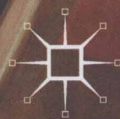

A GLOBAL HISTORY *of*
ANTI-SLAVERY POLITICS
in the NINETEENTH CENTURY

Edited by
WILLIAM MULLIGAN
MAURICE BRIC



A Global History of Anti-slavery Politics in the Nineteenth Century

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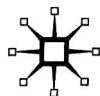
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A Global History of Anti-slavery Politics in the Nineteenth Century

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Introduction: The Global Reach of Abolitionism in the Nineteenth Century

William Mulligan

In 1874 a slave, working as a pearl diver in the Persian Gulf, swam away from the shore and clambered onto a Royal Navy vessel. The fugitive believed that the boards of the naval vessel constituted “free soil” and, on this occasion, he was not disappointed.¹ That slaves in the Persian Gulf acted on the notion of “free soil” to achieve their liberty is just one of many demonstrations of the international connections that shaped abolitionist politics and practices in the nineteenth century. Abolitionism provided a tissue that connected high politics, popular associations, and the agency of the most oppressed individuals in changing social institutions, labour, economic and commercial relations, and international politics. The story of the exchange of these ideas across borders, the establishment of transnational networks, and the global legacy of anti-slavery for human rights and humanitarian politics today are the subjects of this collection of essays.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the institution in its different forms was firmly entrenched, despite some important blows, notably the overthrow of French rule and the establishment of a republic in Haiti. Defenders of slavery were forthright, supporting the institution on the grounds of economic efficiency, civilized practice, custom, and race. By the end of the century, slavery had been abolished in many parts of the world and was restricted to isolated areas, though brutal coercive labour regimes continued to exist. Supporters of slavery had been forced on to the defensive, their arguments wilting in the face of political, economic, and military pressure—in addition to justifications made on the basis of a variety of arguments, from the rights of man to the claims of civilization.

There already exists an exceptionally rich and often contentious historiography concerning the emergence, spread, and success of abolitionism. One argument has analysed the connections between economic change and the ending of slavery. The emergence of abolitionism coincided with the consolidation of a modern capitalist economy in the Atlantic world. Since the pioneering work of Eric Williams, historians have researched and refined the understanding of the relationship between capitalism and abolitionism.²

While Williams's argument that the decline of plantation slavery owed much to economic interests within British society has been undermined, later work stressed the coincidence of abolitionist interests, capitalist economy, bourgeois values, and class politics. Brion Davis, for example, examined the economic interests of the Quaker abolitionists in a free labour market and concluded that the "anti-slavery movement ... reflected the needs and values of the emerging capitalist order".³ Historians of slavery in other regions of the world have also stressed the relationship between capitalist interests, free labour regimes, and the suppression of slavery. Writing about Africa in the late nineteenth century, Paul Lovejoy argued that "the modern industrial system and a slave-based social formation were incompatible ... The demise of slavery was inevitable in the context of [Africa's] absorption into a capitalist world economy."⁴ The precise relations between class interests, economic factors, and political concerns remains a source of debate, but, in general terms, one narrative locates the ending of slavery as part of a process of globalization, driven by the spread and consolidation of a global capitalist economy.

The other major line of analysis starts with the coincidence between the political and ideological revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century and the rise of abolitionism. Another great revisionist historian writing in the first half of the twentieth century, C. L. R. James, saw the Haitian Revolution as the true fulfilment of the declaration of the rights of man in 1789. Where Enlightenment writers simply delivered "wordy attacks" and British abolitionists were motivated by jealousy of French wealth in Haiti, the Black Jacobins, such as Toussaint L'Ouverture, realized the moral prescriptions of human equality in their revolt against slavery.⁵ In broad terms, this approach views the rise of abolitionism as an ideological revolution, driven variously by the rise of a new moral sensibility and the establishment and defence of rights. The logic of the language of "common humanity" and "the rights of man" had universalizing tendencies, which different groups used to expand their political space, freedom, and dignity. Historians disagree on the relative importance of moral arguments, empathy, and rights doctrines, as well as on the timing and triggers for these changes. The Enlightenment, the American, French, and Haitian revolutions, and crisis of empire in the late eighteenth century provide the different starting points.⁶ The jagged spread of these ideas through revolution, empire, and war over the rest of the long nineteenth century provides an over-arching explanation, rooted in political history, for the suppression of slavery.

Within these broad narratives, histories of abolitionism tend to concentrate on the national paradigm for several reasons. First, abolitionists had their most important impact within a national or imperial framework. Their greatest triumphs came when slavery was abolished within their own empires.⁷ These represent the most dramatic stories in the collapse of slave

systems. In addition they can be cast into established national narratives of parliamentary reform, revolution, and civil war, the quintessential motors of domestic political and social change. Because abolitionists formed pressure groups but rarely wielded power at the highest levels, it was extremely difficult for them to pressure their governments to take action against foreign slave-holding powers. When governments did take action, it was often limited to diplomatic entreaties. Second, whereas the history of slavery is the study of an economic institution and migration, the history of abolitionism is largely a study of ideas and popular politics. Phenomena which can be measured have dominated global history—trade, capital flows, and migration, for example—but it is more difficult to assess the spread of ideas across global networks. Historians have also adopted comparative approaches to the study of slavery, but less frequently to abolitionism in different societies.⁸

Abolition was an international project, as well as a domestic one. Commercial competition and concepts of national prestige within the international system are just the factors that shaped the global history of abolition. The subject requires a global perspective, just as slavery does. In 2001, David Brion Davis urged his colleagues working on slavery to look at the “big picture”. The study of slave systems, particularly in the United States, he argued, was too bound up with the borders of the nation-state, when slavery was a multinational phenomenon, sustained by transoceanic networks. Davis spoke of the importance of comparative and global history, by which he meant the web of interconnectedness. Although his article concentrated on slavery, he referred briefly to the opportunities for examining abolitionism in transnational frameworks: “the influence of the American Quakers on the British abolitionists, the influence of the British abolitionists on America, and of American abolitionists on Brazilian reformers”.⁹ While the study of slavery has been central to the new global history and its illustrious subsets, such as Atlantic history, until recently the history of abolitionism has received less attention from global history.

Perspectives drawn from global, transnational, and international history must be careful not to deracinate movements, ideas, and politics from their local context. Some scholars have registered concern that historians are liable to overinterpret fleeting connections between societies as evidence of networks that can explain major political and social change.¹⁰ Yet this does not mean that we should neglect the transnational links which forged abolitionism in the nineteenth century. The exchange of ideas, the moral pressure on governments and societies, the establishment of international networks, the development of new means of communication, and the possibility of one state intervening in another made abolition an international project. Abolitionists (and their opponents) were always aware of the international context—it has not been imposed by current scholarship. The clash between slavery and abolition was part of a wider process of social and political reform in the nineteenth century, driven partly by a competitive

international system. As states sought to preserve their position or advance their interests, they looked for successful models of reform elsewhere. Abolition of slavery also created a moral measure for a state's inclusion in international society, or at least its position in the pecking order—one that was defined by European notions of “humanity” and “civilization”. Finally, the economics of slavery and abolition were acted out on an international playing field. Slave-produced crops were often cheaper and more competitive than those produced by free labour, but abolitionist campaigners urged consumers to boycott morally suspect goods and governments to impose tariffs on them.

Historians have long known about these connections. After all, the spread of revolutionary ideas from the North American colonies and France has been a staple of historiography, while studies of the history of capitalism cannot but take international commerce into account. In recent years, however, a number of studies have concentrated on the formation of networks and the exchange of ideas as a means of assessing the history of abolitionism. For example, João Pedro Marques shows the importance of British diplomatic pressure on thinking in Portuguese society about slavery.¹¹ Edward Rugemer's study of the impact of the abolition of slavery in Britain's Caribbean colonies on the politics of slavery in the United States is an excellent example of how an international perspective can stimulate a well-tilled field of research.¹² He shows how abolitionists and defenders of slavery used examples of slave revolts and popular mobilization in the British Empire to bolster their campaigns within the United States. Hilary McDonald Beckles shows how slaves in the Caribbean heard, transformed, and criticized British abolitionists and their arguments. Slaves overheard gossip at the tables of the planters, they sang, and they exchanged information with other slaves in towns and markets.¹³

Three recent overviews of anti-slavery politics have also adopted international approaches. Brion Davis's *Inhuman Bondage* begins with the Amistad case—an illustration of the international implications of anti-slavery politics. In contrast to his earlier arguments, which stressed the coincidence of capitalist and abolitionist economic, political, and moral interests, Davis places more weight on the transformation of moral perceptions as the fundamental reason for the rise and spread of abolitionist ideas. He shows the connections of anti-slavery ideas and networks across time and space, from Frederick Douglass's paean to the Haitian Revolution at the Chicago World Fair to the impact of the American Civil War on the Brazilian abolitionist, José Ferreira de Menezes.¹⁴ Drescher's *Abolition* and Blackburn's *The American Crucible* both chart the transmission of ideas, the establishment of networks, and the international politics that drove processes of abolition in the nineteenth century. Where Drescher argues that western European, and especially British, notions of freedom provided the core justification for abolitionism, Blackburn stresses the agency of the slaves, particularly

those who adopted and re-worked French ideas about the rights of man. Where Drescher places emphasis on the popular moral pressure exerted by the mobilization of civil society as the key force behind the process of abolition, Blackburn underlines the importance of war and revolutionary upheaval in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Where Drescher concludes that slavery underpinned a vibrant economic system and that abolition was an act of econocide, Blackburn views abolition as part of a crisis of capitalism, resulting from unrestrained growth. Despite differences in interpretations, all three succeed in showing that international intellectual and institutional connections were an important element of abolitionist politics in the nineteenth century.

These three works also locate abolitionism within the history of human rights, spreading and contracting around the globe since the late eighteenth century, and an emerging field of historical research. Seymour Drescher ends his recent history of abolitionism with "the story of slavery's reduction remains a model of comparative achievement for all who seek to expand the range of human rights".¹⁵ "The modern notion of 'human rights' is a twentieth-century invention, but it resonates with the anti-slavery tradition in important ways", claims Blackburn. "Indeed the historic travails of anti-slavery have great relevance for a world where the conditions needed for human flourishing are too often sadly inadequate or entirely absent."¹⁶ Brion Davis uses the term incidentally, suggesting that American ideas of human rights in the early nineteenth century made slavery a "peculiar institution". He ends on a positive note, arguing that abolition was a "willed achievement" that inspires "confidence in other movements for social change".¹⁷ Meanwhile Laurent Dubois sees the significance of the Haitian Revolution thus: "It was a central part of the destruction of slavery in the Americas, and therefore a crucial moment in the history of democracy, one that laid the foundation for human rights everywhere. In this sense we are all descendants of the Haitian revolution, and responsible to these ancestors."¹⁸

In her pathbreaking history of human rights, Lynn Hunt claims that once universal rights were on the political agenda, it became increasingly difficult to restrict claims to them. The granting of equal political rights to free blacks in 1792 and the abolition of slavery in 1794 were testimony to the power of the new rights talk. However, the French Revolution had also elevated the concept of the nation as the fundamental basis of domestic and international political action. This went against the grain of universal rights. In the nineteenth century, discussion of human rights was marginal and implementation of any human rights negligible, she argues. Only a few benevolent societies "kept the flame of universal human rights burning", notably the World's Anti-Slavery Convention of 1840.¹⁹

Historians of human rights, on the other hand, are sceptical that continuities existed between the anti-slavery movements of the nineteenth

century and the human rights movements of the late twentieth century. In a programmatic article, Kenneth Cmiel acknowledges the possible merit of viewing the transnational cooperation of anti-slavery movements as a bridge towards human rights activism in the 1940s, but he notes that rights are politically contingent and is therefore sceptical of longer-term continuities between the rights of man and human rights, via anti-slavery movements.²⁰ Mark Mazower argues that human rights derived from the failure of the minority rights regimes of the interwar period, leading to a regime, after the Second World War, based on rights enshrined in the individual.²¹ Stefan Ludwig Hoffmann believes that the concept of human rights “almost disappeared from political and legal discourse in the nineteenth century, while other concepts such as ‘civilization’, ‘nation’, ‘race’, and ‘class’ gained dominance”. The abolition of slavery was rooted in a civilizing mission that was bound up with and perhaps fatally compromised by its association with imperial expansion.²² The most trenchant dismissal of any relationship between human rights and abolitionism can be found in Samuel Moyn’s work. In a lively and provocative discussion, he argues that contemporary notions of human rights are centred on common humanity and negate the sovereignty of the state. He disputes efforts to locate the origins of human rights within the American and French revolutions, which, he claims, concentrated on forming citizens rather than protecting any imagined inherent rights. Finally he notes that anti-slavery campaigns were “almost never framed as rights issues”.²³

Michael Barnett in *Empire of Humanity* distinguishes between human rights and humanitarianism—human rights rely on a discourse of rights, humanitarianism on a discourse of needs; human rights are based on a legal code, humanitarianism on a moral code; human rights aim to end suffering, humanitarianism aims to keep people alive, responding to emergencies. He identifies the emergence of abolitionism in the late eighteenth century as the origins of the history of humanitarianism. In an age of rights, Enlightenment ideas about liberty, and evangelical revival, abolitionism emerged, deriving from and consolidating the idea of humanity as the basis for political action.²⁴

The essays in this volume locate their case studies within the context of transnational networks and cultural exchange, and the development of international politics and commerce in the classical era of globalization.²⁵ They cover anti-slavery politics in Europe, North and South America, Africa, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Examining abolitionism in its international context enables historians to achieve a clearer understanding of how abolitionist ideas spread and were re-fashioned in different social contexts, how abolitionist movements built transnational networks, how the international system shaped and was shaped by anti-slavery ideas, and how the legacies of the suppression of slavery in the nineteenth century are articulated in present-day politics.²⁶

Justifying abolition

Jacques Maritain, a member of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Committee on the Theoretical Bases of Human Rights, noted in 1949 that “we agree about the rights but on condition that no one asks us why”. Charles Beitz makes much use of this observation to argue: “This conception of human rights as a public doctrine open to a variety of justifications is indispensable to a proper appreciation of its historical uniqueness.”²⁷ A similar comment could be applied to condemnations of slavery. The sources were so vast and diverse that it is impossible to identify a single intellectual key to explain the moral revolution in attitudes towards slavery. The porous quality of borders, to use Gaffield’s phrase, enabled the exchange of anti-slavery ideas. Ideas that emerged in one society had different reverberations when activists in another society adopted them.

The transmission of anti-slavery ideas between slaves and free abolitionists changed the context of resistance to slavery. Revolts, one of several strategies open to slaves to improve their living conditions, have been a feature of slave societies.²⁸ The resistance of one human to existing as the possession of another human is the most intimate, immediate, and enduring form of anti-slavery. From the late eighteenth century the scope for successful opposition to slavery widened. Rebellious slaves were able to locate their claims to freedom in a broad political spectrum of entitlements to rights, rights which other people recognized and which therefore provided points for cooperation and alliances. The rise of abolitionism around the world gave slaves a new political instrument in their struggle for freedom. Rights rhetoric underpinned the legitimacy of slaves’ resistance, whether collective military action or individual flight. Arguably the most significant anti-slavery moment of the long nineteenth century was the Haitian Revolution. Examining the international context of this rebellion, Julia Gaffield (Chapter 1) shows that figures such as Jean-Jacques Dessalines and Henry Christophe crafted their language of rights to appeal to particular audiences. The assertion of rights was variously derived from common humanity, the rights of man, and God. Ehud Toledano (Chapter 6) shows how slaves in a variety of Muslim societies from North Africa and the Ottoman Empire to Indonesia sought to escape bondage by fleeing to American and European consulates. While slaves claimed freedom as a right, drawing on European and American abolitionist ideas, the success and failure of this strategy often depended on the attitude and political interests of the local consul or military officer.

Lynn Hunt has identified the shift in moral sensibilities in the eighteenth century, whereby empathy for another individual, based on notions of common humanity, provided the foundation for the universal claims of the rights of man. Empathy was closely associated with the condemnation of slavery, particularly the suffering slaves endured. William Mulligan (Chapter 8) shows how campaigners in the late 1880s forged empathetic

bonds between their audience and African slaves by telling stories that focussed on the plight of the individual slaves and the ripping apart of family bonds. The Congo Reform Association, the subject of Charles Laderman's contribution (Chapter 9), displayed pictures of victims of King Leopold II's regime in lantern lectures in Britain and the United States. The object of empathy was distant, located in a different continent in these examples. This raises the issue of whether it was easier to extend dignity and empathy to individuals when domestic stability and institutions were not at stake. In her essay on Russian abolitionism, Megan Dean (Chapter 5) demonstrates how the state could view empathy as a threat to domestic social institutions. Alexander Radischev, in his 1790 book *Journey from St Petersburg to Moscow*, had his narrator talk to serfs. The tsarist regime condemned Radischev to death for treason, a sentence commuted to exile to Siberia, where he committed suicide.

Anti-slavery ideals based on conceptions of the rights of man as opposed to a shared sense of common humanity emerged in the late eighteenth-century revolutions. Discussion of these rights was not confined to abolitionists in the two newly founded republics, the United States and France. In addition to the Haitian Revolution's invocation of the rights of man, other chapters show the dissemination of these ideas. Maurice Bric (Chapter 3) demonstrates that British abolitionists shared the rhetoric of the "universal rights of man" with their counterparts from the United States. Even the late twentieth-century term "human rights" made an occasional appearance in the nineteenth century, as the contributions by Bric, Mulligan, and Laderman show. Moreover, the assumptions underpinning conceptions of rights changed over the course of the century, so that by 1900 rights were often conflated with arguments based on common humanity and empathy. Dignity, rather than rights, provided a path to political and social liberty, though activists often failed (and did not need) to distinguish between arguments rights and empathy.

Andrea Nicholson (Chapter 11) locates the international legal debates on slavery in the growing prevalence of positive law at the expense of natural law. Lord Mansfield in his famous judgment in the *Somerset* case in 1772 argued that while slavery might have existed in the state of nature—and therefore was potentially justifiable in natural law—a positivist approach enabled society to shape laws to reflect society's moral purposes. Of course Mansfield was making a judgment specific to England, rather than one universally applicable, but the role of positive law offered a very different route to abolition than the natural rights articulated in the American and French revolutions.

Religious belief also provided the basis for attacking as well as justifying slavery. Maeve Ryan (Chapter 2) makes the telling observation that missionaries viewed slavery and the slave trade as a sin against God's moral order rather than a social and political question. This infused missionary

anti-slavery activities with an urgent moral agenda, but it also limited their support of freed slaves. The sins of a slave-owning society were more pressing than the suffering of slaves. These ideas were then refined, particularly by colonial administrators, who had to deal with social issues arising out of freeing slaves. Mulligan shows how Protestant and Catholic leaders in the 1880s argued that anti-slavery was a common Christian duty. Toledano argues that in Islamic societies there were considerable religious pressures to treat slaves well, but the *ulema* (scholars) used the same religious texts to justify slavery.

The intellectual association between the abolition of slavery, the expansion of civilization, and the moral justification of empire was one of the most striking features of the period. Bric notes that both Britain and the United States conceived themselves as moral empires, as well as political ones. This provided pressure to abolish slavery within the borders of these states. Abolitionism could also serve as a justification for the expansion of empire. Dean argues that Russian imperialists, often disingenuously, invoked anti-slavery and anti-slave trade measures as justifications for expansion in Central Asia. Likewise European powers claimed that their conquests in Africa were designed to stamp out the slave trade, though, as Laderman shows, these empires could also engage in the effective enslavement and murder of African workers on a vast scale.

Processes

All of these justifications for the abolition of slavery were also used, though with decreasing frequency, to support the continued existence of slavery. Rights could be restricted on any number of grounds, owners could assert their property rights, empathy could ease the suffering of slaves but did not necessarily entail their manumission, civilization and empire could (and often did) enshrine racial barriers, and the Bible and the Koran could be raided for passages that supported slavery. The international system shaped the political processes by which these arguments were interwoven into the fabric of abolitionist claims.²⁹

The abolition of slavery was part of a wider debate on security and geopolitics in the nineteenth century. Although abolition proceeded within the territorial bounds of the state, each act of abolition had international repercussions. As Gaffield shows, Dessalines and Christophe recognized that exporting anti-slavery abroad would bring down upon the new republic the wrath of its slave-holding neighbours. British colonial officials were equally concerned that Haiti would provide a model for slave revolts in their Caribbean colonies. On the other hand, figures such as Bolívar, as Christopher Schmidt-Nowara (Chapter 7) and Gaffield show, forged diplomatic relations with Haiti and asserted a common interest in the suppression of slavery. In turn, Schmidt-Nowara credits the American Civil War with triggering