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Public Memories of the Atlantic Slave Trade and Slavery in Contemporary Europe

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For centuries, major European states were involved in the Atlantic slave trade and in slavery in their colonies in the Americas. In the last decade, this subject has attracted serious but uneven attention in Europe beyond the realms of descendants and academia. The British, French and Dutch governments have engaged with the subject, expressing remorse and stimulating public commemorations. Portugal and Spain on the other hand have hardly addressed the subject. The reason for this remarkable divergence, the author suggests, lies with divergent commemorative traditions and the fact that the two Iberian countries have no substantial Caribbean communities as visible reminders of this past. The last part of the article discusses some problems associated with the politicized rediscovery of these embarrassing chapters in European history.

Between the late 15th and the mid-19th centuries, several major European states were involved in the Atlantic slave trade and in slavery in their American colonies. As for the trade in enslaved Africans, Portugal (and in its wake Brazil) was the first and foremost player in this field, followed in order of importance by the British, the French, the Spanish, the Dutch, the Danish and even the Swedes. The Atlantic slave trade was abolished by Denmark in 1803 and by the British in 1807, whereupon the United Kingdom started to enforce this legislation upon the other European states as well. In particular, the Iberian states were reluctant to comply. The last (illegal) delivery of enslaved Africans to the Spanish colony of Cuba dates from 1866.[1]

The abolition of slavery followed suit, with one crucial exception. The Haitian revolution (1791–1804) not only put an end to the French colony of Saint-Domingue, but the emerging first black republic ended the system of slavery as

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well – over half a century before the abolition of slavery in the first New World republic, the United States, and decades before the ending of slavery in the Spanish-speaking republics after their secession from Spain in the first quarter of the 19th century. The one Portuguese colony in the Americas, Brazil, became independent in 1822 but failed to abolish slavery until 1888.

As for the remaining European colonies, all located in the wider Caribbean, again the United Kingdom was the first to make the definitive move of putting an end to slavery itself. The system was abolished in 1834 in the British West Indies and peer pressure did the rest. France and Denmark followed in 1848, the Dutch in 1863. Again Spain was last: slavery was abolished only in 1873 in Puerto Rico and in 1886 for Cuba.

For centuries, memories and/or ideas about the ghastly past have been part and parcel of the consciousness of the descendants of the enslaved Africans. Long ago, historians in Europe and the Americas alike started to establish a venerable tradition of studies on the subject. Yet it is only in the last decade or so that the Atlantic slave trade and the resulting slavery in the Americas has attracted serious attention beyond the realms of descendants and academia. As will be argued below, the rediscovery of this uncomfortable memory was uneven across Europe, and the logic of this disparity is inserted in the divergent postwar migration histories of Europe.

Western civilization, peer pressure and atonement

History and memory are not equivalent; neither are history as a combination of past processes and history as a contemporary reflection on these processes and their possible interconnections. If we want to understand why the past history of the slave trade and slavery re-emerged, we will have to understand the impact of later developments on our contemporary societies. If we want to discern between memory and history, we should digest the extant rich historiography as well as some of the ongoing ‘memory wars’ in the Western world.

The recent resurgence of an interest in the seemingly faraway history of the slave trade and slavery bears some striking parallels to the phenomenon that provoked the successive rounds of abolition in the 19th century: peer pressure. Back then, Anglo-Saxons led the way and, once that example was set, a refusal to follow would increasingly be denounced as backward and barbaric. This helped the French and Danish to follow suit, next the Dutch, and finally the Spaniards, by then considered hopelessly behind the more enlightened Northern states.

L’histoire se répète, or so it seems. In 1991, Pope John II offered his apologies for the ‘sins’ of Christian Europe against Africa in the former slave depot of Gorée, in Senegal. Similar apologies and expressions of remorse followed one another, from American, European and Latin American leaders of government to

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the United Nations. Belatedly, the European Union followed suit, qualifying the Atlantic slave trade as 'barbaric' in 2007 at the occasion of its bicentenary of its British abolition.

Now if the longevity of national involvement with the whole system, the sheer volume of the Atlantic slave trade, or the importance of trade and slavery for their colonial or metropolitan economies would have been decisive for recognition of this past and perhaps the expression of remorse, then certainly one would have expected the two Iberian countries to have been among the first protagonists in what Nigerian author Wole Soyinka characterized as a '*fin de millénaire* fever of atonement'.[2]

Yet Portugal and Spain were not. What is more, there is still no such thing as a national debate or public recognition in either of these countries about these issues. Some years ago, the present author observed that the first market house of the Atlantic slave trade, in Lagos, Southern Portugal, bears only a small sign 'Mercado do escravos', below a sign in the same style but with larger lettering saying 'Galeria'. The former heart of the slave market indeed housed a non-descript art gallery with no relation whatsoever to the building's past function. A recent search on the internet does not suggest any changes.

As will be discussed below, the British, the French and the Dutch have been far more forthcoming in acknowledging their involvement in the trade and slavery itself. The contrast with the Iberian experience is baffling. How can we account for this? One may think of many explanatory factors. One highly speculative explanation may be that the Iberian countries have come late to the postmodern European condition of critically interrogating the national past, including a colonial past long thought of as nothing but glorious. Be that as it may, it seems of more direct relevance to remember that both countries have recent and still disruptive episodes of national history to come to terms with. Spain is presently engaged in heated debates about the most sensitive issue of its civil war and the resulting Franco regime. If there is a critical debate about colonialism, the major bone of contention is the impact ('genocide'?) of colonization on the Amerindian population – an issue tabled time and again by Spanish American nations. Portugal in turn faces up to the history and legacies of its equally authoritarian Salazar regime, including its abrupt fall and the ensuing collapse of its colonial empire in Africa.

What emerges as a crucial factor in a comparative perspective is the absence in the peninsula of a sizable community of postcolonial migrants descending from the enslaved Africans shipped across the Atlantic – the black community in Portugal hails mainly from the former African colonies, not Brazil, and only a minority of the Spanish American immigrants in Spain is of African origins. As we will see, this factor has been absolutely crucial in the rediscovery of these issues way up North. And probably, between parentheses, this is also the reason

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why the same subject has not provoked much public and political debate in Denmark. With the 1917 sale of its Caribbean Virgin Islands to the US, the country more or less concluded its colonial history – and there are no post-colonial migrants reminding the Danish of the way things once were.

The United Kingdom

In 2007, under the motto 'Reflecting on the past and looking to the future', the bicentenary of the British abolition of the slave trade caused a nationwide avalanche of commemorations, museum exhibitions, television series, research projects, publications, educational projects and so on, which participant historian James Walvin qualified as 'remarkable by any standards'.[3]

The scale and contents of the 2007 commemorations were definitely something new, but there was a long tradition to fall back on. Both the 1807 abolition of the slave trade and the 1834/1838 ending of slavery itself had been celebrated in the United Kingdom as well as in the British West Indies ever since the actual passing of the pertinent laws. Much of these commemorations were rather self-congratulatory – after all, under the leadership of concerned citizens such as William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson, the British had indeed been the pioneers of abolitionism. Throughout the colonial period, the focus on the pivotal British role in ending the slave trade and slavery also served to highlight the benign character of its colonial system – consequently, the focus was less on several centuries of Atlantic slave trade and Caribbean slavery and more on the great British humanitarian tradition that ended it.[4]

This changed considerably with decolonization, the growing involvement of Black Britons in debates about the remembrance of the trade and slavery, and a mass of new historical studies. By the late 20th century, there was not just more interest in academia, the museum world and the like in the business of remembrance, but also a new approach came to dominate. The focus moved to the trade and slavery itself, self-congratulatory renderings became unacceptable, and far more attention was given to African agency. This change in the culture of remembrance was evident in most preludes to the bicentennial, and would characterize the nationwide 2007 commemorations as well.

Certainly Wilberforce continued to receive a good and well-deserved share of praise in 2007, even in a feature-length film '*Amazing Grace*'. Yet remorse (but not governmental apologies) and reflection set the tone, and much effort was made to ensure the participation of Black Britons – it was widely accepted that the considerable and vociferous West Indian community had been, and should be, pivotal in the project of bringing this history alive in the first place.[5] No other commemoration of slavery in Europe has had the kind of governmental support, financial resources (surely over €20 million), strong participation from descendants

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of enslaved Africans, and ultimately wide public appeal in spite of inevitable reactionary objections. As we will see later, both the Dutch and French governments have equally expressed remorse over this shameful episode and they came up with various types of ceremonial gestures, actually before the British. But the UK's 2007 commemorations were on a scale unrivalled either in continental Europe or, indeed, in the United States.

The Labour Government's engagement with the bicentenary clearly reflects the soft side of its otherwise increasingly ambivalent dedication to multicultural policies. Underlying the British government's involvement with the commemoration and the repeated expressions of remorse was an explicit politics of inclusion towards the West Indian community. Of particular importance for British commemorations were also the participation of Christian churches, including the Anglican Church of England, as well as mainstream media such as the BBC. Again, one of the factors at work must have been that over the past decades these venerable institutions ceased to be all-white bastions.

Yet the British case also illustrates that growing numbers of the African diaspora alone do not tell the whole story. While indeed the Caribbean communities in France and the Netherlands were consistently growing over the past decades, Britain's over half a million West Indian population has been fairly stable over the past few decades. In the British case, more effective West Indian lobbying combined with a tradition of explicit multiculturalism and an increasing mainstream receptivity to ethnic minorities' identity politics made the difference. It must have mattered in this respect that Tony Blair's cabinet included members of West Indian backgrounds.

Again, as in France and the Netherlands, the many solemn declarations spoke of shame and remorse, but never of formal apologies opening the floor for a debate about reparations. Having said that, there was a serious commitment to self-criticism. Thus parliament's laudable abolitionist legislations were squarely placed at the end of a long tradition of legislation supportive of the trade and slavery itself. And much emphasis was placed throughout on Afro-Caribbean agency and resistance rather than (only) on British abolitionism.

If 'social inclusion' was a leading motive, the attention given to slavery seemed to say that somehow this history could not be excluded from ongoing debates about British identity at large. These commemorations were apparently not considered divisive. Walvin poignantly remarks that the tercentenary of the Act of Union with Scotland (1707) was all but neglected – possibly because of its more troubling contemporary significance in the debate about what Britishness means.

Scholarly afterthought about the bicentennial has been critical nonetheless. It could hardly have been otherwise. The depiction of slavery in museums is a case in point. As Bernier and Newman argue in a special issue of *Slavery & Abolition*, there is always a tension between 'thanatourism, which seeks to reproduce the

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feelings of terror and death as part of the experience; and heritage tourism, which displays cultural and historical achievements'. It is no surprise that museums (whether in the UK or elsewhere, even in Ghana) tend to opt for representations that remain palatable to their targeted audiences – and no less so that, as a consequence, they will be attacked for whitewashing the horrors of the past.[6]

A related type of criticism worries about the balance, or lack thereof, between a focus on the abolitionists and the enslaved Africans and African agency. Most participants in these debates would agree that the balance has moved away from the previous glorification of abolitionist heroes such as William Wilberforce and, eventually, the 1807 British parliament. Yet clearly there is no consensus as to what a fair balance would be. This in turn links up with debates about 'black' versus 'white' perspectives on slavery.

Another bone of contention has to do with questions of contemporary legacies and possible concrete actions that should be enacted as a sequence to these commemorations. Much of this is really politics. Does contemporary racism have a direct continuity with the period of slavery? Is disadvantage of Black Britons in British society somehow a consequence of slavery and its legacies? Should and can British society make up for black disadvantage, and if so, what type of reparations – in hard currency or otherwise, for what purposes, by whom, for whom – are at stake? And should reparations also be considered for the former Caribbean slave colonies and perhaps also the providing areas of Africa?

The answers to these controversial questions are dissonant – as the British government's mission statement for the commemorations had rightly emphasized from the start.[7] The most radical views hold that commemoration will remain futile without a sweeping reframing of the debate and concrete reparations. The dilemma is of course that the radical stance was incompatible from the beginning with the objective of making '2007' a truly national commemoration encompassing wide sectors of British society. On balance, the British commemoration, with its many often heated debates, seems more sophisticated and more tolerant of contesting perspectives than the prevalent practice elsewhere in Europe. The longer British experience with multicultural policies seems to account for this openness.

France

France has long been oblivious of its deep involvement in the Atlantic slave trade and slavery itself. The 1989 massive celebrations for the bicentenary of the French Revolution neglected its failure to extend the high principles of *liberté, egalité et fraternité* to the enslaved population of its Caribbean and Indian Ocean colonies.[8] In contrast, the 1998 commemorations of the abolition of slavery (1848) did witness a new interest and, eventually, ceremonial gestures by the state. In doing so, French parliament and the Chirac government reacted to widespread discontent in the overseas Caribbean departments as well as to a

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memorable march on 23 May, 1998, in Paris in which some 40,000 mainly Antillean protestors demanded official recognition.

Supported by Chirac, Christiane Taubira, a representative to the French parliament from the Caribbean *departement d'outre-mer* Guyane drafted a law condemning the trade and slavery as crimes against humanity. After several revisions – such as extending the coverage of the law to the Indian Ocean and including indigenous slavery in the Caribbean – the law was formally accepted in 2001. Now officially designated as crimes against humanity, the trade and slavery were to be assigned 'a proper place' both in school curricula and in historical research.[9]

The unanimous acceptance of this law responded to widespread discontent among the roughly half a million descendants of former enslaved Africans living in France about the neglect of this infamous period in French national history. Its passing was also inscribed in a wider context of rising discontent among France's ethnic minorities about their place in society and the lack of the Republic to live up to its high principles. Perhaps one may add that for Antilleans, there was an additional frustration over the fact that much of the French debates on migration issues and integration focused mainly on Maghreb migrants and Islam.

The law-Taubira does not speak of apologies, repentance or reparations, and its statement that this past should be assigned 'a proper place' was very vague indeed. Initially, its passing and enactment did inspire wide acceptance and little opposition. It should be noted that the law certainly did not lead French government to any major gestures of appreciation, reparations or whatever towards its former colony Haiti that in 2004 commemorated the bicentenary of its hard-fought abolition of slavery and independence from France.

Things changed in 2005 in France itself, after the passing of yet another 'history law' and after a remarkable incident involving a prominent French historian of slavery, Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau. In 2005, the French parliament approved a law commemorating French colonialism worldwide, but particularly urging that schools would confer the 'positive role' of French colonialism in North Africa. Thus, while the law-Taubira responded to Antillean and sub-Saharan demands to criticize French colonialism, this law conveyed the opposite in response mainly to a lobby of French repatriates from French Algeria.

The latter law first caused uproar for its contents and its implications. Many critics thought it ridiculous and offensive to speak of a positive role of French colonialism in the first place. Others instead argued that time had come for a more distanced evaluation of colonialism, which would indeed leave room for positive repercussions. This, in the end, has become the official French position as expressed by Nicholas Sarkozy. In Dakar, he declared that French colonialism had certainly conquered, stolen and exploited, but had also given – bridges, roads, hospitals, health care, schools. In sum, colonization was 'a great fault but from that great fault a common destiny was born'.[10] Nonetheless, the

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law extolling the positive role of colonialism had by then already been vetoed by his predecessor Chirac.

The French debates then turned to a wider question: was it a good idea anyway for the state to qualify past episodes in moral terms and to link such evaluations to prescriptions for education and scholarly research? In this debate, four 'history laws' were scrutinized: the 1990 law-Gayssot declaring punishable by law the denial of the Holocaust as a crime against humanity; another 2001 law qualifying the early 20th-century killings in Armenia as genocide; and the two laws on slavery and the positive role of French colonialism. This ongoing debate has been passionate and widely-published, both in the mass media and in academia. Suffice it to state that the intensity of the debates reflect serious French concerns about the demise of the Republican ideals of an undivided nation, the hesitation to take colonial and migrants' history aboard as truly national history, as well as well-founded worries about intellectual freedom.[11]

In defence of the Taubira-law, some historians have argued that the state, by definition, prescribes certain interpretations of its national past, as in the choice of national holidays, school curricula, national museums, and the like – and that indeed the recent law only echoes the spirit of the 1848 abolition law with its insistence that slavery was 'an assault on human dignity' and in flagrant contradiction to the republican values. Many prominent French historians, some of them organized in the foundation 'Liberté pour l'histoire' presided over by no less than Pierre Nora, *auctor intellectualis* of the acclaimed *lieux de mémoire* project, have nonetheless urged for the revocation of all history laws and the rejections of many more that have been tabled.[12]

Concerns over intellectual freedom proved to be less theoretical than was long thought when, in 2005, a radical Antillean collective started a lawsuit against historian Pétré-Grenouilleau. In a study, *Les traites négrières*, comparing different slave trades around the globe as well as in media interviews, he had questioned the uniqueness of the Atlantic slave trade and insisted on the crucial participation of African slave traders.[13] He also discussed at length the Arab slave trade and slavery, refuting ideas about lesser significance and 'mildness'. Moreover he opposed categorizing the transatlantic slave trade as genocidal and suggested the law-Taubira unfortunately facilitated the comparison to the Shoah. Many expert historians would subscribe to these interpretations, others might not – but no serious historian would object to the raising of these issues.

The Antillean collective did object, indeed vehemently, and started a lawsuit against Pétré-Grenouilleau – by then often qualified as racist on websites and the like – accusing him of trespassing the law-Taubira. This case was eventually withdrawn early in 2006 in reaction to widespread protest, also from those sympathetic to the law, but the harm had already been done. The threat of a lawsuit has not done any good to the 'cause' of the commemoration of slavery,

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giving ample room not only for concerned historians, but equally for chauvinistic French intellectuals to urge for an end to all the revaluations of the glorious French past. Soon, the law-Taubira was criticized not only for its possible misuse in the field of freedom of intellectual inquiry, but equally as another ridiculous gesture of self-flagellation. Once again, it should be noted that the law did not urge for any repentance or reparation and actually draws its inspiration precisely from the Republican values.

What exactly the practical follow-up of the law-Taubira will be remains to be seen. Clearly, all sort of efforts have been made to develop new educational materials, and the hitherto rather understudied subject of French colonial slavery and its legacies has certainly acquired more academic prestige than it had before. The law also prescribed the installation of a committee which, inter alia, would recommend a date for annual commemorations. The day finally chosen for metropolitan France, 10 May, has no relation whatsoever to colonial history but refers to the final unanimous vote in the French senate on 10 May 2001. This choice strongly symbolizes the way contemporary concerns and politics shape French thinking about colonial slavery.[14]

The Netherlands

Again, the ways in which the Netherlands' long history of slave trading and slavery has recently been rediscovered can only be understood against the backdrop of the impact of post-war migration from the Dutch Caribbean to the metropolis. There is a broader history to this.

The postcolonial community in the Netherlands is roughly some one million out of a total population of 16.5 million. Colonial history has thus literally come home with the successive waves of migration from Indonesia, Suriname, and the Antilles. This postcolonial presence has translated into a new awareness of colonialism and hence in debates on Dutch identity and culture. Postcolonial identity politics certainly played a role here. 'History', implying an imputed Dutch collective guilt handed down through the generations, was used as a strong argument, particularly by leaders of postcolonial migrant communities. The Dutch government reacted accordingly in the past decades, supporting and subsidizing commemorations, statues and museums, research projects and the like for postcolonial migrant communities.

Perhaps seeking some kind of moral redemption, but certainly in an attempt to enhance social cohesion, the Dutch state has answered to the urges of its post-colonial citizenry. This does not necessarily lead to consistent re-thinking of the past. The Dutch East India Company (VOC) is celebrated, while shame and remorse dominate the memory of the Dutch West India Company (WIC). This contrast has something to do with the different trajectories of the two companies, but arguably as much or more with the willingness to respond to postcolonial migrants' divergent ideas about these pasts.

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Whatever the inconsistencies and moral challenges, the large-scale settlement of postcolonial migrants has had the effect of bringing colonial history back into the narrative of national history. This is best illustrated in the recently presented canonical version of Dutch history defined by a government commission and subsequently accepted as the model for history education in Dutch schools. The new canon testifies to an enhanced awareness of the significance of colonialism in and for Dutch history. Of the 50 'windows' making up Dutch history according to this canon, five are exclusively about colonial history, while several other windows have a colonial dimension. Nowhere do we come across glorification of colonialism, the perspectives varying from neutral to explicitly critical.[15]

Once we move to renderings of colonialism outside of academia, the picture becomes more blurred and one also encounters more self-congratulatory perspectives on colonialism. Dutch colonialism in Asia evokes mixed memories, while Dutch Caribbean history is mainly equated with slavery and therefore shame and the nadir of colonial history. In 2000, seven per cent of a representative sample of Dutch citizens thought so. By 2008 this was 24 per cent, making the Dutch participation in the slave trade the most frequently given answer to the question of what episode in national history is most shameful.[16] The pendulum may continue to swing though, and there has been no shortage of mainly radical right-wing protests against self-procrastination.

The awareness of the Dutch involvement in the slave trade and slavery is nearly exclusively linked to the Atlantic system. The equally important Dutch involvement in slave trading in the Indian Ocean and with colonial slavery in the territory covered by the Dutch East India Company has received only slight scholarly interest and no public interest at all. This is actually one of the reasons why the 400 years' jubilee of the establishment of the VOC could be extensively celebrated in the Netherlands, an act unthinkable for the West India Company.[17]

The 'Dutch' memory of slavery is therefore narrowed down to – in this order – Suriname, the Antilles, and perhaps Africa, symbolized by the Elmina fortress in Ghana. The rediscovery of slavery in Dutch history is thus partial and corresponds to a particular demand in Dutch society expressed mainly by the Afro-Caribbean community of approximately 300,000 living in the Netherlands.

Since the late 1990s, the Dutch government and institutions in the public arena have been forthcoming in financing and otherwise supporting initiatives to commemorate Atlantic slavery. In the presence of the Dutch queen and prime minister, a national commemorative monument was inaugurated in Amsterdam, 1 July (Emancipation Day) 2002. A national institute (NiNsee) for the study and documentation of slavery and public outreach was established one year later in Amsterdam. Zeeland, once the major slave trading province, followed suit in 2005 with its own monument, in Middelburg. In 2006, a plaque was attached to the beautiful, early 17th-century mansion of the mayor of Amsterdam, indicating

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that one of its first inhabitants had been an official of the West India Committee with a special assignment for the Atlantic slave trade.

Invariably, such inaugurations went accompanied with solemn declarations. Members of the Dutch cabinet expressed 'deep remorse', as did the present queen and the future king. Cultural institutions financed by the Dutch state embarked on a wide variety of initiatives, ranging from the publication of books through the opening of genealogical databases at the National Archives and restoration projects to a series of permanent or travelling exhibitions in various museums and school television documentaries. Media coverage was extensive and helped raise public awareness on the issue – possibly triggering some chauvinistic backlash as well.

There is irony in the fact that the initiative in all of this has definitely been metropolitan, with Suriname and the Antilles obtaining second servings most of the time. The successful Caribbean lobby in the Netherlands to 'unsilence' the slavery past has inadvertently served to strengthen the metropolitan hold on the digestion of colonial history. Of course 'metropolitan' now includes views and players from the Caribbean community, but even so, the historical asymmetry continues to be reproduced.

Within the Netherlands, the urge to accept Atlantic slavery as part and parcel of Dutch history may have been spectacularly successful, but this does not mean that there is no dissonance. There are debates about 'black' versus 'white' perspectives, where the former is portrayed as perhaps anti-racist, but top-down, paternalistic, a product of the political, cultural and scholarly establishment, in contrast to a black perspective that is subaltern, Afro-centric, anti-colonial, and inspired by US debates on slavery as the Black Holocaust, and hence the claim to reparations.[18]

It soon turned out that there were more radical expectations within the Dutch Caribbean community. Anyone engaged in debates on the issue of slavery and its contemporary legacies was soon bound to be caught in heated debates on legitimacy, black versus white perspectives, and eventually the question of apologies and reparations. Liberal white historians, operating within a reconciliatory mode, could easily find themselves exposed to criticism of high-jacking a 'black' issue or, at best, of experiencing that their contributions were met with distrust by radical Afro-Caribbean protagonists who themselves, however, could not be sure of their own constituency either.

History and memory

The European 'rediscovery' of Atlantic slavery testifies to the impact of the Black Atlantic. Not all countries with a slavery past have responded in the same way to claims for recognition. Within Europe, France, the Netherlands and the

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United Kingdom have been more responsive and self-critical than Portugal or Spain, a difference that may be accounted for by divergent cultural and political traditions but certainly by reference to the dissimilar volume and political clout of the metropolitan Afro-European communities.

Debates and claims regarding slavery and its legacies have increasingly become framed in a seemingly delocalized transnational discourse which, at the end of the day, discloses a heavy orientation on radical African-American perspectives grounded in US realities. At times, then, supposedly broad African diasporic conceptualizations might well be a mere transplanting of American ideas and realities to other contexts. This skipping over past and present differences in time and place is not necessarily useful to understand either the realities of slavery or to weigh its contemporary legacies.

Terminology is an obvious illustration of American derivation, as in the use of the conceptually disputable and politically provocative notion of 'Black Holocaust', or in the concept of the politically perhaps attractive, but empirically problematic, concept of 'cultural trauma'.[19] The claim of 'reparations' is another idea inspired by US debates.[20] These are appropriations one can appreciate or not, but there is no reason to propose these American concepts are less (or more) appropriate in a European – or for that matter Caribbean or Latin American – context. But once we read about 'black' versus 'white' perspectives, about a white 'silencing' of the past, or about generalized legacies of slavery, historians should make amends.

American interpretations of slavery and its legacies are rooted in a unique historical experience with unique implications for race relations. Perhaps inevitably, the stark racial divide characterizing US society both during and after slavery translated into strongly oppositional understandings of slavery and its legacies. Hence the emergence and popularity of the idea of mutually irreconcilable perspectives, grounded in a long history of brutal suppression and cultural resistance, proudly celebrated by the civil rights' movement and given new credential by cultural studies' insistence on the inevitability and indeed legitimacy of partial truths and emic discourse.

Yet any historian of the Americas will appreciate that the US record of (post-)slavery and race relations is only one out of many models, a uniquely grim bipolar model at that. Throughout Latin America and even in the non-Spanish Caribbean, society and race relations during slavery and certainly after Emancipation were not necessarily less violent, but certainly more fluid and ended up producing societies that defy the notion of bipolarity. To be sure, there was and has remained a class-cum-colour social hierarchy, racism persists, and so on. But it simply does not make sense to think of these societies and the way its citizens think of themselves primarily in terms of 'race' and a black versus white polarity.

Narrowing understandings of slavery and its legacies to a simple division between white versus black discourse therefore misses much of the complexities

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of the wider Afro-American experience. This should worry not just historians, but anyone engaged in the debate on the contemporary relevance of slavery. How, for instance, are we to understand the concept of 'silencing the past' itself? The idea gained currency with Michel-Rolph Trouillot's seminal book, *Silencing the Past*. Trouillot's argument is straightforward. There are hegemonic versions of history that tend to actively silence subaltern voices. He applies this paradigm specifically to the (un)remembering of the Haitian Revolution and the quincentenary of Columbus' 'discovery' of the New World.[21]

Seen from this perspective, one understands the popularity of the recurring trope of 'unsilencing' the slavery past. The big question however is whether it really makes sense to always think of this kind of silence as engineered, as actively imposed by hegemonic forces. If one after another plantation mansion, converted into a plantation museum in the US, manages to tell a wondrous story about the antebellum Deep South skipping over the harsh realities of slavery, then yes, the conclusion of silencing seems astute. The British case has some parallels, but these would be far less evident for the Dutch and perhaps the French case.[22] And whereas slavery remained as crucial to American history up to 1863 as its legacies of institutionalized racism, at least into the 1960s, European society could in a sense more easily 'forget' this past as long as the descendents of enslaved Africans were not living in the metropolitan societies.

To sum up, now that the Atlantic slave trades and slavery are once again recognised as integral to European history, historians are facing the challenge of having to deal with issues such as 'white' versus 'black' perspectives. Empathy may be requested here, but serious scholarship can and should defend itself against the idea of being 'just another discourse' at a par with, say, memory (whose memory in the first place?). Much has been made in recent decades about 'multivocality' – yet while every serious scholar should allow for the fact that people experience and remember all sort of things differently today as well as in the past, a radical reduction of interpretations to a priori positions or perspectives is no serious scholarly alternative to the comparative historical method.

References

1. According to the superb Emory University database, the number of enslaved Africans embarked between 1500 and 1866 totalled 11.5 millions, out of whom 10.7 millions were disembarked alive in the Americas. Of the 11.5 embarked Africans, Portugal/Brazil accounted for roughly half (5.8 million), followed by Great Britain (3.3 million), France (1.4 million), Spain (1.1 million), the Netherlands (554,000), the USA (305,000) and Denmark and the Baltic countries (111,000). See http://www.slavevoyages.org/tast/assessment/estimates.faces (accessed 20 November 2008).
2. Cited in J. Torpey (ed.) (2003) *Politics and the Past; On Repairing Historical Injustices* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield), p. 1. Compare my

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introduction to G. Oostindie (ed.) (2001) *Facing up to the Past; Perspectives on the Commemoration of Slavery from Africa, the Americas and Europe* (Kingston/The Hague: Ian Randle/Prince Claus Fund).

3. J. Walvin (2009) Commemorating abolition 1807–2007. Paper presented at an international workshop 'The abolition of slavery; Long-term consequences' at the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, 2 July; cf. C. Hall (2008) Feature; remembering 1807: histories of the slave trade, slavery and abolition. *History Workshop Journal*, **64**(1), 1–5; and Way Forward (2007) *The Way Forward; Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act 1807–2007* (London: HM Government). There were also commemorative committees in the former British West Indies, independent of the British initiative, see H. M. Beckles and V. A. Shepherd (2007) *Saving Souls; the Struggle to End the Transatlantic Trade in Africans; A Bicentennial Caribbean Reflection* (Kingston: Ian Randle), p. xvii.
4. See E. Kowaleski Wallace (2006) *The British Slave Trade and Public Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press) and J. R. Oldfield (2007) *'Chords of Freedom'; Commemoration, Ritual and British Transatlantic Slavery* (Manchester: Manchester University Press) for analyses of earlier commemorations and public memory. More specifically, for statues and monuments in London see M. Dresser (2008) Set in stone? Statues and slavery in London. *History Workshop Journal*, **64**(1), 162–199.
5. For example, the mission statement of the Transatlantic Slavery gallery in Liverpool: 'The aim of the gallery is to increase public understanding of the experience of Black people in Britain and the modern world through an examination of the Atlantic slave trade and the African diaspora.' (quoted in Oldfield 2007, p. 126).
6. C.-M. Bernier and J. Newman (2008) Public art, artefacts and Atlantic slavery: introduction. *Abolition & Slavery*, **29**(2), 135–150, esp 136. Cf. A. Green (2008) Remembering slavery in Birmingham: sculpture, paintings and installations. *Abolition & Slavery*, **29**(2), 189–201; J. R. Oldfield (2007) *'Chords of Freedom'; Commemoration, Ritual and British Transatlantic Slavery* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), pp. 117–139.
7. Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2006) *Reflecting on the Past and Looking to the Future* (London: Department for Culture, Media and Sport), paragraphs 7 and 13.
8. In 1794, the revolutionary national convention did abolish slavery in the colonies, but this decree was not put into practice. In 1802 Napoleon formally re-established slavery.
9. See *Codes noirs* (2006) *Codes noirs de l'esclavage aux abolitions*. Introduction de Christiane Taubira (Paris: Dalloz) for all relevant laws on slavery.
10. Discourse of 26 July 2007, see citations in C. Coquio (ed.) (2008) *Retours du colonial? Disculpation et rehabilitation de l'histoire coloniale* (Nantes: l'Atalante), pp. 16–17.
11. See D. Beriss (2004) *Black Skins, French Voices; Caribbean Ethnicity and Activism in Urban France* (Boulder, CO: Westview), pp. 51–54, 63;

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A. G. Hargreaves (2007) *Multi-ethnic France; Immigration, Politics, Culture and Society* (New York: Routledge), pp. 129–131; B. Stora (2007) *Les guerres des mémoires; La France face à son passé colonial; Entretiens avec Thierry Leclère* (Paris: l' Aube), pp. 71–75; F. Vergès (2006) *La mémoire enchaînée; Questions sur l'esclavage* (Paris: Hachette); P. Weil (2008) *Liberté, égalité, discriminations; L'identité nationale au regard de l'histoire* (Paris: Grasset), pp. 17–22, 165–209.
12. P. Nora and C. Françoise (2008) *Liberté pour l'histoire* (Paris: CNRS Editions).
13. O. Pétré-Grenouillé (2004) *Les traites négrières; Essai d' histoire globale* (Paris: Gallimard) and http://www.clionautes.org/spip.php?article925.
14. The UK has decided that 23 August, the UNESCO day for the International Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition, will also be the national day of remembrance (Way Forward (2007) *The Way Forward; Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act 1807–2007* (London: HM Government), p. 4). In the Netherlands, the official day is still 1 July, the day Dutch West Indian slavery came to an end.
15. http://www.entoen.nu/
16. *De Geschiedeniskrant*, 26 March 2008.
17. G. Oostindie (2003) Squaring the circle; commemorating the VOC after 400 years. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, **159**, 153. See the overview of both trades provided by R. van Welie (2008) Slave trades and slavery, 1596–1863. In: G. Oostindie (ed.) *Dutch Colonialism, Migrations and Cultural Heritage* (Leiden: KITLV Press), pp. 155–260.
18. A. van Stipriaan (2006) Between diaspora, (trans)nationalism, and American globalization: a history of Afro-Surinamese Emancipation day. In: R. Gowricharn (ed.) *Caribbean Transnationalism; Migration, Pluralization, and Social Cohesion* (Lanham: Lexington Books), p. 169. See also A. van Stipriaan, W. Heilbron, A. Bijnaar and V. Smeulders (2007) *Op zoek naar de stilte; Sporen van het slavernijverleden in Nederland* (Leiden: KITLV Uitgeverij).
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20. For example, J. Torpey (2006) *Making Whole what has been Smashed; On Reparations Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).
21. M.-R. Trouillot (1995) *Silencing the Past; Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press).
22. J. Eichstedt and S. Small (2002) *Representations of Slavery; Race and Ideology in Southern Plantations Museums* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press); A. Tibbles (2008) Facing slavery's past: the bicentenary of the abolition of the British slave trade. *Abolition & Slavery*, **29**(2), 293–303.

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