

DOWNLOAD PDF REPORT MADE TO THE CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES ON THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY IN THE FRENCH COLONIES

Chapter 1 : Politics and Views/His convictions: The Abolition of Slavery

Alexis de Tocqueville, Report made to the Chamber of Deputies on the Abolition of Slavery in the French Colonies, by Alexis de Tocqueville; July 23, Translated from the French (Boston: James Munroe and Company,).

They, who have hitherto considered the subject of slavery, have, for the most part, endeavored to show its injustice or to mitigate its hardships. The Commission, in the name of which I have the honor to speak, perceived, from the commencement of its labors, that its task was at once more simple and more grand. It has been sometimes assumed that Negro Slavery had its foundation and justification in nature herself. It has been declared that the slave-trade was a benefit to its unfortunate victims; and that the slave was happier in the tranquillity of bondage, than in the midst of the agitation and the struggles that accompany independence. Thank God, the Commission has no such false and odious doctrines to refute. Europe has long since discarded them. They cannot serve the cause of the colonies, and can only injure those planters who still uphold them. The Commission has not now to establish the position, that slavery can and ought to cease. This truth is now universally acknowledged, and one which slaveholders themselves do not deny. The question before us has ceased to be a theoretical one. It is at length comprehended in the field of Edition: We are not to consider whether slavery is evil, and ought to terminate, but when and how it can best be brought to an end. Those, who, while they admit that slavery cannot always continue, desire to defer the period of emancipation, say that before breaking the chains of the negroes we must prepare them for independence. The black now escapes almost entirely from the salutary bonds of marriage; he is dissolute, idle, and improvident; in more than one respect he resembles a depraved child rather than a man. The truths of Christianity are almost unknown to him, and of the morals of the Gospel he knows only the name. Enlighten his religion, reform his habits, establish for him the family relation, extend and fortify his intellect, until his mind can conceive the idea of the future, and acquire the power of forethought. After you have accomplished all these things, you can without fear set him free. True; but if all these preparations cannot be made in a state of slavery, to exact that they shall have been made before servitude can cease,â€”is it not in other words to declare that it never shall cease? To insist on giving to a slave the thoughts, the habits, and morals of a free man, is to condemn him to remain always a slave. Because we have made him unworthy of liberty, can we forever refuse to him and his descendants the right of being free? It is true, that the conjugal union is almost unknown among the slaves of our colonies. It must, however, be allowed, that, in this respect, the masters have sometimes attempted to do what the law has not done. But the negroes have generally escaped, and still escape, this salutary influence. There exists, indeed, a profound and natural antipathy between the institution of marriage and that of slavery. A man does not marry when he cannot exercise marital authority, when his children must be born his equals, irrevocably destined to the wretchedness of their father; when, having no power over their fate, he can neither know the duties, the privileges, the hopes, nor the cares which belong to the paternal relation. It is easy to perceive that every motive, which incites the freeman to a lawful union, is lost to the slave by the simple fact of his slavery. The several means which the legislature or the master may use to attract him to that condition, which they have rendered him incapable of desiring, will always be without effect. The same remark may be applied to the other arguments. How can the reason of a man be enlightened and strengthened, while we hold him in a state where reason is useless to him, and where its exercise may be injurious? We cannot seriously hope it. Besides, it is absurd to endeavor to render a laborer active and diligent, who is compelled to work without wages; and it is a puerile effort to undertake to endow with discretion and habits of foresight those, whose lot it is to remain strangers to their own fate, and who see their future destiny in the hands of another. All, who have had occasion to reside in our colonies, agree in saying, that the negroes are much disposed to receive and retain religious faith. It seems certain, however, that the negroes have as yet conceived only very obscure and unsettled ideas on the subject of religion. This may be attributed in part to the small number of priests who live in the colonies, to the little zeal of some among them, and to the habitual indifference of the

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masters on this point. But these are, it must be allowed, only secondary causes; the primary cause is still slavery itself. This is easily understood, and is explained by what precedes. In many countries where the Europeans have introduced servitude, the masters have always opposed, openly or in secret, the preaching of the Gospel to the negroes. Christianity is a religion of free men; and they fear, lest in exciting it in the soul of the slave, they may also awaken there some of the instincts of liberty. When, on the contrary, they have had occasion to call on the priest for his assistance in preserving order, and introduce him among the laborers, he has had little power, because in the eyes of the slave the priest appeared but as the substitute for the master, and the sanctifier of slavery. In the first case the slaves could not, in the second they would not, receive instruction. How convey the idea of moral dignity to a man, who is nothing in his own eyes? With every exertion, it is hardly possible to enlighten and spiritualize the religion of a slave, whose life is spent in hard and incessant labor, and who is naturally and irrevocably plunged in ignorance by the very tenor of his condition. It is not easy to purify the life of a man, who can never know the principal charms of the conjugal union, who can see in marriage only another slavery in the bosom of bondage. If the subject be carefully examined, we shall be convinced, that in most slave countries, the negro is entirely indifferent to the truths of religion, or at least that he turns Christianity into an exciting and gross superstition. It would seem then hardly reasonable to believe, that in slavery we can destroy those vices to which slavery naturally and necessarily gives birth. The thing is without example in the world. It is only experience of liberty, liberty long possessed, and directed by a power, at once energetic and restrained, which can prompt and form in man the opinions, virtues, and habits, which become a citizen of a free country. The period, which follows the abolition of slavery, has therefore always been a time of uneasiness and social difficulty. This is an inevitable evil; we must resolve to meet it, or make slavery eternal. Your Commission thought that all the means, which might be employed to prepare the negroes for emancipation, would be very slow in operation, and of extremely limited utility. They have, therefore, judged, that little is gained by delay, and have questioned Edition: Slavery is one of those institutions, which may endure a thousand years, if no one undertakes to enquire why it exists at all, but which it is almost impossible to maintain when that enquiry has once been made. If we consider what is passing in France, it seems evident, that at the point to which opinion has now arrived, after the Chambers have been often occupied with the question of emancipation, and have made it the order of the day, as the able reporter of the preceding Commission has expressed it; it seems evident, we say, that the administration cannot long resist the pressure of public sentiment upon this subject, and that, after a very short delay, it will be compelled, directly or indirectly, to abolish slavery. On the other hand, if we consider the state of the colonies, we are induced to believe, that, for their interest alone, servitude must soon cease among them. One cannot study with attention the numerous documents placed before the Commission, without discovering that in the colonies the idea of the abolition of slavery is present to every mind. The approach of this great social change, the natural fears and well grounded hopes which it inspires, disturb and deeply agitate society. The events, which are happening in the English colonies, surrounding our own, the occurrences of each year in the mother country, and what is passing even in our own islands, where, within eight years, thirty-four thousand blacks 1 have been enfranchised; all these announce to the planters that slavery must soon terminate. Nothing has happened to countenance the uneasiness which was manifest. It is certain, however, that the laborers are agitated by the hope of approaching emancipation. It is no longer a state of regular and established order; it is a transitory and stormy condition; the dreaded revolution is already begun. The planter, who sees this inevitable revolution advancing upon him day by day, is without definite prospects, and consequently heedless of the future. He begins no new enterprises, because he is uncertain whether he shall reap the fruit of them. He improves nothing, because he is sure of nothing. He takes no pains to preserve that which may not always belong to Edition: The uncertainty of their approaching destiny weighs heavily upon the colonies; it contracts their intelligence and abates their courage. It is partly to this cause, that we must attribute the pecuniary distress in our colonies. The estates and slaves are without purchasers, because there is no security for the proprietors and masters. The same results were also visible in most of the English colonies during the period,

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which immediately preceded the abolition of slavery. Of this we shall be convinced on reading the discussions of the English Parliament in the session of 1789. If this state of things be long continued, it will ruin the white population, and leave little hope of ever attaining peaceably and happily the enfranchisement of the blacks. In the gradual and involuntary relaxing of the bond of slavery, the negro becomes gradually accustomed to the idea of being feared; he readily attributes all that humanity accomplishes in his favor to the terror which he inspires. He becomes a bad slave, without acquiring any of the virtues of the free man; he loses that habitual obedience and respect, of which the magistrate must avail himself when the authority of the master is withdrawn. It is also during this nocturnal liberty, that they employ themselves in robbery and smuggling, and hold their meetings. When day arrives, they are exhausted and little fit for work. When the planters are asked why they give Edition: In short, when the master demands of his negroes anything that they are unaccustomed to do, they resist, at first by idleness, and, without further action on his part, proceed to poison the cattle. The terror of poison is great in this country; by its power the slave governs his master. The Commission have examined a report by the Governor of Martinique, dated the 15th March, 1789, in which this functionary attributes partly to the fear of poison the little interest the planters take in raising cattle. It is now a measure of political necessity. It is better that the crisis should be brought about by a firm and prudent hand, than to leave the colonies to be enfeebled and degraded by delay, and at length to become incapable of supporting it. Your Commission have been unanimous in the opinion, that the time has come to engage actively in the final abolition of slavery in our colonies; and they have thought it their duty to endeavor to devise the best method of accomplishing that object. Two general systems have naturally presented themselves. The first gives liberty to the slaves individually, and by a succession of slow and progressive measures. The second puts a stop to servitude at once, and for every slave. Your Commission, after mature investigation, were Edition: This opinion, which, moreover, seems universally admitted in the colonies themselves, may at first appear surprising. But an attentive examination will soon show, that it is founded upon reasons which seem unanswerable. These reasons have already strongly attracted the attention of the late Commission. When the government shall at once, and by the direct and visible operation of her will alone, grant independence to all the slaves, she may easily, in return for the new rights which she confers, impose upon each of them certain peculiar and strict obligations, and place them at once under temporary regulations, which shall gradually accustom them to make a good use of their liberty. As the change is complete, the whole society being transformed at the same time, it will not be impossible to introduce new maxims of government, a new police, new functionaries, new laws. These laws applying to all, no one will feel himself injured, none will resist them. The mother country is prepared to make such an effort, and the colonies to submit to it. When, on the contrary, the slaves receive their liberty one by one, and by a concurrence of circumstances which appear accidental, the social change thus effected attracts no attention. At each separate enfranchisement the nature of colonial society is fundamentally Edition: The enfranchised continuing to form a class by themselves, we must create for it special legislation, separate magistrates, a distinct government. These are undertakings always difficult and often dangerous. It seems more simple and less troublesome to resort to common law. Now the common law for a society of slaves does not at all resemble ours; it were a great error to suppose it. All who have travelled in those countries where slavery exists may have remarked, that the social power interferes less in the affairs of life, and assumes infinitely less responsibility, than in countries where slavery is unknown.

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