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CONDORCET

Political Writings

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On slavery.
Rules for the *Society of the Friends
of Negroes* (1788)

Preamble

Any society which wants to stimulate general interest must explain to the public *the reasons why it has been formed and the aims it intends to fulfil*; a task which is more important for the *Society of the Friends of Negroes* than for any other of the many societies this century has nurtured. These other tributes to humanity and benevolence needed simply to be publicised in order to evoke compassion; the unfortunate people who needed help were there, before our very eyes; the help requested was merely financial and could be obtained simply by directing the public's attention towards the picture of misfortune. The *Society of the Friends of Negroes* does not have the same advantages: the unfortunate victims we have befriended are being sacrificed far away; the men who could become their true protectors are themselves blinded by cruel prejudice; and no amount of money could ease their suffering. But just because their hardship is linked with powerful political interests, because their chains are made heavier still by the blind force of prejudice and because there are great obstacles to overcome, we must not forget that this time it is not just a small group of people that we are trying to help, but an entire race; part of the world, crushed beneath the weight of its chains, cries out to us for the restoration of its sacred human rights.

To understand the reasons for the formation of the *Society of the Friends of Negroes*, we need simply think for a moment about the negro

slave trade and trace its development through to the present, when its victims are groaning under the yoke of slavery.

The people of Africa, constantly at war with one another, are prey to all the evil powers which tyrannise these unfortunate countries.

No reason for their constant conflicts or for the dreadful fate to which Africans have been subjected can be found in their customs, colour or moral character; we stand condemned by reason of the superiority of civilised nations over uncivilised ones. Our trade could have moderated their customs if it had not been in our interests to perpetuate their vices. However hard we try, we will never be able to convince any thinking man that these poor people are responsible for the shameful trafficking of their freedom.

From the very beginning, this trade (since we dare to call it that) has borne the stamp of deception and injustice. We have no compunction in offering them damaged goods in exchange for their freedom; goods whose value stems only from the ignorance of the recipients, firearms which we no longer feel we can safely use, but which in their hands serve to prepare our victims, and alcoholic liquor designed to preserve the brutishness and frenzy without which the slave trade would cease to exist. Initially, we are simply ourselves doing an injustice; since they know nothing else, uncivilised nations regard our deceptive gifts as truly valuable, while we know that they are sufficient to stimulate their greed and avarice. The richest Negro is the one who has placed the largest number of his fellows in our chains; greed has become their dominant passion, drowning out the voice of nature. When strength is not enough to satisfy their greed and they do not have enough prisoners, they select slaves for us from amongst their own women and children. What does it matter to us? If we could do so without danger, we would even enchain the man providing the slaves.¹

Scarcely are these unfortunate people in our power than they realise the value of the freedom they have lost and the emptiness of the consolation they had expected from the love of property. Once on the ship to be transported, each person is squashed into the smallest possible space and surrounded by chains. At the slightest protest, his chains are made

¹ Men supplying slaves have sometimes been enslaved themselves. While this seemingly well-deserved punishment does not excite much pity, we cannot, however, fail to be revolted by such atrocious treachery.

heavier; at the slightest groan, he is whipped; and any sign of anger or despair is punished by death. Proving that these conditions are contrary to the interests of the ship-owner makes no difference; interests often go beyond the bounds of prudence and we should not expect to find enlightened interests in this kind of trafficking.² Besides, those who succumb to bad treatment and illness during the crossing are the lucky ones, for those who reach the West Indies eventually lose all their human characteristics. No sooner have they disembarked than they are put up for auction where, like animals, they are given the degrading marks of servitude.³ We might imagine that if their physical strength or moral weakness has enabled them to survive this kind of treatment, they will not succumb under the weight of their chains; however, more perish in the course of the first year.⁴ This should come as no surprise if we consider that a slave's only protection is the interest of the man whose property he has become. We cannot resolve this by establishing laws to fix the limits of the master's power, for such laws can be upheld only by the master himself. The slave's condition is so bad that he cannot even invoke a law to ensure his own protection. We deprive the Negro of all his moral faculties and then declare him inferior to us, and consequently destined to carry our chains. This is a monstrous mixture of injustice and cruelty. No compassionate person could ever stop hoping for an end to this appalling situation, which contradicts all the laws of humanity.

This is undoubtedly why several beneficent French ministers have been prompted to seek ways of destroying this system.⁵ Considerations such

² This cruelty seems at first to be based on totally false principles, but can be explained to some extent by the fact that ships' captains who conduct the slave trade receive from the man who commissioned them a certain percentage of the Negroes they transport or a certain percentage of the proceeds of their sale. The privateer is also free to insure the Negroes' lives. It is therefore very probable that several of these unfortunate people have perished simply to benefit the privateer at the insurer's expense. Indeed, research conducted in England has provided proof of this.

³ When a man buys a Negro, he has his name stamped on the slave's chest with a hot iron. This process is called branding. When the Negro changes master he is branded once again, so that anyone unfortunate enough to change masters several times may be scarred all over by this gruesome practice.

⁴ It would not be an exaggeration to say that more than one in four perish.

⁵ Although M. Turgot was Minister for the Navy for just one month, he had already begun to look for ways of destroying the Negro slave trade and slavery. As Controller General, he rejected one trader's proposal that he give his name to a building destined for use by slave traders. His rejection was so forceful that he caused the privateers considerable alarm.

M. Necker, on pp. 262–263 of his book, writes as follows: 'As we have just seen, the French colonies contain almost 500,000 slaves, and this number is used as a gauge of their

as these opened the eyes of Quakers, showing them that the Negro slave trade and slavery could not be reconciled with the principles of equality, gentleness and humanity which they profess; they led the United States to encourage the formation of societies in America to assist the vast numbers of victims; they led England to follow the same example, establishing a large society which devoted considerable funds to the research required to prove the necessity of abolishing the slave trade. It is for these reasons that a Society was established in this capital – a society which all charitable men will support, to which clever men will devote their enlightenment, which will undoubtedly obtain government protection and which cannot fail to provoke general interest. This interest will develop further when people see our moderate defence of a cause designed to provoke passions, when we are seen to be calm in our study of matters which will revolt humanity and to oppose prejudice with facts and calculation alone; and, finally, when the wise rules of our Society force us constantly to strive for the goals we have set ourselves and which we aim to publicise.

Now that this account of the reasons for its establishment has been presented, there can be no doubt about the aims of the *Society of the Friends of Negroes*. The combination of mankind suffering in one corner of the world while greed and cruelty are encouraged in the other is bound to produce horrific scenes, since the laws of justice are infringed by all nations which are engaged in the Negro slave trade or who benefit

fortune. This appalling situation provides a great deal of food for thought. How inconsistent we are, both in our morals and in our principles. We preach humanity and yet every year we enchain 20,000 Africans. We call the Moors barbarians and brigands when they risk their own freedom to attack that of Europeans; and yet speculating Europeans, with no risk of danger, use money to stimulate the slave trade and all the bloody scenes which precede it! We pride ourselves on the greatness of Man, basing this on the mystery of all our intellectual faculties, and yet a small difference in hair or in skin colour is enough to change our respect into scorn and to make us rank beings similar to us on a level with unintelligent animals, to place a yoke on their shoulders and to dispose of their strength and their instinct ... Only with time could a free race do this work itself, but the great difference between the price of these two types of labour would so advantage trading nations which had kept their old customs that, before long, we would be deterred from trying to surpass them in virtue. This plan for a general pact by which all nations would renounce the slave trade with one common accord is not simply a dream. This kind of agreement would not alter their current positions relative to one another, for only comparative wealth is important in calculations of power.⁹

During his time as a minister, M. le Maréchal de Castries examined ways of softening the fate of Negroes. The last ruling he made in their favour was dictated by humanity and kindness, and he would undoubtedly have praised the enthusiasm and work of the *Society for the Friends of Negroes*.

from their slavery. The need to stamp out the source of so much evil is apparent everywhere, and this is the goal which the *Society of the Friends of Negroes* has set itself.

The name we have chosen for ourselves would undoubtedly have been enough to make our intentions clear. However, since we intend to concentrate on useful work, we need to repel in advance anyone who attempts to sow suspicion by accusing us of having no fixed aims, by presenting us as a dangerous institution with the sole aim of discrediting a branch of commerce which has become necessary or, finally, by ridiculing us and claiming that we are insubstantial, inconsequential and controlled by passion alone. It is therefore important for the *Society of the Friends of Negroes* to make known the principles and spirit by which it is governed.

The discussion of the present system is of interest to the whole of mankind. It would be neither prudent nor politic at the moment for any nation which conducts a slave trade to ignore this important question; the first nation which raised it necessitated others to consider it as well. It is therefore probable that the slave trade will be abolished by a general agreement or pact between the powers. The Quakers are currently preaching this as a point of doctrine; in the United States, where there is general opposition to the slave trade,⁶ various American societies have been formed to protect the unfortunate Africans, and have been enthusiastically received. While our supporters are finding out the facts in our colonies, this important cause is being forcefully pleaded in England where, although Parliament has deferred its decision on the matter, it has praised the Society concerned. Could France be the only European power to remain indifferent? Surely it is in our government's best interests to be well informed, so that it can follow every step taken by the other powers and find solid foundations on which to base its own actions?

Colonists will be prevented by a cruel but time-honoured prejudice⁷ from examining a question which is far removed from all their concerns; this prejudice may influence the administrators sent to the region by the

⁶ Ten States have forbidden the importation of Negroes. Eight of these have only a few slaves, but the other two – Virginia and Pennsylvania – have a great many. One of the other three States, South Carolina, has forbidden the importation of Negroes for a period of three years: thus, Georgia and North Carolina are currently the only States where the importation of Negroes is permitted.

⁷ *The Just Limitation of Slavery* by Granville Sharp [a leading English anti-slavery propagandist], p. 54 onwards. Fothergill devoted a considerable sum of money to try to cultivate the African coast, and began a subscription fund for the same purpose. He died before being able to complete his project, but since then the English have apparently had some

government; also, owners of plantations who remain in France, seeing only the produce received from the colonies, are bound to reject outright any kind of change.⁸ Slave trade privateers will oppose any project of this kind. Since most of them will have no direct interest in the examination of such a delicate question, and will flinch at the thought of the amount of information to be collected and the huge extent of the research to be done, they are bound to criticise any undertaking of this kind without even trying to understand it. So how can the government shed light on this important question? It will constantly be wary of being misled by errors resulting from prejudice, by particular interests, by insincerity and, above all, by ignorant men who are always ready to criticise and quick to decide. Only a society of men brought together by principles of humanity and justice can assemble all the facts and vouch for their authenticity, collect all the proposals for changing the present system, examine them, subject them to calculation, look for any information they may be lacking and obtain it, pose questions, find the answers and compare them, and finally form a considered plan of action, implement it and maybe even conduct some experiments. This is the only way to present the government with plans which are sufficiently detailed and based on facts and calculations to deserve their consideration, to enlighten the colonists about their interests (at the same time as benefiting from their enlightenment and their experience), and to apply this lengthy work and research to the greater or lesser task of destroying an evil which shocks both justice and humanity.

The slave trade must be abolished by a general agreement, but this happy revolution can only be the result of our convictions. With this permanently in mind, the Society will attempt to discover, balance and accommodate the interests of all concerned.

If the *Society of the Friends of Negroes* intended to present a doctrine, or to inveigle or seduce people, it would insist upon a profession of faith from all its members and carefully avoid anyone who might contradict its views. Yet its rules show that any individual presented by a member of

success on the coast. If colonial lands can be cultivated properly, surely it is time to award them the real value of which they are deprived in the present system.

⁸ When we consider that Negro women are fertile, that the climate in the West Indies is not dissimilar to the natural climate of the Negroes, that population size adjusts very quickly to the means of survival, and therefore in this case to the owners' interest in increasing their Negroes, we find that the slave trade probably is not necessary; and therefore that both the government and the owners have very good reasons for requiring its abolition.

the Society can be admitted, provided that he obtains the support of four other members. This formality was vital to make certain of the membership of this society. While we cannot have the same confidence about the results of the *Society of the Friends of Negroes*, there can be few sentient beings who do not share our desires; this fact alone is enough for a person to want to become a member, to follow the work of the Society and to examine its progress and that of foreign societies. We are already lucky enough to number some planters amongst our members. Far from attacking those whose opinions might seem to distract us from our goals, we ensure that discussion alone is the path towards the enlightenment for which we aim. It is vital that the other side of the argument is heard, for while we obviously hope to destroy all objections, it would be more dangerous still to be ignorant of their existence.

If the *Society of the Friends of Negroes* still needed to provide proof of its openness, such proof could be found in the reasons for the subscription it requires. It is well to make these public. Although several people have already been so moved by the use for which these subscriptions are destined that they have given the Society considerable sums of money, the subscription rate has been fixed at just 2 louis for Paris and 1 louis for the provinces, so that no one who might be of assistance would be deterred from joining. This subscription is devoted not only to publicising the results of the Society's work, but also to the publication at a moderate price of all works which may throw some light on this important question, to enable everyone to profit from the research and from the documents belonging to the Society or sent to the Society from foreign societies, and to enable public opinion to be the prime judge of this noble and moving cause.

The Society is bound to encounter great obstacles and will have to accommodate great interests, but the sweet hope of the possible rewards will keep up its spirits and preserve its courage.

We are trying to save millions of men from ignominy and death,⁹ to enlighten those in power about their true interests and to restore to a whole section of the world the sacred rights given to them by nature. It would be a great triumph for our century if a thorough examination

⁹ See *The Influence of the Discovery of America* by M. l'Abbé Genty [Paris, 1788]. We should like to be able to transcribe here the sections from p. 165 to p. 185 and from p. 331 to p. 338. This sensitive and enlightened writer, whose profound *Studies* inspire confidence, says on p. 334, 'Servitude consumes men with quite terrifying speed; the 9 million Negroes imported into America now number just 1,500,000.'

of the question, economic research, political calculations and, above all, the vital link between all the societies concerned with the question could enable us even simply to envisage the possibility of enacting this important revolution. What a reward for all those whose work enabled them to help determine such an event!