Part I

Slave Revolts and the Abolition of Slavery: An Overinterpretation

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INTRODUCTION

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At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Thomas Clarkson portrayed the anti-slavery movement as a river of ideas that had swollen over time until it became an irrepressible torrent. Clarkson had no doubt that it had been the thought and action of all of those who, like Raynal, Benezet, and Wilberforce, had advocated "the cause of the injured Africans" in Europe and in North America, which had ultimately lead to the abolition of the British slave trade, one of the first steps toward abolition of slavery itself.[1]

In our times, there are several views on what led to abolition and they all differ substantially from the river of ideas imagined by Clarkson. Ironically, for one of those views, it is as if Clarkson's river had reversed its course and started to flow from its mouth to its source. Anyone who, for example, opens the UNESCO web page (the Slave Route project) will have access to an eloquent example of that approach, so radically opposed to Clarkson's. In effect, one may read there that, "the first fighters for the abolition of slavery were the captives and slaves themselves".[2] Indeed, the UNESCO web page considers that the insurrection of Saint-Domingue (Haiti) was the event that led to the abolitions, and that is why August 23rd—the day on which, in the distant year 1791, the largest slave revolt in history broke out—was chosen as the International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition.[3]

The tendency to over-emphasize the role of the resistance to slavery in its abolition, so clearly evident in an organization as important and far-reaching as UNESCO, is even more pronounced in the discourse of journalists, political activists, and the so-called remembrance groups, large associations which devote a fair amount of attention to the memory of slavery, a memory that they seek to reconstruct primarily as the outcome of slave resistance everywhere—in Africa, on the slave ships, on the plantations in the colonies where slavery was practiced—and only secondarily the result of the anti-slavery movement, which emerged and developed in the Western world.[4] Although this approach occurs most frequently in the mass media, this is not simply a case of popular mystification, extra-

neous to the academy. This book addresses a type of discourse at least partly to be found in the academy itself.

A major gain for scholarship has occurred in recent decades. There has been a welcome surge in the number of studies on slaves' resistance to their masters. In those studies, historians have investigated cases of insurrection, conspiracy, escapes, the withholding of labor, and sabotage. They have built up a complex and surprisingly full picture of the way in which an anonymous and often brutalized mass reacted to their bondage. Often, the different forms of slave resistance—especially armed revolt—have been seen as the manifestation of a hitherto unsung heroism and of a spirit valuing liberty and refusing to be restricted by the brutality of the masters. Many aspects of this resistance had remained hidden by the age-old stereotype of Negro docility.

Some historians, however, went further and replaced the stereotype of the docile slave with the counter-stereotype of the always-rebellious slave. For a number of these historians, the slave as rebel was the first, and the main, agent—or at least the most significant one—in the abolition of slavery. In the words of Nelly Schmidt, "Overcoming slavery was the aim of those primarily concerned, i.e., those who had been captured in Africa and deported to the Caribo-Americas between the end of the Fifteenth Century and the end of the Nineteenth Century. *Subsequently*, it also became the aim of the Western abolitionists who sought to convince the European governments of the need to put an end to the slave trade and to the system of slavery" (author's translation).[5] To illustrate the notion that African slaves were the first opponents of slavery, Schmidt adopted a cumulative and teleological conception, lumping together revolts on the plantations and on slave ships, poisonings of masters, escapes and suicides, infanticides, and even the slave's daily, stoical survival itself. All of these phenomena are conflated as forms of the struggle against slavery and as actions which undermined the colonial slavery regime for centuries, so that it eventually collapsed.[6] In other words, for Schmidt, the purpose of all of these manifestations, whether of resistance, rejection, and despair, and whatever form they took, was to end slavery itself. Hence, slaves were the historic precursors of the movement that would take on its visible political form—abolitionism—at the end of the eighteenth century.

There are obvious difficulties with this thesis. To group together the manifestations of slave resistance as if they all derived from the same motivation and had only a single objective is tenuous to say the least. Even aligning such closely related phenomena as conspiracies and revolts raises a number of difficulties from the point of view of historical analysis. It should always be recalled that the confessions of those allegedly involved in conspiracies generally were obtained under torture. It seems likely that whites invented some of the conspiracies. Many historians refer to outbreaks of paranoia and persecution, which take us beyond the issues of slavery. Trevor-Roper, for example, demonstrated how people under torture confess to whatever their interrogators want to hear, de-

nouncing their friends and neighbors or involuntarily exaggerating the importance of harmless episodes or non-events.[7] Another problematic posture is equating all slave revolts with anti-slavery, but only from the sixteenth century onward. This excludes Antiquity and the Middle Ages, both Christian and Muslim. If Schmidt had not excluded them, she would have had to acknowledge that resistance to slavery and the anti-slavery attitude supposedly deriving from it had their origins in very ancient times, and would have had to explain why that anti-slavery attitude did not lead to abolition in those times. Of course, as an alternative, she could always regard the revolts, conspiracies, and escapes that took place before the sixteenth century as not being expressions of anti-slavery. In that case, however, she would have to explain why they were not similar expressions of antislavery.

Despite these and other problems, a number of historians have developed the thesis that the struggle of the slave masses both preceded, and had a significant effect on, the final decision to abolish the institutions of slavery. In addition to Nelly Schmidt, the theory is also to be found in the writings of Elikia M'Bokolo, Hebert Aptheker, Hilary Beckles, Richard Hart, and several others.[8] I examine these in greater detail in chapter 4. Regardless of the differences between them, all of these historians see the actions of slaves in revolt as having led to abolition. They supposedly did so directly, in that successful insurrections produced an area of freedom that undermined or destroyed the fabric of slavery, and indirectly in that those actions, helped to instill generalized fear amongst whites, and thus eventually force them to abolish the system. In other words, these historians have helped to encourage two persistent misinterpretations: first, that revolts were always ways of fighting slavery; and secondly, that the decision to end the system of slavery in most Western nations was for the most part the outcome of such revolts. As Schmidt concluded, "Every emancipation act, whether it concerned French, English, Spanish, Danish or Dutch colonies, was preceded by a more or less extended slave rebellion which precipitated the decision" (author's translation).[9]

This statement is biased, because it does not consider what happened in the majority of Western countries. And it is also misleading because, unless one ascribes a meaning to the verb "to precede" so widely that it covers events that took place several decades or even centuries before abolition, the emancipation decrees in most countries were not preceded by slave revolts. On the contrary, it is generally impossible to establish a direct, necessary or sufficient correlation between slave uprisings—which are an integral part of the history of slavery in various epochs and latitudes—and the emancipation laws enacted in the West, which were all highly localized and specific events in human history. On the rare occasions when such a correlation can nevertheless be established, those who dub the slave as the main agent of the abolition of slavery have generally placed the cart before the horse. It is precisely this thesis that I will seek to demonstrate.

The first of this book's four chapters deals with events prior to the end of the eighteenth century. It provides a general picture of the various forms of slave resistance and it explains what usually happened as a result of resistance in terms of its threats to the prevailing systems of slavery. Chapters 2 and 3 analyze the main revolts that occurred during the Age of Abolition, between the end of the eighteenth and the end of the nineteenth centuries. It further asks whether and to what extent those revolts deviated from the usual pattern, and if it is possible to establish a correlation between violent slave agitation and the decision to end slavery—and, if so, what sort of correlation. Finally, in looking at the close relationship between history and ideology, chapter 4 seeks to identify the origins and nature of the theory that views emancipation as something which was primarily the result of the struggles of the slaves themselves.

Notes

1. Thomas Clarkson, *History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade by the British Parliament* (London, 1839; 1st edition 1808), 47ff.
2. http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=27519&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html.
3. http://www.unesco.org/focus/newslett/newslet8.html.
4. By way of illustration only, see the web page of Le Collectif des Antillais, Guyanais, Réunionnais (http://www.collectifdom.com).
5. "vaincre l'esclavage fut l'objectif des premiers concernés, les captifs d'Afrique déportés aux Caraïbes-Amériques entre la fin du XVe et la fin du XIXe siècle. Ce fut *ensuite* et aussi celui des abolitionnistes qui, en Occident, cherchèrent, du XVIIIe au XIXe siècle, à convaincre les gouvernements européens de la nécessité de mettre un terme à la traite négrière et au système esclavagiste"
   Nelly Schmidt, *L'abolition de l'esclavage. Cinq siècles de combats (XVe-XXe siècle)* (Paris: Fayard, 2005), 7 (my italics).
6. Schmidt, *L'abolition de l'esclavage,* 49. For a critique of Schmidt's book, see João Pedro Marques, "Terão os escravos abolido a escravidão? Considerações a propósito de um livro de Nelly Schmidt," in *Africana Studia,* 8 (2006): 249–273.
7. H.R. Trevor-Roper, *Religion, the Reformation and Social Change* (London: Macmillan, 1967) (I used the Portuguese translation by Maria do Carmo Cary, *Religião, Reforma e Transformação Social*, ed. Presença (Lisboa, 1981), 73ff.). For examples of conspiracies that were the result of white fear, see Winthrop D. Jordan, *Tumult and Silence at Second Creek: An Inquiry into a Civil War Slave Conspiracy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993); and Matt D. Childs, *The 1812 Aponte Rebellion in Cuba and the Struggle against Atlantic Slavery* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 138.
8. By way of example, see Herbert Aptheker, *Abolitionism. A Revolutionary Movement* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1992), xiii.
9. "chaque décret d'émancipation, qu'il s'agisse des domaines coloniaux français, anglais, espagnol, danois ou néerlandais, fut précédé d'un soulèvement d'esclaves plus ou moins long qui précipita la prise de décision."
   Schmidt, *L'abolition de l'esclavage*, 326.