



Sur la législation anglaise relative à la traite des noirs, et sur l'état des nègres affranchis

[On English legislation relating to the slave trade, and on the condition of the liberated negroes]

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In August 1820, the French Protestant historian Charles Coquerel published an article in the liberal journal *Revue Encyclopédique* which examined the politics of ending the slave trade among European countries, looking particularly at Britain's role in legislating for abolition. The article appeared at a time when the slave trade was causing a great deal of political controversy in France. The five years of trading that Britain had conceded in the 1814 Peace of Paris had ended, and yet reports were arriving from observers in Africa that the French slave trade to the Americas was continuing. A minor colonial employee in Senegal, Joseph Elzéar Morenas, petitioned the French Parliament in June 1820 demanding "in the name of humanity, the execution of the laws abolishing the slave trade, which have until now been violated with impunity".¹ This demand was countered by an official government report accusing Morenas of exaggeration and threatening to take legal action against him. The initial statement against the French authorities was supported in a pamphlet by the Abbé Giudicelly entitled *Observations on the slave trade*, and in another petition by Morenas in 1821.² A "genuine whistle-blower",³ Morenas was able to provide an eye-witness account of the

¹ J. Morenas, *Pétition contre la traite des noirs, qui se fait au Sénégal, présentée à la Chambre des Députés, le 14 juin 1820* (Paris: Chez Corréard, 1820), 3.

² Abbé Giudicelly, *Observations sur la traite des noirs, en réponse au rapport de M. Courvoisier sur la pétition de M. Morenas, par M. l'Abbé Giudicelly, Ancien préfet apostolique du Sénégal et de Gorée* (Paris: Chez les

continuing slave trade, due to his position within the colonial administration on the coast of West Africa as an agricultural specialist. These petitions were encouraged by major figures within the European abolitionist movement such as Grégoire, Clarkson and Macaulay, who saw them as a chance to pressurise the French government into taking decisive action against the slave trade.

At the height of this controversy, Charles Coquerel's article on Britain and the slave trade appeared in the *Revue Encyclopédique* and was also printed as a pamphlet. Like many abolitionist publications of the 1820s, the article tried to portray the abolition of the slave trade as a cooperative effort, describing it as a "spontaneous league of European nations".⁴ Coquerel credits the sudden, collective feeling against the slave trade in European public consciousness to several factors: firstly, the testimonies of missionaries and travellers against the slave trade, secondly, the work of the "most distinguished minds" of Europe (2), and thirdly, the spread of Enlightenment ideals of political emancipation. Above all, he argues, the slave trade was a shadowy and outdated practice that was fundamentally at odds with the modern, enlightened age, and thus the outcome of the campaign for its abolition in Europe could never have been in doubt. He compares the abolitionist movements in Britain and France, noting the philanthropic engagement of "illustrious citizens" in France such as Condorcet, Necker, Lafayette and Grégoire against the slave trade, and the widespread publicity and support from the arts in Britain: "Wedgewood's pretty cameos shone on everyone's finest clothes. The image of a kneeling slave could be seen everywhere, and everywhere the touching motto could be read: Am I not a man and a brother?" (19). The influence of Clarkson's box of African produce in France, as well as the model of the Brooks that Mirabeau had constructed, are also noted by Coquerel as important elements of the European campaigns against the slave trade. Finally the impassioned speeches of politicians in both countries are recalled by Coquerel as examples of "that memorable era, when the cause of black freedom united the most prominent citizens of France and England" (20).

Coquerel acknowledges popular suspicions in France of hidden motives behind Britain's abolitionist zeal, but tries to show that they had no basis in reality. Using official documents supplied by Thomas Clarkson and Clarkson's book, *History of the rise, progress and accomplishment of the abolition of the African slave-trade by the British parliament* (1808), he explains the laws abolishing the slave trade in Britain in more detail and describes the colony of Sierra Leone where the majority of Africans from captured slave ships were taken. He thereby attempts to prove to French readers that Britain was sincere in its efforts to end its own slave trade. Coquerel also comments briefly on the Morenas affair in a footnote, stressing the importance of this eye-witness account and petition. While he avoids a public commitment in support of Morenas, Coquerel calls for a more rigorous enquiry to be conducted by the French government.

Marchands de Nouveautés, 1820). Joseph Morenas, *Séconde pétition contre la traite des noirs, présentée à la Chambre des Députés, le 19 mars 1821, et à celle des Pairs, le 26* (Paris: Jeunehomme-Crémière, 1821).

³ Christopher L. Miller, *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2006), 206.

⁴ Charles Coquerel, *Sur la législation anglaise relative à la traite des noirs, et sur l'état des nègres affranchis* (Paris : Baudouix Frères, 1820), 1.