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## The Abolitionist Cause in Britain and in France (1787-1790): A Case of Counter-Productive Transposition ?

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# The abolitionist cause in Britain and in France (1787-1790): a case of counter-productive transposition?

This paper will seek to analyse the limits of the international transpositions of political causes in the Enlightenment era. I shall more particularly focus on the example of the transfer of slave trade abolitionism from Britain into France, to try and observe whether or not Jacques-Pierre Brissot, le Comte de Mirabeau and Etienne Clavière, who were all well-acquainted with Thomas Clarkson and the London Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, managed to stir up an effective abolitionist movement in France. This paper shall then analyse how the radicalisation of political views in France during the Revolution had negative consequences on abolitionism, threatening the legitimacy of its discourse and even its very existence as a political cause both in France and in Britain.

## 1. The Committee for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, founded in 1787, and the subsequent creation of *La Société des Amis des Noirs* in Paris

The Committee for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade was founded in London on 22nd May 1787 by twelve men.<sup>1</sup> Very shortly after they created this association, the members of the Committee were contacted by French supporters of the abolitionist cause. The Proceedings of the Society, kept in the British Library<sup>2</sup>, show that just about three months after its creation, this association received a letter from French activist Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville, in which he offered to become a representative of the abolitionist movement in France:

A translation of a letter from Brissot de Warville dated Paris, August 18th 1787 and addressed to James Phillips, was produced and read, in which he offers to act as agent for this institution in France and to promote a subscription there, whereupon it was resolved that this committee highly approving the zeal expressed by Brissot de Warville thanks him for his disinterested offer and elects him an honorary member and correspondent. [...] the committee [...] earnestly recommends that Brissot de Warville would set on foot and promote to the utmost of his power a similar institution in that country for the purpose of effecting the abolition of the slave trade.<sup>3</sup>

Other regular epistolary contacts were established between the French activists and the Committee, as proved by their numerous mentions in the proceedings of the Society, for instance on 30th October 1787,<sup>4</sup> on 12th February 1788<sup>5</sup> and on 26th February 1788.<sup>6</sup>

On 19th February 1788, Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville founded the French counterpart of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade in Paris. At that point, Brissot had long been interested in abolitionism and egalitarianism. He was especially close to the Quakers. He spent a long time in London, first in 1782, when he established his

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<sup>1</sup> Nine of them were Quakers, John Barton, George Harrison, William Dillwyn, Joseph Hooper, Samuel Hoare, Joseph Woods, John Lloyd, James Philips and Richard Phillips – The Quakers, or ‘Society of Friends’ pioneered the Abolitionist cause – and three were Anglicans, Thomas Clarkson, Granville Sharp and Philip Sansom.

<sup>2</sup> *Fair Minute Books of the Committee for the abolition of the Slave Trade*, 22 May, 1787-9 July, 1819.

<sup>3</sup> *Fair Minute Books of the Committee for the abolition of the Slave Trade*, 27th August 1787, 22 May, 1787-9 July, 1819, Volume 1, British Library, reference: Add MS 21254.

<sup>4</sup> “A letter dated the 13th October was received from Brissot de Warville and Stephen (sic) Clavière, a translation thereof was read, expressing their disposition to promote the views of this society in France”.

<sup>5</sup> “The Marquis de la Fayette having his friend the Chevalier de Ternant now in England, signified to Mr Sharp his approbation of the society for the abolition of the slave trade, and his earnest desire to assisting to the utmost of his power, in effecting that charitable purpose.’ The committee further expresses its support to this idea of international cooperation [...] [The committee] hopes that a society of the same purposes as our own will be instituted in France, so that if the governments both of Great Britain and France should really prohibit the infamous traffic in their respective dominions, the humane example may probably be followed by the other European nations”.

<sup>6</sup> “A translation of a letter from Brissot de Warville, dated Paris the 14th February was read. A letter from the Marquis de Fayette (sic) dated Paris 17th February was read”.

*Licée* (sic) de Londres and met a number of Quakers; then he returned to London in 1787 as he was having trouble with the French authorities because of his publications. At this point he reconnected with the Quaker community whose commitment to the abolitionist cause had been gaining momentum since the 1720s when the Quakers officially disapproved of the slave trade. In 1761 they excluded from their society any person having a link with the slave trade. In 1783 they set up a first association whose official aim was the liberation of the slaves and in 1787, they were instrumental in the creation of the Committee for Effecting the Abolition of the slave trade<sup>7</sup>. Brissot called the French abolitionist group *La Société des Amis des Noirs* and used exactly the same seal as that chosen by the British society, to wit a medallion representing a kneeling Black man with the motto “AM I NOT A MAN AND A BROTHER?” translated into French as “Ne suis-je pas ton frère?”<sup>8</sup> A nude slave (often black and cane colours) kneels and clasps his chained hands in prayer on the medallion created by Josiah Wedgwood (1730-1795) that was part of an instant and successful moral marketing when it was sent to Benjamin Franklin in 1788.<sup>9</sup> It was imbedded in accessories from cuff links and snuff boxes to bracelets and hair pins. The pacific position of the supplicant helped the movement.

The following year, in 1789, Thomas Clarkson spent several months in France, helping in the promotion of the abolitionist campaign for ending the slave trade in the French colonies. Clarkson intended to encourage the passing of an anti-Slave-Trade bill in the French *Assemblée Nationale Constituante*, hoping that this would stimulate a similar process in the British Parliament: “Clarkson avait été envoyé en France [...] pour épauler l’action de la Société des Amis des Noirs et pour mesurer son influence sur l’opinion publique. Il projetait de faire déposer une motion contre la traite à l’Assemblée nationale. Un succès rapide en France pourrait influencer favorablement sur les décisions des députés anglais”.<sup>10</sup>

To this effect, he sent a series of letters to French abolitionist *député* le Comte de Mirabeau<sup>11</sup>: “Clarkson comprit bientôt que Mirabeau, le meilleur orateur du moment, de surcroît excellent manœuvrier, serait l’intermédiaire le plus efficace. La préparation de cette intervention de Mirabeau est au centre de cette correspondance. Le député pose des questions, toujours brèves, va droit au sujet”.<sup>12</sup> The reason why Clarkson chose to address Mirabeau is obvious. Mirabeau, who himself called the slave trade “*l’infâme trafic*”,<sup>13</sup> had been raised in a very progressive family. His father, the Marquis de Mirabeau, a physiocrat, already promoted free trade and freedom for slaves in an essay published in 1758, *L’Ami des hommes ou Théorie de la population*<sup>14</sup>. On 2nd July 1789, Mirabeau confirmed his commitment to abolitionism when, in a debate at the *Assemblée Constituante*, he reproached the delegation of St. Domingue with the total absence of Black people among them: “Croient-ils que ces hommes qu’ils ont exclus, nous ne les représentons pas? Croient-ils que nous ne défendrons pas ici leur cause? Ah! sans doute, si telle a été leur espérance, je leur déclare qu’elle est

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<sup>7</sup> See footnote 1.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.histoire-image.org/fr/etudes/cachet-societe-amis-noirs>

<sup>9</sup> Medallions came in a variety of colors such as black on blue-grey or white on a purple background.

<sup>10</sup> Françoise Thésée, “Autour de la Société des Amis des Noirs: Clarkson, Mirabeau et l’abolition de la traite (août 1789-mars 1790)”, *Présence africaine*, 1983/1, n° 125, 1.

<sup>11</sup> These letters are kept in the library of museum Paul-Arbaud in Aix-en-Provence (Fonds Mirabeau, dossier 102).

<sup>12</sup> Françoise Thésée, « Autour de la Société des Amis des Noirs : Clarkson, Mirabeau et l’abolition de la traite (août 1789-mars 1790) », *Présence africaine*, 1983/1, n° 125, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Comte de Mirabeau, *L’Analyse des Papiers anglais*, tome 3, n° L du 16 au 19 mai 1788.

<sup>14</sup> Marquis de Mirabeau, *L’Ami des hommes ou théorie de la population*, 1756.

outrageante pour nous et qu'elle sera déçue!"<sup>15</sup> His personal political commitment and his rhetorical talents naturally made Mirabeau the ideal promoter of abolitionism in the *Assemblée Nationale* and, therefore, one of Clarkson's main political allies in France, along with the other activists of *La Société des Amis des Noirs*.

But Clarkson did not come to France between August 1789 and March 1790 only to support the nascent French abolitionist movement. The British abolitionists had been somewhat disappointed with their own campaign in Britain: in August 1789, indeed, the British Parliament had only committed themselves to trying and improving the living conditions of the slaves during the Middle Passage, but the rest of the debate had been delayed to the following parliamentary session. Clarkson and his friends, then, decided to reinforce their strategy, first by collecting evidence of the extreme violence of the slave trade and second by finding allies abroad. William Wilberforce, the abolitionist Member of Parliament, hoping that the egalitarian ideals characterising the early stages of the French Revolution would help promote the cause, entrusted Clarkson with the mission of going to France to gain the collaboration of the French abolitionists. Upon his arrival in Paris, in August 1789, Clarkson thus immediately contacted the French opponents to the slave trade, Condorcet, Brissot, Clavière, La Fayette and le Comte de Mirabeau. His first impression of the French abolitionists was excellent. He more particularly admired le Comte de Mirabeau's sincere commitment to the abolitionist cause and clever strategy in spite of the difficulty of the task, mainly due to the actions of the planters' committee who constantly try to present the *Société des Amis des Noirs* as an extremist organisation advocating the immediate emancipation of the slaves:

When our correspondence was over, I had some conversation with him relative to fixing a day for the motion. But he judged it prudent, previously to this, to sound some of the members of the Assembly on the subject of it. This he did; but he was greatly disappointed at the result. There was not one member, out of all those, with whom he conversed, who had not been canvassed by the planters' committee [...] While the Comte de Mirabeau was continuing his canvass among the members of the National Assembly, relative to his motion, attempts were again made in the public papers to mislead them. Emancipation was now stated to be the object of the Friends of the Negros. This charge I repelled, by addressing myself to Monsieur Beauvet. I explained to him the views of the different societies, which had taken up the cause of the Africans; and I desired him to show my letter to the planters.<sup>16</sup>

## 2. Clarkson's gradual disillusionment in France (1789-1790)

Clarkson was however soon to be disappointed by the French abolitionists' action. When he first attended a meeting of *La Société des Amis des Noirs*, on 21st August 1789, he discovered that only a few members were present: "The first public steps taken after my arrival in Paris were at a committee of the Friends of the Negros, which was but thinly attended. None of those mentioned, except Brissot, were present".<sup>17</sup> And, although he noticed with satisfaction that the ambitions of the *Société* were moderate, since the French members of the *Société* advocated, just like their British counterparts, the end of the slave trade, and not the immediate emancipation of Black people,<sup>18</sup> Clarkson found out that the French abolitionists had very few initiatives and actually relied on the support of the London anti-Slave Trade Committee for their actions. This showed that the London abolitionists could

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<sup>15</sup> *Gazette Nationale ou Moniteur universel*, séance du 2 juillet 1789, <https://archive.org/stream/gazettenationale1789panc#page/58/mode/2up>.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade by the British Parliament* (1808), Vol. I, chapter XXV. <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/12507/pg12507-images.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise*, *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> "Les Noirs ne sont pas mûrs pour la liberté: il faut les y préparer. Telle est la doctrine de la Société", *Patriote Français* du 24 août 1789, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k49495k/f125.image>

definitely not expect much from their French counterparts to liven up their own activities. For instance, the French abolitionists wanted their British fellow activists to send a petition to the French *Assemblée Nationale* demanding the abolition of the slave trade:

It should be recommended to the committee in London to draw up a petition to the National Assembly of France, praying for the abolition of the Slave-trade by that country. This petition, it was observed, was to be signed by as great a number of the friends to the cause in England, as could be procured. It was then to be sent to the committee at Paris, who would take it in a body to the place of its destination.<sup>19</sup>

Clarkson however disapproved of this initiative as he considered that this would certainly embarrass the French members of the *Assemblée Nationale* to be given orders by a foreign association: “It struck me that an application from a little committee in England to the National Assembly of France was not a dignified measure, nor was it likely to have weight with such a body. It was, besides, contrary to all the habits of propriety, in which I had been educated. The British Parliament did not usually receive petitions from the subjects of other nations”.<sup>20</sup> Also, after spending several weeks in Paris, Clarkson found it difficult to establish a regular contact with the members of *La Société des Amis des Noirs* and it was increasingly apparent to him that very little was happening:

But time was flying apace, I had now been nearly seven weeks in Paris; and had done nothing. The thought of this made me uneasy, and I saw no consoling prospect before me. I found it even difficult to obtain a meeting of the Friends of the Negroes. The Marquis de la Fayette had no time to attend. Those of the committee, who were members of the National Assembly, were almost constantly engaged at Versailles. Such of them as belonged to the Municipality, had enough to do at the *Hôtel de Ville*. Others were employed either in learning the use of arms, or in keeping their daily and nightly guards. These circumstances made me almost despair of doing any thing for the cause at Paris, at least in any reasonable time.<sup>21</sup>

Clarkson therefore decided not to rely too much on the *Société* and to promote the abolition of the slave trade himself with members of the *Assemblée Nationale*, whom he strove to meet:

I thought it expedient to depend less upon the committee and more upon my own exertions, and I formed the resolution of going among the members of the National Assembly myself, and of learning from their own mouths the hope I ought to entertain relative to the decision of our question. In the course of my endeavours I obtained a promise from the Duke de la Rochefoucauld, the Comte de Mirabeau, the Abbé Syeyes (sic), Monsieur Bergasse, and Monsieur Petion de Villeneuve, five of the most approved members of the National Assembly, that they would meet me, if I would fix a day.<sup>22</sup>

However, the violent events of the Revolution hindered his action. Pétion de Villeneuve, a lawyer and a very active revolutionary, became gradually involved in the processes of the *Assemblée Constituante* and with the *Jacobins* faction, which kept Clarkson from meeting him. And, to make things even worse, in October 1789, Clarkson witnessed the Days of October, which resulted in the imprisonment of the French Queen and King, diverted the attention of the entire country to other causes than the abolition of the slave trade and totally compromised Clarkson’s plans to meet any of the prominent revolutionaries he wanted to speak to:

On my arrival at Paris in the evening the Palais Royal was full of people, and there were movements and buzzings among them, as if something was expected to happen. The next day, when I went into the streets it was obvious what was going to take place. Suffice it to say, that the next evening the King and Queen were brought prisoners into Paris. After this, things were in such an unsettled state for a few days, and the members of the National Assembly were so occupied in the consideration of the event

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise*, op. cit.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*



itself, and of the consequences which might attend it, that my little meeting, of which it had cost me so much time and trouble to procure the appointment, was entirely prevented.<sup>23</sup>

Clarkson also had to deal with the growing extremism of some revolutionaries on the issue of slavery abolitionism. While the *Société des Amis des Noirs* fully agreed with the British moderate and gradual approach, advocating a step-by-step abolition process, of the slave trade first and then of slavery, not to threaten their country's economic and commercial interests<sup>24</sup> and also to reassure the White planters, some French Revolutionaries displayed impatience and demanded the immediate abolition of slavery. This radicalisation of the Revolutionaries eventually led to the abolition of slavery by the French *Convention Nationale* on February 2<sup>nd</sup> 1794 (16<sup>th</sup> pluviôse, An II). Yet this law, pioneering though it was, was not fully implemented as it was strongly opposed in the Reunion and Mauritius<sup>25</sup>, and did not apply to the Martinique or Tobago then under British control. This law was eventually repealed by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1802, and, added to the 1791 Saint-Domingue slave rebellion and its subsequent bloodbath, definitely frightened both planters and governments throughout Europe. To put it differently, due to its radicalism, the French revolutionary approach eventually proved completely counterproductive and confirmed that the British abolitionists' gradual strategy was probably the only effective way to put a durable end to the enslavement of Africans. In this very unsteady context of the French Revolution, then, after months of actions and negotiations, and concluding that the abolition of the slave trade would definitely not happen overnight in France, a very disillusioned Clarkson left the country in March 1790:

I left France, as it may be easily imagined, much disappointed, that my labours, which had been of nearly six months continuance, should have had no better success; nor did I see, in looking forward, any circumstances that were consoling with respect to the issue of them there; for it was impossible that Mr. Pitt, even if he had been inclined to write to Mirabeau, circumstanced as matters then were with respect to the hearing of evidence, could have given him a promise, at least of a speedy abolition;<sup>26</sup>

### 3. International abolitionism, an asset or a flaw?

Clarkson's presence in Paris, though it may have appeared to William Wilberforce and to the members of the London Committee as a clever initiative, turned out to be useless. But the initiative was also fraught with danger. Indeed, as he could not really rely on the help or actions of the newly created *Société des Amis des Noirs*, Clarkson decided to act personally and reached out for help by contacting the *députés* of the *Assemblée Constituante* himself. Now, though rational such an action may sound, it resulted in growing suspicion towards Thomas Clarkson who was publicly denounced as a British "spy": "My name was mentioned

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> See for instance this letter sent by a person living in the port of La Rochelle to the Comte de Mirabeau, criticising the revolutionary project of abolition of the slave trade : 'Voilà mes principes. Mais, M. le comte, malheureusement ce genre de commerce est aujourd'hui presque le seul auquel puissent se livrer plusieurs de nos ports. Les armateurs qui s'en occupent y ont employé de grands capitaux, non seulement les leurs, mais ceux de leurs co-intéressés, mais encore ceux des manufacturiers qui leur fournissent les articles de traite, mais encore les crédits que les banquiers de la capitale, et même dans l'étranger, leur accordent en supplément de leurs fonds propres. L'abolition de la traite ne produira-t-elle point le bouleversement de leurs fortunes, tout au moins l'engorgement de leurs moyens ? On pourrait le craindre, parce que ces armateurs ont des fonds plus ou moins considérables répandus parmi les habitants ou planteurs, qui souvent ne paient qu'autant qu'on leur fait de nouvelles ventes, et qui, dans le régime appréhendé, seront eux mêmes contraints de donner la denrée destinée au paiement d'anciennes dettes, au marchand étranger qui leur portera des esclaves.', (*Gazette Nationale ou Moniteur Universel*, 24th November 1789, p. 54, <https://archive.org/details/gazettenationale1789panc/page/n6>).

<sup>25</sup> Mauritius was then called 'Isle de France'.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

at full length [...] It was stated [...] that I was employed by the British government as a spy, [...]”.<sup>27</sup>

Certain members of the *Assemblée*, extremely straightforward in that matter, not only accused Clarkson of being a British spy attempting to cause France to lose its colonies, but even suspected le Comte de Mirabeau of being himself bribed by the British into speaking against the slave trade for the same reasons:

Mirabeau a perdu dans l'Assemblée la plus grande partie de son crédit [...] méprisé, moins peut-être qu'il ne le mérite, mais très fort [...] Cependant, si on voulait y faire attention et examiner avec un peu de soin la conduite de cet homme-là, on serait bientôt éclairé sur son compte [...] Mirabeau semble avoir juré de nous faire perdre nos colonies, soit en voulant faire prononcer sur le champ la liberté des Nègres, soit en y faisant changer brusquement le régime d'administration. Est-il donc si fou de croire cet homme soudoyé par l'Angleterre?<sup>28</sup>

At some point, Clarkson was even physically threatened and had to require the assistance of the *Garde nationale*, commanded over by General Lafayette:

I mentioned it to General la Fayette, and solicited his advice. [...] He desired me also to change my lodging to the Hotel de York [...] and to send to him if there should be any appearance of a collection of people about the hotel, and I should have aid from the military in his quarter. He said also, that he would immediately give in my name to the Municipality; and that he would pledge himself to them, that my views were strictly honourable.<sup>29</sup>

It appears, then, that the transposition of British abolitionism into France, under the impulse of both Brissot, who established a contact with the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade as early as August 1787, and Wilberforce, who thought a good idea to seek support and foster initiatives with the recently founded French *Société des Amis des Noirs* in 1789, resulted in confrontation, suspicion, opposition, extremism, threat and no immediate legal ban on the slave trade, either in France or in Britain. Worse even, this transposition led some revolutionaries to develop extreme views, which contributed to discrediting the abolitionist discourse and threatened its very existence both in France and in Britain. Indeed, the French Revolution and its subsequent radicalisation led to the slaves' rebellion of St. Domingue in 1791 with hundreds of white planters massacred. This provided fuel for the abolitionists' opponents, especially the French *Club Massiac*, and resulted in the disappearance of *La Société des Amis des Noirs* in the Autumn of 1791 after it was accused of stirring up hatred and rebellion among the slaves. The subsequent crackdown on the moderate Girondins in 1793—Jacques-Pierre Brissot was beheaded on 31 October 1793—dealt the final stroke to French abolitionist moderate activism.

On February 4th 1794, the French revolutionaries had the previously mentioned abolition of slavery law voted by the *Convention Nationale*, which, though apparently progressive, proved to be a poisoned chalice, for this measure had disastrous effects on British abolitionism: its moderate activists were immediately accused of working for the abolition of slavery—not only the slave trade—and were consequently demonised as *jacobins*.<sup>30</sup> Abolitionism was consequently silenced in Britain for several years, the actions of the

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Journal d'Adrien Duquesnoy, député du Tiers-Etat de Bar-le-Duc, sur l'Assemblée constituante, 3 mai 1789-3 avril 1790 (Paris: Picard, 1894), Tome II, p. 113.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, op. cit.*

<sup>30</sup> *A Very New Pamphlet Indeed! being the truth, addressed to the People at large containing some strictures on the English Jacobins* (London: np, 1792).



abolitionists in favour of their cause were hindered and delayed, and the passing of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act was postponed<sup>31</sup> to 1807.

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<sup>31</sup> Only in 1802 when Napoleon restored slavery and the slave trade in the French colonies could the British abolitionists launch a new campaign for ending the slave trade. From then on, indeed, being an abolitionist became respectable since it represented mainly opposition to France and to Napoleon. Only at that point did the British Government, through the voice of William Pitt the Younger, a personal friend of William Wilberforce's, endorse the abolitionist cause.

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