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“THE MOST USEFUL MEMBER OF SOCIETY?”: AN ANALYSIS ON THE IMPACT OF ENLIGHTENMENT ON ANTI-SLAVERY ARGUMENTATION IN THE LATE 18TH CENTURY AMERICAS

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Abstract

*This paper focuses on the impact of the Enlightenment movement in Europe and the Americas on how the anti-slavery advocates structured their argumentations and supporting evidence. By mainly examining primary sources in the late eighteenth century, such as local newspapers and lawsuit documents, and comparing it with prior anti-slavery writings as *The Selling of Joseph*, this paper is able to find evidences of new argumentation methods such as rational thinking and the use of pure reason, as praised by the Enlightenment thinkers. Also, this paper can find traces of existing ideas proposed by well-known Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke and Thomas Jefferson in the primary sources it examines. The most exciting findings of this paper are how anti-slavery supporters' argument showed traces of early socialists ideas, which is believed by the author to be the product of their use of reason and rational thinking.*

Keywords

Enlightenment, Slavery, Anti-Slavery, Rational Thinking

1. Introduction

The sailing of the first Spanish ship carrying the African captives from Europe to the Americas in 1503 marked the start of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, one of the most immoral activities in the course of human history. However, this horrible labor and the economic system did not receive significant objections until the eighteenth century, as various European thinkers were proposing new ideas about human rights and government, known as the Enlightenment movement. “The man of Enlightenment condemned slavery as a vestige of barbarism, an offense against the moral law, and a flagrant violation of peoples' rights derived from the Creator” (Morrow, 1985). With the support of Enlightenment ideas, myriads of anti-slavery articles and pamphlets were produced by anti-slavery activists in the late eighteenth century, which accelerated abolitionist movements in different parts of the Atlantic world. While many prior anti-slavery advocates structured their arguments based on religion and moral principles, by the late eighteenth century Americas, anti-slavery supporters were able to establish their argument with Enlightenment ideas by employing the idea of “rational thinking”, “State of Nature”, and “Universal rights.” To make their case, these anti-slavery advocates directly quoted major Enlightenment thinkers like John Locke, Montesquieu and others, which produced a new way of argumentation, a combination of religious and moral argument which also could be seen in specific anti-slavery arguments.

It is essential to recognize that before the eighteenth century and the sprout of Enlightenment ideas in Europe and America in the late eighteenth century, there were published anti-slavery pamphlets of anti-slavery argument in the late seventeenth century. The 1688 Germantown Quaker Petition against Slavery and *The Selling of Joseph*, written by Samuel Sewell in 1700, are the two typical earlier anti-slavery tracts. While the two documents were published on different dates and occasions, the two shared the same argumentation structure and approach in delivering their stance on anti-slavery and anti-slave trade. It is important to note that these two early anti-slavery pamphlets all structured their argument based on religious principles and the Bible. In the 1688 Germantown Quaker Petition against Slavery, Francis Pastries and his fellow Quakers friends protested against the importing and buying of slave laborers from Africa by British merchants and government. They established their argument based on the Bible golden rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” arguing for a ban of slavery in Pennsylvania (Cadbury, 1942). Similarly, Samuel Sewell’s *The Selling of Joseph* condemned the buying and holding slaves based on the Bible text as well, citing the tale of Joseph and also texts from the Exodus and Genesis, etc (Sewall, 1700). However, in the eighteenth century, as the publications of

different Enlightenment thinkers, such as the Encyclopedia by French thinker Diderot, denied the presence of God and the Bible as the source of all answers to the world, the way anti-slavery advocates structured their arguments has changed dramatically.

2. Methodology

The research question this paper is trying to tackle is the impact of Enlightenment on Anti-slavery argument development in America. As the general knowledge only focused on the well-known thinkers during the Enlightenment movement, but often neglect the impact of this intellectual movement on common intellectuals at the time, and how it inspired them to originate sound ideas. This paper mainly utilizes primary sources, but not governmental archives' papers, extracted from different archives and databases as the research method to find the impact of Enlightenment to anti-slavery arguments.

3. Anti-Slavery Advocates Utilized Rational Thinking

What is rational thinking, and how did Enlightenment thinkers define it? René Descartes first proposed the idea of Rationalism or rational thinking in the late seventeenth century as an opposing idea to English thinker Francis Bacon's empiricism (Leiss, 1994). First found in Descartes' book *Discourse on the Method*, the famous saying "*Je pense, donc je suis*" and "*Ego cogito, ergo sum*," which means "I think therefore I am" (Descartes, 1637). This new way of scientific reasoning proposed by Descartes opened a new way of thinking to Enlightenment thinkers later on, which is to think using reason, not the Bible. Later Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke, Roseau, Kant, and others, all proposed their unique way of understanding the world with the help of Rationalism, and their ideas will be the basis of many anti-slavery advocates' arguments. An analysis of anti-slavery writings in the late eighteenth century Americas show they form their anti-slavery stance following the ideology of Rationalism proposed by Descartes about a hundred years ago (Withers, 2008).

One distinct feature of late eighteenth century anti-slavery writings compared to previous pamphlets, the Bible is not the authoritative source for answers anymore. Instead, government-issued laws and the Constitution of America became the moral persuasion in many texts. Historians usually interpret the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and the US Constitution written by James Madison and other founding fathers in the Philadelphia Convention in 1789 to be highly influenced by ideas of European Enlightenment thinkers such as Montesquieu and John Locke (Berman, 2013).

These ideas can be seen in the newspapers of the time period. In December 1797, *the Gazette of the United States, & Philadelphia Daily Advertiser* published an article that stated: “All men are free when they set their foot within the state, but the state passed laws not freeing slaves.” In 1797, the country of the United States of America had just been established. It’s about decades later after the Declaration of Independence, where the famous “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...” was known to the world. It is interesting to see that the author of this quote, who is an anti-slavery proponent, could be willing to quote the Declaration of Independence written by the founding fathers of this newly-born country instead of quoting Bible texts like his or her anti-slavery predecessors, like 1688 *Germantown Quaker Petition against Slavery*. It is reasonable to suggest that the author of the excerpt above from the *Gazette* at that time was influenced by Enlightenment ideas which shaped his or her ideology. As mentioned before, the author’s choice of not citing the Bible but ideas from the Declaration of Independence clearly showed his or her agreement with the Enlightenment ideas within the founding document of America. Though patriotism might play a part in boosting this agreement, since the country has only established for less than thirty years from the time this newspaper article was published, the author’s own individual ideology of Rationalism has definitely played a massive role in the transformation from citing Bible texts to founding ideas of the United States.

Similarly, this tendency of referring to government-issued documents such as the Constitution could also be found in “*Memorials presented to the Congress of the United States of America*,” an anti-slavery pamphlet presented to the Congress in 1792. This memorial was submitted by Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia and was published by "The Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, and the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage, and for Improving the Condition of the African Race," The pamphlet was a collection of anti-slavery writings from organizations in six different states. Though the Congress did not respond directly to the request the pamphlet proposed of abolishing slavery, many arguments in the pamphlet and how it was structured influenced by Enlightenment’s rational thinking is worth analyzing. “... yet under our present excellent Constitution, congresses ‘Have authority to restrain the citizens of the United States for carrying on the African trade....’” The Rhode Island chapter of this pamphlet cites the Constitution on what Congress can do to restrain slavery. Similar argumentation approaches could be seen in the Pennsylvania chapter as well.

The Argumentation pattern of honoring laws over spiritual documents could be seen outside of the United States as well. In the late eighteenth century Latin America, legal records in Maranhao

showed similar anti-slavery justification as what the pamphlets mentioned above did. As paraphrased by a secondary source, the case was about a plantation slave in Maranhao trying to buy his freedom from the plantation owner but was rejected by the owner (Maclachlan, 1979). At the time in the late 1700s, a slave would buy out its freedom was an uncommon phenomenon to a slave owner and the judicial system. Therefore, there are no specific articles in the local judicial system that directly address this issue. As a result, the magistrate had to apply his reasoning. It was interesting to see that instead of reasoning based on moral principles from religious texts and shared beliefs on race, the magistrate came out of a conclusion reasoning through the existing laws. The magistrate noted that as in Roman laws, the basis of Portuguese law, recognized the natural impulse toward a state of freedom. All slaves had the absolute and incontestable right to regain their freedom, even as caged wild animals denied theirs sought to escape into their natural, Free State. Since the enslaved are still humans, not wild animals, they certainly have the right to buy their freedom according to law. The law the magistrate was referring to was Roman laws thousands of years ago; it is essential to recognize that over the past more than thousands of years after the end of the Roman Empire, state-issued laws was diminishing its significance in deciding a case; with religious texts and principles, dominated the European judging system and ideology throughout the Medieval Age and the Renaissance, all the way to the late eighteen century. Until French philosopher, Montesquieu, in his book, *The Spirit of Laws*, addressed the importance of government and laws in a country and society (Montesquieu, 1748). After the publication of the book in 1748, the importance of laws in reasoning an argument or stance became evident in the writings of anti-slavery advocates.

It's common in many anti-slavery writings that an alternative solution would be proposed to the society when the slavery system was abolished. However, since at the time in the late eighteenth century, there were no examples of government system in the world which had successfully abolished slavery, the solutions anti-slavery advocates proposed in their writings would have to come from their reasoning. Interestingly, many of the solutions anti-slavery writings proposed at the time and the logistics behind it is likely to be the product of rational thinking.

One most common approach in proposing a solution to the society after slavery is based on government-centered actions. In *Gazette of the United States March 10, 1790 edition*, the author argued that after the slavery is gone, "Government ... [should]... supported free negro life." Similarly, in *Gazette of the United States February 20, 1793 edition*, the article on anti-slavery suggested that slave owners should be paying taxes for owning slaves, because "... tax Are anything, but labor." The author then

suggested that the tax paid by these owners would be as public money and support the lives of the laborers. The excerpts from two editions of the *Gazette* presented an innovative practice at that time, the practice of Socialism. Through government-oriented actions and laws, the potential chaos after slavery would be nicely resolved. The excerpt of government raising taxes to support the labors under oppression, though published in 1793, could see the framework of wealth redistribution, a much later idea in the next century. It's fascinating to see anti-slavery advocates could be going this far and proposing ideas which would be formally proposed by socialists and communists in the middle of the next century. The only way they could accomplish this by reaching to the point of government-oriented wealth redistribution program, and government-oriented welfare program is through rational thinking and reason from the Enlightenment. Historians generally believe, famous socialists such as Saint-Simon, Karl Marx, and Engels, couldn't reach their ideas without the Enlightenment movement at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century. Maybe the author of these anti-slavery articles published on *the Gazette of United States* in the 1790s had gone through the similar thought process as those famous socialists did in reaching a practical solution in addressing the society after slavery oriented by the government.

It is generally believed that the most famous solution to slavery and after slavery at the time came from Thomas Jefferson in his famous book, *Note on the State of Virginia* (Jefferson, 1785). In "Laws," Jefferson proposed a solution to slavery which lasts till the Civil War and after. The solution of resettling slaves back to Africa, which was also a government project. Though Jefferson was a controversial figure in the topic of slavery, and he was also a famous Enlightenment figure, who drafted the famous Declaration of Independence and other founding documents of America. Because of his significance in the Enlightenment movement, his solution to slavery, sending them back to Africa, as a result of rational thinkings, the way of thinking how other thinkers like Rousseau and Locke reached their conclusions and understandings of the world. Although in hindsight this solution seems unsatisfactory, this was a novel approach to solve the issue of slavery at that time, providing severe counter-arguments for pro-slavery advocates, and this new way of solving the problem of slavery couldn't be proposed without rational thinking from the Enlightenment.

Besides the proposal for the government to take action in solving the issue related to slavery, some anti-slavery advocates raise issues over the social class structure in the debate of slavery. As one writer stated in *the Gazette of the United States, May 14, 1794 edition*: "If Virginia democrats live by the labor of slaves, and a northern aristocracy by the labor of his own hands, which is the most useful

member of society?” The author of this article, instead of attacking slavery and slave owners based on moral principles or Enlightenment ideals of all men are created equal, and he attacked the southern slave owners from a completely different and novel dimension, the social class structure. The author argued that the slave owners did not work at all; all of their production and wealth are obtained by slaves they owned. Thus, they are not useful to society at all, unlike the northerners who worked by themselves. The social class of the southern plantation owners, as Saint-Simon would argue according to Henri Saint-Simon 1760-1825: *Selected Writings on Science, Industry, and Social Organization*, is the Bourgeoisie (Saint-Simon, 1825). Since the Bourgeoisie doesn't usually do work by themselves, they are considered “parasites” to society. Though the author did not explicitly mention any of the term Saint-Simon used in illustrating his socialist ideas, like “parasite” or “Bourgeoisie class,” the idea toward social class are nearly identical. Similar to the proposal of the government-centered welfare system for Africans, the idea of social class on the issue of slavery was also the product of rational thinking as anti-slavery advocates utilized it to develop ideas which wouldn't be recognized until the next Century.

4. Direct Quote of Enlightenment Thinkers and their Ideas

Besides reasoning anti-slavery argument by themselves, many of the advocates would quote the work from famous Enlightenment figures and their ideas directly. Since at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, Enlightenment ideas were trendy among Europeans and Americans, both sides of the slavery discussion would quote or reference Enlightenment figures and their ideas.

French philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, was one of the first figures of the Enlightenment movement. His famous writings, *The Social Contract*, and *Emilie*, or *On Education*, influenced many later revolutions, most notably the American Revolution, Haitian Revolution, and the French Revolution (Rousseau, 1762). In *Social Contract*, Rousseau made one of the most famous quotes in the Enlightenment movement, “Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains.” This famous Enlightenment quote influenced myriads of anti-slavery advocates in structuring their arguments. “... Other free fowls in chains.” As quoted from *the Gazette of the United States April 11, 1794 edition*, the author was describing others who were held in chains as slaves. Later in the article, the author argued he: “...[had]... been known only by ...[his].... Effort for liberty and equality.” Though the author did not explicitly mention Rousseau, his ideas of men in chains and their liberty had been influenced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau argued that all men are born equal, but were held in chains by the

government and other constraints. The author of this newspaper article took the actual meaning of chains as the symbol of slavery and argued that he was constantly finding a way to break the chains for his fellow others and embrace liberty and society. Even though America had already gained independence in 1776 from the oppressive British government, the connotations of Rousseau's chains no longer applied to American society, but the slavery system still exists in American society as an integral part of the society. Therefore, those anti-slavery advocates who read works by Rousseau had transformed the “Political slavery,” addressed in Rousseau’s work into the “Chattel slavery” context on African American groups who were enslaved (Morrow, 1985).

The United States of America is the first country in the world which had a constitution, and the government system of America, the Three Branches of Government, the Congress, the judicial system, and the Executive branch was also the first country in the world which adopts a system alike. The originator of the government system of American government adopted from 1776 until now was a French political philosopher, Montesquieu. Since the country had just been established for less than 30 years, the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence was treated like the Bible of the new country. If Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and all other founding fathers of America are the writers of this “Bible of America”, Montesquieu would be the reason why there’s this “Bible”. Therefore, despite their stance on slavery or political parties, Montesquieu and its ideas were respected by everyone in America in the late 18th Century. Though pro-slavery advocates did employ Montesquieu and his work for arguing in favor of slavery, which will be discussed later in the discussion section, anti-slavery advocates often quoted Montesquieu directly to support their stance on the debate as well. For example, as could be seen in *the Gazette of the United States May 19, 1795 edition*, “Not to the virtue of Montesquieu, nor the bolted patriotism of a French revolutionist are we to look for a preservation of liberty and equality, in any free government...” The excerpt supported the premise that Montesquieu was so influential at the time, the author of this newspaper article would mention his name and quote his idea of the function of government directly in support his anti-slavery stance that the government is born to protect the liberty and equality of everyone in the country, which is also the function of government Montesquieu argued in *L'esprit des Lois* (Montesquieu, 1748).

John Locke was generally known to be the founding father of the Enlightenment movement and liberalism. He has considered the first thinker in Enlightenment proposed the idea of the State of Nature, which all men are by nature equal. He also abandoned the idea of God and religion. In his book, *the Two Treatise of Government*, Locke argued that the Social Contract people made with the government gave

them the chance to decide who's going to be their government and governs them (Locke, 1689). Also, he argued that if the people are unsatisfied with the government, they have the right to change the government. The idea of Social Contract and State of Nature Locke proposed influenced how the American founding fathers established the country. These two values had become the founding principles of America and also the core ideology in every American's mind. As a result, Locke's idea had become an essential part of the anti-slavery argument. Similar to Montesquieu, Locke's idea was also utilized by pro-slavery advocates who will be discussed in the discussion section. In the memorials "The Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, and the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage, and for Improving the Condition of the African Race" presented to Congress, Connecticut chapter expressed the idea that "Men by nature are equal," which is a representation of Locke's idea of the State of Nature.

Similarly, in the Virginia chapter, the author expressed that slavery "violates the right of human nature." Clearly could be seen how popular Locke's ideas were in anti-slavery advocates' argumentation and justification of the unfairness of slavery. Though the ideas such as the State of Nature and Social Contract was used as a political term in connection with the government by Locke, similar to the explanation under the section on Rousseau, Americans became empathetic toward "Chattel slavery" because of they believed they were in "Political slavery" under British rule (Morrow, 1985).

5. New Forms of Religion Argumentations

With the rise of Enlightenment ideas, traditional religious argumentations were losing their significance in how anti-slavery supporters structured their arguments. Though Enlightenment might be praising the idea of atheism or deism, because of John Locke and other significant Enlightenment figures, the Christian religion was still dominating Europe and the Americas, no matter if it was Catholicism or Protestantism, a significant portion of the population was still affiliated to Christianity and the Bible. However, like Mendelssohn, a well-known Jewish Enlightenment thinker who believed the combination of his own Judaism faith and the novel idea of Enlightenment could be beneficial to the Jewish population, it was common among people with religious background to combine their original religious beliefs with the idea of reason from Enlightenment.

James MacGregor, an American who lived in the late 18th Century, published a book in 1788 titled, *A letter to a clergyman urging him to set free a black girl he held in slavery*, served as an excellent example in representing this new form of argumentation, a combined argument and reasoning with

religious principles and texts and Enlightenment rational thinking (MacGregor, 1788). The reason why James MacGregor would utilize both the religious argument and Enlightenment reasoning was that the audience of his book was a clergyman who owns slaves, which is an excellent approach in reasoning, appealing to his audience, primarily. The author opened his argument with: “Is it so then that one man is born a slave, and another a Lord? ... it will never satisfy the conscience of a tender Christian. If you have more power and wealth than your slave, it owes cause only -- that God hath been more to you than her.” The excerpt at the beginning of the book serves a perfect example of this new combination of argumentation. The author starts with the question fully Enlightenment-like. Initially proposed by John Locke, in his book *The Two Treatise of Government*, that all men are born equal, which is known as the State of Nature (Locke, 1689). Following the Enlightenment argument, the author added his point of view as the “Conscience of a tender Christian.” Though as mentioned before, religion is not recognized by Enlightenment thinkers, the author agreed with the State of Nature from a Christian perspective. Only in this way could the author point out the State of Nature as an argument for his stance in a plausible way considering an extreme religious audience. The author mentioned the Bible text on the story of the Apostle Paul and its teaching of hospitality. Following this religious account, the author applied reasons to argue that if Jesus were black, will you still kept him a slave? This empathetic method of reasoning was novel at the time. Compare to previous religious writings as discussed in the previous sections, *The Selling of Joseph* and *1688 Germantown Quaker Petition against Slavery*, the past religious anti-slavery argument had not used this method of reasoning at all. So it is reasonable to conclude that this new way of reasoning is a product of the Enlightenment movement. Toward the end of the book, James MacGregor went on addressing his understanding of the definition of “Devil.” It is well known that the idea of Devil is a religious terminology. But MacGregor expressed his understanding of this seemingly religious devil within an Enlightenment-like way. “Reverend Sir, if you maintain that Negros have the image of the Devi because they are black, I will maintain, ... you have this image because you are white... But the truth is, the Devil is contrary to man, that in the day time, and among white people, you will always find him black. But at night time, among the Negros, he is invariably white” (MacGregor, 1788). Combining with reasoning of empathy and the religious idea of Devil, the author strengthened the old religious argument and boasting it to be more plausible and persuasive. In general, this new form of reasoning transformed the old religious argument to be more reasonable and harder to rebut for audiences with a religious background.

6. Additional Considerations

History is a complicated subject of study, and nothing is either black or white. In the case of how Anti-slavery advocates utilized Enlightenment ideas to argue in their favors, some of the Enlightenment ideas they applied could be argued in the opposite by pro-slavery people as well. For example, Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States, though he wrote about the unfairness of slavery in his book *Notes on the State of Virginia*, he's known to the world as a slave owner as well (Cohen, 1969). Because of his complicated nature, it's essential to keep in mind that Thomas Jefferson, being both an Enlightenment figure and a slave owner, could also serve an example as Enlightenment supporting the pro-slavery argument.

Similarly, John Locke, in 1699, had helped found the colony of North Carolina, which asserts that “every freeman of Carolina shall have absolute power and authority over his negro slaves” (Morrow, 1985). As mentioned in previous sections, the ideas of Locke support anti-slavery arguments are structured based on the premise of the empathetic nature of “Political Slavery,” which Locke wrote a lot about, to “Chattel Slavery,” which is the slavery the excerpt above was expressing about in North Carolina. Though Locke in later days had made attempts to refute the establishment of slavery, it is still crucial for historians to note that John Locke, the representatives of the equality ideals of the Enlightenment movement, could be quoted either way in the slavery debate. Montesquieu stood in the same position as Locke in the debate of slavery. Past historians had doubted the stance of Montesquieu on the issue of slavery as well from his writings, especially, *L'Esprit des Lois, the Spirit of Laws*, one of Montesquieu most notable writings on his ideals (Montesquieu, 1748). In the book written by Nancy Morrow, *The Problem of Slavery in the Polemic Literature of the American Enlightenment*, Morrow, after carefully examining the original French version of Montesquieu's writing, in Chapter X of *L'Esprit des Lois*, Morrow found Montesquieu made a unique distinction between the French word “*esclavage*” and “*servitude*”, which blurs the meaning of the original text to be whether those of slavery or those of servitude would have the choice to freedom (Morrow, 1985). Thus, it's never too early to label Montesquieu and Locke, and other Enlightenment figures, like Jefferson to be either supportive of slavery or anti-slavery arguments. Also, it's important to note that even the idea of rational thinking and the use of reason was used in pro-slavery argument as well. “Our author, in his great zeal to support his doctrine of the inferiority of the race of black, proceed thus to the proofs, they are in reason much inferior to whites...” The excerpt from *the Gazette of the United States, October 15, 1796 edition*, was written by an anti-slavery advocate, but the author quoted his or her opponent's writing as well. As the pro-

slavery advocates were trying to use reason to justify their stance. Therefore, even though anti-slavery advocates might adopt rational thinkings from the Enlightenment to support their argument, pro-slavery supporters could also be equipped the same weapon as well, and this is an area worth exploring by historians in the future.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, Rational thinking, a reasoning method which long had been existed since Plato and even Presocratics and was highly praised by the Enlightenment movement and ideas, did appear in the late eighteenth century as opposed to moral and religious argument in the earlier century and period. European Enlightenment writers' ideas and works were cited across the ocean in the Americas, showing the Enlightenment movement is trans-Atlantic and maybe an earlier sign of globalization of ideas. Still, nothing is single-sided in the course of history, it's important to recognize other complicated figures in the Enlightenment, such as Thomas Jefferson and John Locke, etc., whose idea and could be understood in supporting both sides in the debate.

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