

Abbé Raynal,
Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies (1770) [Excerpt]

[*Introductory note:* Abbé Guillaume–Thomas Raynal (1711–96), known by his clerical title [*Abbé* refers to ecclesiastical training], first published his multivolume history of European colonization anonymously in French in 1770. Today many sections of it seem almost quaint and hopelessly detailed, for Raynal and his collaborators (among them Diderot) gathered every imaginable fact to support their scathing indictment of European rapaciousness. As the English man of letters and diarist Horace Walpole commented, “It tells one everything in the world,” from the story of the tea and coffee trades to naval battles and to the history of Greek and Roman slavery. In its time, the book startled and shocked, and its indignant denunciation of colonization set off a firestorm of controversy. The French crown immediately prohibited its sale on the grounds that it contained “propositions that are impudent, dangerous, rash, and contrary to good morals and the principles of religion.” The government ordered Raynal into exile, and an assembly of the French clergy condemned him as “one of the most seditious writers among modern unbelievers.” Thanks to its notoriety, the book soon became a best–seller. In all, twenty approved editions and fifty pirated ones appeared by the time of Raynal’s death in 1796. The work gained as much fame in the New World as in the Old; American colonists read it as a defense of the rights of man, and the book was soon translated into English. Slave owners must have shuddered, however, when they read the passages below for Raynal not only condemns the slave trade and the practice of slavery but also predicts a future uprising of the slaves against their masters.]

Liberty is the property of one’s self. Three kinds of it are distinguished. Natural liberty, civil liberty, and political liberty: that is to say, the liberty of the individual, the liberty of the citizen, and

the liberty of a nation. Natural liberty is the right granted by nature to every man to dispose of himself at pleasure. Civil liberty is the right which is insured by society to every citizen, of doing every thing which is not contrary to the laws. Political liberty is the state of a people who have not alienated their sovereignty, and who either make their own law, or who constitute a part in the system of their legislation.

The first of these liberties is, after reason, the distinguishing characteristic of man. Brutes are chained up, and kept in subjection, because they have no notion of what is just or unjust, no idea of grandeur or meanness. But in man, liberty is the principle of his vices or his virtues. None but a free man can say, I will, or I will not; and consequently none but a free man can be worthy of praise, or be liable to censure.

Without liberty, or the property of one’s own body, and the enjoyment of one’s mind, no man can be either a husband, a father, a relation, or a friend; he hath neither country, a fellow citizen, nor a God. The slave, impelled by the wicked man, and who is the instrument of his wickedness, is inferior even to the dog, let loose by the Spaniard upon the American; for conscience, which the dog has not, still remains with the man. He who basely abdicates his liberty, gives himself up to remorse, and to the greatest misery which can be experienced by a thinking and sensible being. If there be not any power under the heavens, which can change my nature and reduce me to the state of brutes, there is none which can dispose of my

liberty. God is my father, and not my master; I am his child, and not his slave. How is it possible that I should grant to political power, what I refuse to divine omnipotence?

Will these eternal and immutable truths, the foundation of all morality, the basis of all rational government, be contested? They will, and the audacious argument will be dictated by barbarous and sordid avarice. Behold that proprietor of a vessel, who leaning upon his desk, and with the pen in his hand, regulates the number of enormities he may cause to be committed on the Coasts of Guinea; who considers at leisure, what number of firelocks [guns] he shall want to obtain one Negro, what fetters will be necessary to keep him chained on board his ship, what whips will be required to make him work; who calculates with coolness, every drop of blood which the slave must necessarily expend in labor for him, and how much it will produce; who considers whether a Negro woman will be of more advantage to him by her feeble labors, or by going through the dangers of child-birth. You shudder!—If there existed any religion which tolerated, or which gave only a tacit sanction to such kind of horrors; if, absorbed in some idle or seditious questions, it did not incessantly exclaim against the authors or the instruments of this tyranny; if it should consider it as a crime in a slave to break his chains; if it should suffer to remain in its community, the iniquitous judge who condemns the fugitive to death: if such a religion, I say, existed, ought not the minister of it to be suffocated under the ruins of their altars? . . .

But, it is alleged, that in all regions, and in all ages, slavery hath been more or less established.

I grant it; but what doth it signify to me, what other people in other ages have done? Are we to appeal to the customs of ancient times, or to our conscience? Are we to listen to the suggestions of interest, of infatuation, and of barbarism, rather than to those of reason and of justice? If the universality of a practice were admitted

as a proof of its innocence, we should then have a complete apology for usurpations, conquests, and for every species of oppression.

[The author then refutes other reasons given in support of slavery.] .

But it is urged, that in Europe, as well as in America, the people are slaves. The only advantage we have over the Negroes is, that we can break one chain to put on another.

It is but too true; most nations are enslaved. The multitude is generally sacrificed to the passions of a few privileged oppressors. There is scarce a region known, where a man can flatter himself that he is master of his person, that he can dispose, at pleasure, of his inheritance; and that he can quietly enjoy the fruits of his industry. Even in those countries that are least under the yoke of servitude, the citizen deprived of the produce of his labor, by the wants incessantly renewed of a rapacious or needy government, is continually restrained in the most lawful means of acquiring felicity. Liberty is stifled in all parts, by extravagant superstitions, by barbarous customs, and by obsolete laws. It will one day certainly rise again from its ashes. In proportion as morality and policy shall be improved, man will recover his rights. But wherefore, while we are waiting for these fortunate times, and these enlightened ages of prosperity wherefore must there be an unfortunate race, to whom even the comfortable and honorable name of freeman is denied, and who, notwithstanding the instability of events, must be deprived of the hope even of obtaining it? Whatever, therefore, may be said, the condition of these unfortunate people is very different from ours. . . .

I have already said too much for the honest and feeling man. I shall never be able to say enough for the inhuman trader.

Let us, therefore, hasten to substitute the light of reason and the sentiments of nature to the blind ferociousness of our ancestors. Let us break the bonds of so many victims to our mercenary principles,

should we even be obliged to discard a commerce which is founded only on injustice, and the object of which is luxury. . . .

[The author then proposes that those currently living as slaves should continue in that status; only their children would be freed after the age of 20.]

While we are restoring these unhappy beings to liberty, we must be careful to subject them to our laws and manners, and to offer them our superfluities. We must give them a country, give them interests to study, productions to cultivate, and articles of consumption agreeable to their respective tastes, and our colonies will never want hands, which being eased of their chains, will become more active and robust. . . .

[The author calls on the monarchs of Europe to abolish the slave trade, but he concludes with a warning of impending slave revolt.]

Let the ineffectual calls of humanity be no longer pleaded with the people and their masters: perhaps, they have never been attended to in any public transactions. If then, ye nations of Europe, interest alone can exert its influence over you, listen to me once more. Your slaves stand in no need either of your generosity or your counsels, in order to break the sacrilegious yoke of their oppression. Nature speaks a more powerful language than philosophy, or interests. Already have two colonies of fugitive Negroes been established, to whom treaties and power give a perfect security from your attempts.*¹ These are so many indications of the impending storm,

¹ The author has in mind the fugitive slaves in Jamaica and Dutch Surinam, but almost every colony in the Americas with slaves had its runaway slave societies. The largest

and the Negroes only want a chief, sufficiently courageous, to lead them on to vengeance and slaughter.

Where is this great man, whom nature owes to her afflicted, oppressed, and tormented children? Where is he? He will undoubtedly appear, he will show himself, he will lift up the sacred standard of liberty. This venerable signal will collect around him the companions of his misfortunes. They will rush on with more impetuosity than torrents; they will leave behind them, in all parts, indelible traces of their just resentment. Spaniards, Portuguese, English, French, Dutch, all their tyrants will become the victims of fire and sword. The plains of America will suck up with transport the blood which they have so long expected, and the bones of so many wretches, heaped upon one another, during the course of so many centuries, will bound for joy. The Old World will join its plaudits to those of the New. In all parts the name of the hero, who shall have restored the rights of the human species will be blest; in all parts trophies will be erected to his glory. Then will the black code [each country had its own code of laws regarding slaves or blacks] be no more; and the white code will be a dreadful one, if the conqueror only regards the right of reprisals.

Till this revolution shall take place, the Negroes groan under the oppression of labor, the description of which cannot but interest us more and more in their destiny.

Source: *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution*, <<http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/>>.

ones could be found in the Caribbean and in the interior of the western South American coast.

