

A Defense of the Slave Trade

(1740)

Anonymous

(1740). "A Defense of the African Slave Trade." *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America*. Edited by Elizabeth Donnan. Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution.

Justifying European involvement in the trans-Atlantic slave trade often involved the use of ideas that made the endeavor seem moral; it was considered part of the "white man's burden" to release Africans from a worst bondage at home. Merchants, in particular, felt the need for some justification for transporting and selling human cargo. In this document, an anonymous person writes about conditions along the Guinea Coast of West Africa and the cruel power of the local kings to control African slaves. The anonymous writer is responding to a letter published in the Gentleman's Magazine under the pseudonym Mercator Honestus, which argued against slavery and the slave trader.

*It is well known that many of the great kingdoms of West Africa had dealt in a local slave trade for centuries. Slaves were used in agricultural production, in households, and as part of court life. These slaves were under varying degrees of bondage outside the realm of what we call "**chattel slavery**", that is, under African customs, the condition of slavery was not hereditary and even slaves had some rights. What is interesting about this account is the heavy emphasis on **Enlightenment** ideas such as the right of every human being to liberty and happiness. European merchants believed they were freeing Africans from an even worse fate, slavery without Western laws and Christianity.*

Sir, The Guinea Trade, by the Mistake of some, or Misrepresentation of others, hath been charged with Inhumanity, and a Contradiction to good Morals. Such a Charge at a Time when private and publick Morals are laugh'd at, as the highest Folly, by a powerful Faction; and Self-interest set up as the only Criterion of true Wisdom, is certainly very uncourtly: But yet as I have a profound Regard for those superannuated Virtues; you will give me Leave to justify the African Trade, upon those State Principles, from the Imputations of "Mercator Honestus"; and shew him that there are People in some boasted Regions of Liberty, under a more wretched Slavery, than the Africans transplanted to our American Colonies.

The Inhabitants of Guinea are indeed in a most deplorable State of Slavery, under the arbitrary Powers of their Princes both as to Life and Property. In the several Subordinations to them, every great Man is absolute lord of his immediate Dependents. And lower still; every Master of a Family is Proprietor of his Wives, Children, and Servants; and may at his Pleasure consign them to Death, or a better Market. No doubt such a State is contrary to Nature and Reason, since every human Creature hath an absolute Right to Liberty. But are not all arbitrary Governments, as well in Europe, as Africa, equally repugnant to that great Law of Nature? And yet it is not in our Power to cure the universal Evil, and set all the Kingdoms of the Earth free from the Domination of Tyrants, whose long Possession, supported by standing Armies, and flagitious Ministers, renders the Thralldom without Remedy, while the People under it are by Custom satisfied with, or at least quiet under Bondage.

All that can be done in such a Case is, to communicate as much Liberty, and Happiness, as such circumstances will admit, and the People will consent to: And this is certainly by the Guinea Trade. For, by purchasing, or rather ransoming the Negroes from their national Tyrants, and transplanting them under the benign Influences of the Law, and Gospel, they are advanced to much greater Degrees of Felicity, tho' not to absolute Liberty.

That this is truly the Case cannot be doubted by any one acquainted with the Constitution of our Colonies, where the Negroes are governed by Laws, and suffer much less Punishment in Proportion to their Crimes, than the People in other Countries more refined in the Arts of Wickedness; and where Capital Punishment is inflicted only by the Civil Magistrates. . . .

Perhaps my Antagonist calls the Negroes Allowance of a Pint of Corn and an Herring, penurious, in Comparison of the full Meals of Gluttony: But if not let him compare that Allowance, to what the poor Labourer can purchase for Tenpence per Day to subsist himself and Family, and he will easily determine the American's Advantage. . . .

Nevertheless, Mercator will say, the Negroes are Slaves to their Proprietors: How Slaves? Nominally: Not really so much Slaves, as the Peasantry of all Nations is to Necessity; not so much as those of Corruption, or Party Zeal; not in any Sense, such abject Slaves, as every vicious Man is to his own Appetites. Indeed there is this Difference between Britons, and the Slaves of all other Nations; that the latter are so by Birth, or tyrannical Necessity; the former can never be so, but by a wicked Choice, or execrable Venality. . . .

Glossary

Slavery

Slavery based upon the principle that men and women who are slaves enjoy no rights and can hold no property. In most cases, this type of slavery is hereditary, and humans are bought and sold as property by the owners. It was the prevalent form of slavery used by Europeans during the age of the Atlantic slave trade, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century.

Enlightenment

The period in Europe when thinkers supported scientific advances and social scientific knowledge based upon rational laws. Most important, the Enlightenment produced a set of basic principles about human affairs: human beings were good, could be educated, and were entitled to basic rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of wealth. In sixteenth-century Europe, the enslavement of "barbarians" or nonbelievers was seen as positive -- as a way to civilize others; however, during the Enlightenment, slavery came to be seen as backward and immoral. The slave trade in particular was criticized. It was the symbol of slavery's inhumanity and cruelty.



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