

FROSSARD AND THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY: A MORAL DILEMMA

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Although Benjamin Sigismond Frossard's writings on slavery have attracted little attention compared with those of his more notorious contemporaries, such as Condorcet and the Abbé Raynal, he was a much respected figure even before his anti-slavery activities. A Protestant during the years when Protestants were still denied full legal status, he became a pastor of his church. Title-pages of his works indicate his membership of academies and learned societies at Bourgen-Bresse, Lyon, Montpellier, Villefranche, Bath and Manchester, while from his translation into French of the *Sermons* of Hugh Blair¹ we learn that he received an honorary doctorate in laws from Oxford University. Internationally known for his scholarship, he was highly regarded for his personal qualities, so much so that he was called upon to preach (on Philippians 1.27) at a service attended by Catholics and Protestants in April 1792 in the Carmelite church in Lyon, under the auspices of the Société des Amis de la Constitution.² Such a role speaks of his toleration and love of others. In leading such an act of worship, he declared his faith in God and the basic goodness of humanity. Against a background of increasing violence he preached patience, moderation and concern for the individual.³ For Frossard, 'l'homme est naturellement bon, tout le démontre',⁴ and whether through his sermons or his works on slavery, it was to this goodness that he was to appeal.

The task of seeking to end French colonial slavery was complex. The *Code noir*, enacted under Louis XIV to provide protection for slaves, had by its very existence legalized the practice, while revision of its terms in 1767 went so far as to describe slavery as 'dicté par la prudence'.⁵ The position of the church was ambiguous. Pope Urban VIII's condemnation of slavery in 1639, reiterated by Benedict XIV in 1741, forbade enslavement of the native population of South America,

¹ *Sermons de M. Hugh Blair, Docteur en Théologie, Ministre de l'Eglise Cathédrale & Professeur de Belles Lettres dans l'Université d'Edimbourg, traduite de l'Anglois par M. B.S. Frossard* (Lyon, 1784-86).

² Published in 1792.

³ *Sermons de M. Hugh Blair*, 12 and 17.

⁴ 'Sermon sur la Bonté', appended to Frossard's translation of Blair's *Sermons*, iii, 410.

⁵ *Code noir* (Paris, 1767), 435.

but made no mention of Africans. Attacks on slavery could also be seen as threats to the prosperity of ports such as Bordeaux and Nantes, whose wealth stemmed largely from the slave trade. On the other hand, there had been increasing pressure from numerous writers to convince thinking Frenchmen that slavery was morally wrong, and 1788 had seen the creation by Brissot and Clavière of the Société des Amis des Noirs, modelled on its forerunner, the London Abolition Society. Interest in the subject must have been considerable to justify the expense of producing Frossard's two substantial volumes devoted solely to the question of slavery. But, given the interest already aroused, what had *La Cause des esclaves nègres*⁶ to offer to a debate which had previously involved so many others? What led to its inclusion among works submitted by the Société des Amis des Noirs to the Assemblée Nationale?

Surveys of anti-slavery literature, surprisingly, have combined warm approval with brevity of treatment. C. Biondi devoted a footnote to recognition of Frossard's thoroughness and dependability.⁷ E. Seeber noted his survey of the work of his predecessors such as Montesquieu, Saint-Lambert, Raynal and Condorcet and his chapters demonstrating that slavery is contrary to justice, Christianity and sound economic policy,⁸ but although he saw Frossard's treatise as 'particularly important', he did not analyse his more personal contribution. S.T. McCloy is notable in devoting more than a page to Frossard, stressing the fairness of this 'in several respects the ablest of the French antislavery works of the period', and providing a brief summary of Frossard's suggestions.⁹ All these commentators ignore Frossard's later work, *A la Convention Nationale*.¹⁰ While Frossard's review of the ideas of his predecessors, united in one work, would be useful, and his own chapters decrying slavery are cogently argued, these points had been emphasized with varying degrees of success

⁶ *La Cause des esclaves nègres et des habitants de la Guinée, portée au tribunal de la justice, de la religion, de la politique; ou histoire de la traite & de l'esclavage des nègres; preuves de leur illégitimité, moyens de les abolir sans nuire aux Colonies ni aux Colons*, 2 vols. (Lyon, 1788). The copies in the British Library and the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, date from 1789, the *Privilège du Roi* having been delivered in April 1788. The *Approbation* of the Société Royale d'Agriculture de Lyon is dated December 1788, which would preclude its appearing in a volume on sale in 1788. It would have seemed reasonable to conclude that, while written in 1788, the work did not appear until 1789, but for Frossard's insistence in a footnote to his address to the Convention in 1792 that his previous work was 'imprimé en 1788'. The volumes reprinted by Slatkine Reprints (Geneva, 1978) are those of the 'édition de Lyon, 1789'. I have been unable to locate a copy dated 1788.

⁷ C. Biondi, *Ces esclaves sont des hommes: Lotta abolizionistica e letteratura negrofila nella Francia del Settecento* (Pisa, 1979), 273.

⁸ E.D. Seeber, *Anti-Slavery Opinion in France during the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore, 1937), 142.

⁹ S.T. McCloy, *The Humanitarian Movement in Eighteenth-Century France* (Lexington, 1957), 99–100.

¹⁰ *B.S. Frossard à la Convention Nationale sur l'abolition de la traite des nègres* (Paris, 1792). Reprinted at least once in 1793, the type evidently having been reset, since a misprint appears on page 22, which was correctly printed in the 1792 version.

since the 1750s. It is his section on the steps to be taken towards abolition that reveals his personal approach and the magnitude of the ethical problem which faced him in seeking an equitable solution.

For the first generation of anti-slavery authors this dilemma seems hardly to have existed. Writings between 1748 and 1770 concentrated on the wrongness of slavery, rather than on schemes for its elimination. True, Montesquieu suggested that machines might replace slaves, and envisaged piecemeal emancipation, but he saw freedmen as still having obligations to their former master.¹¹ Jaucourt's article, 'Traite des negres', in the *Encyclopédie*, goes to the opposite extreme, referring casually to an abrupt end to the system with economic recovery taking several generations, but no details are given and we are left with the impression of overnight emancipation.¹² Only as the wrongness of slavery came to be widely accepted did practical questions come to be treated in considerable detail.

Frossard's was not the first plan proposed. He was preceded by Condorcet, but Condorcet's plan does not attempt to reconcile so wide a variety of interests.¹³ For Frossard the difficulty was to accommodate the needs of everyone involved. His conviction that 'jamais le bonheur public n'est en contradiction avec le bonheur individuel'¹⁴ forced him not only to see the situation of the slaves as an iniquitous price for prosperity, but to consider the fate of individuals other than slaves in endeavouring to right their wrongs. It is this tension between two sometimes irreconcilable aims which characterizes his thinking.

His first step was straightforward and reflected the thought of many contemporaries. This was to end trade in slaves at the earliest possible moment, thus restricting the size of the problem (ii.304). But for Frossard this step meant much more than restricted numbers. As well as ending the horrors of the crossing, losses during the journey, and depopulation of the African coast, he envisaged it as guaranteeing improved treatment for existing slaves, since 'quand les Colons n'auront pas la faculté de réparer la perte prématurée de leurs esclaves par de nouveaux achats, ils auront le plus grand intérêt à les ménager'. Ultimately even the owner would benefit through avoiding replacement costs plus the expense of maintaining the unfit slaves he replaced. Well-treated slaves who could work longer would be happier and spare the owner this dual drain on his resources (ii.313-14).

This left other interests to consider outside the colonies. The slave trade appeared lucrative, and fears of ruin resulting from its termination were understandable, not only among slavers themselves, but among manufacturers of goods exchanged on the African coast.

¹¹ Montesquieu, *L'Esprit des Lois* (1747), XV. viii and xviii.

¹² *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, ed. Diderot and d'Alembert (Paris, 1751-65), xvi. 533.

¹³ Under the pseudonym J. Schwarz (Neufchâtel, 1791).

¹⁴ *Sermon* (1792), 17.

Frossard's solution was twofold: demonstration that the slave trade was less profitable than was supposed, and suggestion of more viable alternatives. He depicted the slave trade as a lottery, with no guarantee of quick or even certain profits. The cargo on the transatlantic leg of the journey was highly perishable and Frossard alleged the loss of a quarter of the slaves (i.254) during the crossing,¹⁵ citing overcrowding (i.257), food shortages on slow voyages (i.263), suicide (i.273), polluted air in bad weather when portholes were closed (i.267), high susceptibility to seasickness which often proved fatal (i.265), and chaining of the slaves in pairs, preventing use of sanitary facilities (i.259) so that 'ces malheureux nageoient, pour ainsi dire, dans la fange' (i.267). Besides losses en route, returns on the original investment were slow. A round trip took twelve to fifteen months and when surviving slaves were eventually sold, it was rarely for ready cash, and then only at lower prices. The rest were paid for by instalments (ii.364-5). There could be over three years between the slaver leaving for Africa and his receiving his money. While Frossard admitted that some voyages were profitable, he saw these as counterbalanced by disasters and quoted the alarming toll of twelve bankruptcies among the thirty companies trading from Liverpool during the previous fifteen years (ii.366). Finally, profits were falling. Slave prices in the colonies had barely risen, while in Africa they had increased 140 per cent in twenty years, dramatically diminishing returns (ii.367).

By way of alternative, Frossard proposed direct trade between France and Africa in products previously obtained from the colonies. Timber, indigo, ivory, cotton, honey, rice and tobacco were suggested as suitable objects of exchange against French goods, but Frossard was as alive to African interests as he was to those of France. His intention was not to exploit Africa, but to build trust and respect, so exchanges were not always to be to the advantage of the French. He urged a new approach, so that 'l'Afrique verra avec étonnement la fourberie remplacée par la probité' (ii.379-81). Shipowners too would benefit since ships would last longer, freed from human cargoes and consequent corruption which rotted their structure (ii.392). Against those who feared a dearth of trained seamen for the navy should the slave trade be terminated, he argued that increased African trade would provide adequate training, but without the death toll of the Atlantic crossing. Contagion from slaves and the inevitable consumption of salted provisions on long voyages would be replaced by shorter journeys with more fresh food, thus conserving sailors instead of killing up to a fifth of the crews as was the case on slave vessels (ii.387-92).

Thus far Frossard shows deeper concern for manufacturers and shipowners than his contemporaries, even if his system would take

¹⁵ The Address to the Convention suggests fifteen to twenty per cent casualties during the voyage, but notes that others died before departure (12).

time to develop, and would be no immediate compensation to Bordeaux and Nantes for the abrupt loss of the slave trade. But only ingenuity has been required. He accepts that the individuals concerned were entitled to a measure of consideration, but there was no moral conflict, since none of the steps proposed was prejudicial to the slaves. The moral dilemma arises when he tackles the question of freeing the slaves. Emancipation is essential. A slave has 'ni patrie, ni moralité ni bonheur' (ii.41), and slavery constitutes 'un attentat contre le droit le plus sacré de la nature & de la société' (ii.48). This deprivation has implications for his soul as well as his earthly life, since it robs him of his free will, 'cette loi de Liberté sur laquelle Dieu a fondé le système du Jugement dernier' (ii.101). Frossard sees slaves as totally restricted in their actions, controlled by a 'dépendance absolue' on their master's orders, so that 'il n'est donc pas en leur pouvoir de faire le bien ou le mal' (ii.106). How can God judge them? The slave is a 'machine à forme humaine' (ii.109). It would seem that recognition of the slave's rights as a moral entity demanded an immediate end to servitude.

This, however, was no easy solution. Freedom must not be synonymous with destitution, and Frossard feared the destructive consequences for slave and colonies alike of a misunderstood liberty. Provision for the future was essential, and the future meant work and integration into society. Slaves needed preparation, being 'encore dans l'enfance de la civilisation' (ii.250-1). It was also vital to protect those such as the elderly, to whom masters had an existing duty (ii.278). Hence Frossard opted for gradual emancipation. How he would have resolved this dilemma had he believed slaves to be eternally damned by loss of free will is difficult to determine. This, however, was something he could not accept. Rather he trusted in God's infinite mercy: 'Ses bienfaits seront même d'autant plus grands que leurs souffrances ont été plus cruelles' (ii.110). In the light of this he found constructive delay permissible, but brooked no excuse for inaction. Preparation for emancipation must begin immediately (ii.396). He was well aware that once the crime of enslaving had occurred, there was no perfect answer, but hoped others would improve on his suggestions. His plans were 'insuffisants' (ii.285), his elaboration 'trop vague pour me satisfaire', but he tried to sow useful seed in the faith that 'l'idée la plus foible donne souvent naissance à des idées grandes & efficaces' (ii.263).

Frossard doubles the difficulty of his task by allowing that slave owners have a valid interest which should be respected. Here he differs markedly from his predecessors who viewed the master as morally wrong and saw no problem in depriving him of his slaves. For Jaucourt, 'un homme dont l'esclave prend la fuite, ne doit s'en prendre qu'à lui-même, puisqu'il avoit acquis à prix d'argent une marchandise illicite',¹⁶ while Condorcet headed a chapter of his

¹⁶ *Encyclopédie*, 'Traite des negres', xvi. 532.

Réflexions sur l'esclavage des negres with the uncompromising claim: 'qu'il faut détruire l'esclavage des nègres et que leurs maîtres ne peuvent exiger aucun dédommagement'.¹⁷ But Frossard sees a genuine difficulty. For three hundred years slavery was regarded as legitimate (ii.287), and owners have bought in good faith, 'sous la sanction des lois' (ii.258–9). Hence the owner cannot fairly be deprived of his capital. Frossard clearly distinguishes, however, between recovery of capital and purchase for life. 'L'esclave a-t-il regagné à son maître la somme que celui-ci avoit livrée à son ravisseur? dès-lors le Souverain peut l'affranchir sans scrupule' (ii.259). Somehow a compromise has to be found to provide slaves with suitable education and release them as soon as possible, while taking into account the price paid by the master.

Frossard's approach to educating slaves also differs from that of his contemporaries. Raynal was negative, declaring that 'ces hommes stupides . . . seraient incapables de se conduire eux-mêmes', and predicting 'une indolence habituelle ou un tissu de crimes' if they were not educated.¹⁸ Frossard was positive, stressing the ability and perfectibility of slaves, and the achievements of those who had enjoyed some education (ii.218–34). If civilization in Africa was less advanced than that of Europe, the potential of the slaves equalled that of Europeans. They were 'ce que nous étions nous-mêmes il y a peu de siècles' (ii.218), and faults resulted from destructive treatment at the hands of the master (ii.216): 'l'avilissement où notre barbarie l'a plongée' (ii.252). Improvement was necessary on both sides. 'Apprenons à les regarder comme des hommes nos égaux par la Nature & par la Religion. Donnons-leur des idées de la justice en l'exerçant à leur égard' (ii.252).

To provide formal education, Frossard suggests Sunday schools which could also function on days when bad weather prevented work, offering elementary vocational training as well as reading, writing and religion. While slaves would learn less than in full-time schooling, we should view this against the situation in France where many children remained illiterate. In fact Frossard was preparing a similar scheme for the benefit of French children whose agricultural activities prevented their attending school normally (ii.254–5).

Throughout the comments on education runs a thread of warning. The educated slave will understand his rights and it is essential to free him before he is tempted to take them by force (ii.253–5). Education cannot be a delaying tactic. It commits the authorities to action. An obvious difficulty emerges, since slaves could not be expected to progress uniformly and some would be intensely aware of their rights while others were still unready to make their way in the

¹⁷ Condorcet, *Œuvres* (Paris, 1847–49), vii. chapter 8.

¹⁸ G. Th. Raynal, *Histoire philosophique & politique des deux Indes*, ed. Y. Benot (Paris, 1981), 199.

world. Moreover, this risk was heightened by events in France. Frossard is writing after the convocation but before the meeting of the Estates General of 1789, and has great hopes for a France where 'le Père du Peuple François . . . appelle à lui tous les Représentans de la Nation . . . pour répartir la justice & les impôts avec la plus grande impartialité'. News was bound to reach the colonies, after which to perpetuate slavery would risk 'une insurrection qui pourroit les bouleverser jusque dans leurs fondemens' (ii.260). Legislation is urgent, yet the slaves are not ready. The dilemma is serious.

Frossard's warning reveals far greater perspicacity than does the attitude of members of the Société des Amis des Noirs such as Brissot and Clavière. The latter insisted that 'l'homme dénué est, en général, foible et timide', and 'les révoltes d'esclaves abrutis sont peu à craindre'. Even granting citizenship to the mulattos had done nothing to stimulate the slaves' desire for freedom.¹⁹ Two days before his election to the Legislative Assembly in September 1791, Brissot was equally confident: 'Si les noirs esclaves étoient si jaloux de s'élever au rang des hommes de couleur, il ne devroit plus y avoir maintenant un seul esclave dans les colonies. Ces esclaves sont restés dans une tranquillité constante'.²⁰ Even news of the revolt in Saint-Domingue was greeted as the plot of 'un faussaire', or at most as due to a few whites arming their slaves on their own account against the mulattos.²¹ Finally, when the details could no longer be ignored, he blamed the troubles on the behaviour of the whites towards the mulattos, rather than on slavery itself: 'Esclaves tranquilles par-tout où les hommes de couleur sont maîtres, turbulens et séditieux par-tout où les blancs triomphent'.²²

Frossard's rather frail bulwark against revolt is immediate action to stimulate hope, which he trusts will suffice to avert violence. 'Ayant l'espoir d'être un jour citoyens, cette perspective, quoique éloignée, soutiendra leur courage' (ii.262). His proposals, in the guise of a discussion paper rather than an unalterable programme, reflect the overwhelming difficulty of being fair to master and slave.

Frossard suggests that all physically fit slaves be freed after fifteen years' service beyond the date of the emancipation edict. Since these are to compensate the planter for his outlay, it might have been fairer to calculate them from the date of first starting work. There is conflict

¹⁹ E. Clavière, *Adresse de la Société des Amis des Noirs à l'Assemblée Nationale, à toutes les villes de commerce, à toutes les manufactures, aux Colonies, à toutes les Sociétés des Amis de la Constitution*, second edition (Paris, 1791), 67.

²⁰ J.-P. Brissot, *Discours sur la nécessité de maintenir le Décret rendu le 15 mai 1791, en faveur des hommes de couleur libres, prononcé le 12 septembre 1791, à la Séance de la Société des Amis de la Constitution* (Paris, 1791), 7.

²¹ J.-P. Brissot, *Discours sur un projet de décret relatif à la révolte des noirs, prononcé à l'Assemblée Nationale, le 30 octobre, 1791* (Paris, 1791), 5 and 11.

²² J.-P. Brissot, *Discours sur la nécessité politique de révoquer le décret du 24 septembre 1791, pour mettre fin aux troubles de Saint-Domingue, prononcé à l'Assemblée Nationale, le 2 mars 1792* (Paris, 1792), 22.

in this clause between the need to be fair to slave and master and the need for peaceful agreement for the benefit of slaves as a whole. His query, 'à cette époque l'esclave n'aurait-il pas acheté assez cher une liberté que personne ne pourroit lui ravir?' suggests consciousness that the slave will have overpaid and that Frossard is trying to convince himself as much as the public when he declares that 'cette loi ne nuirait à personne' (ii.266–7). However, freeing all slaves after fifteen years would produce the mass emancipation feared by Frossard and the authorities. Fifteen turns out to be a maximum. He sees gradual integration of slaves into normal citizenship as far more desirable and proposes means to accelerate the freeing of industrious or otherwise deserving slaves. House slaves were to be freed forthwith, no doubt being better prepared for assimilation into society. However, their initial freedom is not unconditional. Domestic slaves become citizens at once, but must serve their masters for a further five years without pay (ii.278). Frossard here takes for granted that the master, as in France, would be responsible for feeding and clothing his servants, so this measure would not leave them destitute.

Current stress in France on the need to increase population, and thereby prosperity, accounts for the suggestion that all slaves with five legitimate children be freed immediately, and wives with three legitimate children be freed with their husband when he completed his fifteen years' service. It seems that Frossard meant this to be an ongoing process so that in future emancipation could be earned by having children, since he insists that masters must not be allowed to refuse consent to slave marriages (ii.275–6). This would involve a change in the *Code noir* which forbade priests to marry slaves without the owner's consent.²³

The core of Frossard's scheme was open to all slaves. This gave an opportunity to purchase freedom, but here again we find a moral dilemma. The master may be entitled to reimbursement of his capital, but the slave, in buying his freedom, is put in the position of paying for what he never sold. This leads Frossard to be cautious in fixing its price. He proposes a basic price for all slaves, even if this is below the original cost of purchase or the slave's current value, suggesting that half the original price should be adequate, since the extra productivity of the slave in earning it would benefit the master (ii.265). In the past, repurchase had been an ambiguous matter. While the *Code noir* stipulated that a slave's possessions belonged to his owner, the same code allowed slaves to sell produce other than sugar cane on their own account.²⁴ Le Romain observed in the *Encyclopédie* that this frequently occurred and masters, or at least 'ceux qui se piquent de penser', distributed the personal belongings and money of dead slaves to the

²³ *Encyclopédie*, 'Negres', xi.83.

²⁴ *ibid.*, 'Esclave', v.941.

family, or if there was none, to other slaves.²⁵ The restrictive clause still stood, however, and Frossard noted the need to repeal it as well as increasing opportunities of earning (ii.269). He recommended that slaves be free one day each week in addition to the Sunday prescribed by the *Code noir*. If they chose to work that day, they must be paid a freeman's wage. Once the slave had earned a fifth of his price, he could buy a fifth of his freedom in the form of another day off per week, thus permitting him to earn even faster to buy the next fifth. After five such transactions he would be free. For Frossard this had the advantage that those freed soonest would be the most industrious, capable of supporting themselves (ii.271–2). He proposed establishing a savings bank to safeguard the slaves' earnings and enable them to save to purchase the freedom of wife or children at a reasonable price (ii.277).

The master's right to reimbursement of his investment was recognized only so far as he treated his slaves properly. Brutal treatment such as would incur a corporal penalty, were it inflicted on a freeman, would result in the freeing of the slave if he was fit to earn his living. Otherwise his keep would continue to be at the expense of his master, who would forfeit another fit slave instead (ii.285).

The same concern for not leaving the unfit destitute is seen in Frossard's treatment of elderly slaves. He stressed that emancipation without safeguards of slaves too old to work would be a disaster, since it was as slaves that the old were protected by the *Code noir*, which obliged the master to feed them.²⁶ Hence he proposed that masters remain responsible for maintaining slaves over fifty until their death. Those approaching fifty should be allowed to choose between freedom or remaining with the master as his responsibility for life (ii.278–9).

Emancipation of children was a separate issue for Frossard, who comes closer here to the thinking of his contemporaries, several of whom admitted that a master who had paid for years to feed a child too young to work should receive some return for his money once the youngster was old enough to be useful. Frossard stressed that children could only be freed with their fathers if these could redeem them, but logically made an exception in cases where the father had maintained the child on his own earnings, costing the master nothing (ii.277). The remaining children posed a problem, since if the master retained them after maturity, they too could produce slave children who would also be the master's property, and slavery could continue indefinitely. Here Frossard proposed a variation of the scheme for adults. Any baby born into slavery would be fed and educated at the master's expense and required to serve until he was thirty, unless he earned his freedom in the meantime. At sixteen he would be entitled to a day per week to earn his freedom and would thus be on the same footing as an adult. In

²⁵ *ibid.*, 'Negres', xi.83.

²⁶ *ibid.*, 'Esclave', v.941

the case of a husband and wife freed by purchase or at thirty years old, they could free each child by serving for one more year (ii.277). In judging this provision we should remember that in France a man came of age at twenty-five. The slave thus lost five years of free adulthood unless he earned his freedom sooner.

Frossard's plans would have reduced the number of babies born into slavery, since he insisted that the law declare all mulatto babies free. Legally, babies of mixed race followed the mother's status. Where free mothers were concerned, Frossard was happy to let this stand, but he viewed as ridiculous that this old Roman law should apply to offspring of white fathers. It had originated in circumstances where the father could not be traced, but in the colonies the baby's skin left no doubt as to the father's colour and free status. The baby should be free and brought up by the father if the latter could be identified. If the father was unknown, the master must maintain the child in return for which the latter would work for him until he attained his majority at twenty-five (ii.276). Frossard undoubtedly saw freedom as having its obligations and not as a state of total liberty. The first duty of the free child is to honour his debt. Perhaps through ignorance, Frossard omitted a compelling argument in favour of freeing all mulatto babies. The baby followed his mother's status even where a master raped his slave, unless he subsequently married her, in which case she and the baby were freed. If he was unwilling or unable to marry he was fined and mother and baby were confiscated. They were thus worse off, as the law forbade their repurchase. Jaucourt claimed that, faced with losing the mother, the master often pressed her to attempt an abortion, and the mother, 'tremblante de devenir esclave perpétuelle, l'exécutoit au péril de sa vie'.²⁷

Throughout, Frossard's aim was to free industrious slaves. His suggestions for dealing with those who later resorted to begging or vagrancy may look harsh, but need to be compared with the stern treatment of beggars in France. A clear distinction was drawn between the deserving poor and those unwilling to work, and the official punishment for vagrants in France was service in the galleys. The voluntarily idle were 'vermine'²⁸ and begging, 'la mère des crimes'.²⁹ In 1767 a reward was offered for every beggar arrested.³⁰ It was suggested that the incorrigibly idle be sent to the colonies,³¹ even the usually compassionate Jaucourt supporting this solution,³² which would doubtless have been deplored by Frossard, given his dedication to improving the character and industry of the slaves. He expected

²⁷ *ibid.*, 'Mulâtre', x.853.

²⁸ *ibid.*, 'Mendiant', x.331.

²⁹ *ibid.*, 'Misère', x.575.

³⁰ O.H. Hufton, *The Poor of Eighteenth-Century France, 1750-1789* (Oxford, 1974), 223.

³¹ E. Fréron, *Année littéraire* (1757), vi, 17.

³² *Encyclopédie*, 'Mendiant', x.332.

little trouble from those who had earned their freedom, but the penalty was to be temporary deprivation of their liberty. As it would be unwise for beggars to mingle with slaves not yet freed, he suggested forced labour at tasks involving 'un caractère d'humiliation', since 'la crainte de perdre par un seul crime le fruit de vingt ans de travaux, sera un frein puissant' (ii.283).

But deterring the idle few ranked far behind encouraging the industrious. Freed slaves would become workers paid by the day, but implicitly at least, Frossard seems to have realized that they would remain an underprivileged group. They would have received some education, but, their savings having been devoted to purchasing freedom, they would lack capital to better their position. He earnestly hoped that the most industrious ex-slaves would be enabled to work on their own account. Sugar production necessitated large-scale installations, but other products such as cotton and tobacco were more suited to small-scale production, and Frossard suggested that large estates be divided into small farms which freedmen could cultivate for themselves, paying rent in kind (ii.280).

Some critics might feel that the periods of service outlined in the scheme constitute a betrayal of slaves who, with the exception of children, owed the master nothing. Frossard admitted that his plan was far from perfect. But he was not so much deliberately unfair as practical. Co-operation was essential to his plan and could only be achieved 'en offrant de grands avantages aux maîtres' (ii.281). In stipulating such terms Frossard is trading a limited period of service to avert the unlimited longer period inevitable if the planters refused to co-operate or succeeded in persuading the authorities not to act. He was seeking the lesser of two evils. His plan was designed to reassure. 'L'affranchissement se ferait donc sans commotion, sans même qu'on s'en aperçût' (ii.280).

Throughout, then, we see the apparent paradox of a man with uncompromising principles on slavery trying to reconcile irreconcilable interests and being forced to compromise on the grounds that effective compromise is better than inaction. But there is an initially obvious solution that Frossard never raises. Most of his problems stem from recognition of the need to compensate the masters. Without this, the scheme would have been simpler and its implementation faster, despite the need for educating the slaves. The modern reader will realize that a state subsidy could have solved the problem, compensating the masters at once, without continued servitude. With hindsight, we are aware that the French government of 1848 provided a subsidy of ninety million francs, although this was to pay wages to ex-slaves rather than to reimburse the owners. Why did not Frossard make such a suggestion? The answer lies in the date of his proposals. On no account could he make their success dependent on state funding. The scheme must pay for itself. Events leading up to the calling of the Estates General were rooted in France's financial crisis

and the desperate need for tax reforms. No one so well-informed as Frossard could have hoped for a subsidy to end slavery, or risked wrecking his scheme by making such a suggestion.

This readiness to compromise suggests that Frossard had genuine hopes of the implementation of his plan, and this was indeed the case. Recent reforms had encouraged optimism. Torture of suspects and compulsory work on the roads had been abolished, and the Protestant Frossard notes that 1787 had seen the granting of civil rights to Protestants, proof of 'cette attention bienfaisante que le Roi étend jusqu'aux plus petits de ses sujets'. To assume that Louis XVI would perpetuate slavery was 'un tel blasphème' (ii.397-9). While many of Frossard's points are permanently valid, the scheme was nonetheless intended to take advantage of a given moment.

As it happened, that moment was to be short-lived. The King's failure to control the Estates General and the establishment of the Assemblée Nationale meant that initiative passed from his hands. Yet the work evidently had its impact. True, leading figures among the Amis des Noirs had already evolved their own theories. Brissot, for example, was unacquainted with the Lyon-based Frossard when the book appeared, and there is a world of difference between Frossard's plan to ensure a stable future for freed slaves and Brissot's earlier proposal that maple sugar should displace the cultivation of sugar cane and slaves be repatriated to Africa.³³ Brissot also seems to have had less confidence in the educability of the slaves, who, while naturally 'sensibles', had been depraved, whether through enslavement by Europeans or the effects of their own government, 'presque par-tout despotique', in Africa.³⁴ But Frossard had not been trying to convince the Amis des Noirs, and Brissot's testimony indicates his success in reaching his intended public. Introduced to Frossard during a visit to Lyon, Brissot extolled both book and author. He found Frossard 'très-estimable' and acknowledged that his work 'n'a pas peu contribué à dissiper les préjugés répandus par la cupidité'. Attending a service conducted by Frossard, he was 'édifié par la bonne morale qu'il professait', while his observation, 'on fit la cène: c'est bien là le repas et le signe de l'égalité',³⁵ parallels Frossard's reference to the 'culte public où tous les hommes viennent professer qu'ils sont égaux' as a bridge between slave and master (ii.254).

At first sight it might seem that the events of the early years of the Revolution and especially the *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme* of 1789, with its forthright assertion that 'les hommes naissent et demeurent libres et égaux en droits', might have favoured the

³³ E. Ellery, *Brissot de Warville: A Study in the History of the French Revolution* (Boston and New York, 1915), 79.

³⁴ J.-P. Brissot, *Examen critique des voyages dans l'Amérique Septentrionale de M. le Marquis de Chatellux* (London, 1786), 86 and 93.

³⁵ J.-P. Brissot, *Mémoires*, ed. C. Perroud (Paris, 1912), i.264-5.

acceptance of Frossard's proposals. In fact, at levels where evidence is available this is far from being the case. Although occasional attacks were still made on the slave trade,³⁶ political considerations focussed attention primarily on the mulattos to the marked disadvantage of the slaves, and the idea of freeing the latter was to be vigorously repudiated by leading members of the Amis des Noirs. Enthusiasm for the mulatto cause generated stress on their closeness to whites and consequent disassociation of their fate and rights from those of the slaves. Clavière dismissed the suggestion that the Amis des Noirs sought slave emancipation as 'un odieux mensonge', given their 'état d'abjection et de nullité',³⁷ and Brissot saw 'aucune analogie' between the two groups.³⁸ In one sense we can hardly disagree, since, as he pointed out, some mulattos were themselves 'propriétaires d'esclaves comme les blancs'.³⁹ But the claim was used to call for full civil rights for the mulatto as distinct from the slave. To link the two causes was 'une perfidie'.⁴⁰ Slaves seem to be relegated to a sub-human level. The issue of the mulattos is that of men of partly European descent and not 'des noirs esclaves'; it is 'la cause des Patriotes, de l'ancien tiers-état, du peuple enfin si long-temps opprimé'.⁴¹ Mulatto violence became 'le plus saint des devoirs', its sole cause 'l'injustice commise envers les gens de couleur',⁴² in contrast with the slaves. The mulattos, Brissot urged, should be armed as 'un rempart contre les noirs'.⁴³

The reasons lie in a power struggle rather than slavery itself. Fear among white planters that the Revolution implied the end of white supremacy,⁴⁴ consequent opposition to constitutional changes, and struggles for self-determination were countered by French attempts to restrict the influence of colonial Assemblies and impose metropolitan rule. The struggle between mulattos and whites became for France a struggle between Revolution and counter-Revolution, while in the colonies themselves conflicting interests produced a chaos of moves and counter-moves. Whites armed their slaves against mulattos, mulattos armed their slaves against whites, whites fought French troops, while those in the towns were in conflict with rural whites, and slaves rose against their masters. In 1792 slaves rose in support of the mulattos. In 1793 they rose against them.⁴⁵ Legislation was similarly

³⁶ Clavière, *Adresse de la Société des Amis des Noirs*, 114; J.-P. Brissot, *Le Patriote français* (27 June 1790).

³⁷ Clavière, *Adresse de la Société des Amis des Noirs*, 107.

³⁸ Brissot, *Discours* . . . prononcé le 12 septembre 1791, 3.

³⁹ Brissot, *Discours* . . . prononcé le 2 mars 1792, 5.

⁴⁰ Brissot, *Discours* . . . prononcé le 12 septembre 1791, 3.

⁴¹ J.-P. Brissot, *Discours sur les causes des troubles de Saint-Domingue*, prononcé à la Séance du premier décembre 1792 (Paris, 1792), 6 and 8.

⁴² Brissot, *Discours* . . . prononcé le 2 mars 1792, 5 and 1.

⁴³ Brissot, *Discours* . . . prononcé le 30 octobre 1791, 15.

⁴⁴ D.P. Geggus, *Slavery, War and Revolution* (Oxford, 1982), 37.

⁴⁵ For detailed accounts of the complex agitation see G. Martin, *Histoire de l'esclavage dans les colonies françaises* (Paris, 1948), 209–13 and Geggus, *Slavery, War and Revolution*, 38–40.

chaotic. Successive decrees from France granted full civil rights to mulattos born of two free parents (15 May 1791), but left other decisions on rights to the colonies, revoked the decree of 15 May leaving all decisions to the colonies (24 September 1791), and re-enacted the law of 15 May (24 March 1792).

The unsuccessful rising of the mulattos in Saint-Domingue in 1790 under the lawyer, Ogé (characterized by Clavière as 'martyr de la liberté'),⁴⁶ was followed by the slave rebellion, its ostensible and immediate cause a Voodoo ceremony, attended by hundreds of slaves, but with origins so complex that it has recently been claimed that they may never be known.⁴⁷ It was against this background that Brissot and his colleagues were to support mulatto rights for political and not just humanitarian reasons, even, if politically necessary, at the cost of the anti-slavery movement.

Frossard seems to have played no part in this denigration of the slave for political ends. In addition to his pastoral and teaching duties he was engaged in Lyon in trying to maintain calm and order, and was heavily involved in projects for educational reform, accepted locally early in 1792.⁴⁸ Yet his second work is carefully adjusted to the current political scene. Its immediate occasion was the proposal put to the Convention by the deputy, Kersaint, on 28 November 1792 to end 'l'affreux commerce des nègres', and referred for discussion at committee level.⁴⁹ Frossard's address to the Convention was clearly intended to contribute to this debate, but it is difficult to know its influence since the proposal seems to have foundered with Kersaint's resignation in January 1793. Perhaps it was for this reason that Frossard had the work reprinted.

It is clear from his arguments and his recommendation of his own previous book in a footnote on the first page that Frossard's ideal is still the gradual ending of slavery itself, although the emphasis here, dictated by the circumstances of its composition, and possibly encouraged by the Danish decree in early 1792 of a gradual ending of the slave trade in Danish possessions by 1802, is on the trade itself. He follows current thought to the extent of defending the Amis des Noirs against the accusation that they wanted to 'affranchir tous les noirs'(4), but, unlike many contemporaries, does not stop there, making instead the distinction between a 'prompte abolition' of the trade and the abolition 'par degrés insensibles' of slavery itself (26-7). His present stress, however, is entirely on the trade. The reasoning advanced in *La Cause des esclaves nègres* is presented here merely as a justification for terminating the trade. The impossibility of selling one's freedom, the

⁴⁶ Clavière, *Adresse de la Société des Amis des Noirs*, 183.

⁴⁷ Geggus, *Slavery, War and Revolution*, 39-40.

⁴⁸ L. Trénard, *Lyon: de l'Encyclopédie au Prémantisme* (Paris, 1958), i.250 and 310.

⁴⁹ *Débats de la Convention Nationale, ou Analyse complète des Séances*, ed. L. Thiessé (Paris, 1828), i.454.

practicality of using free workers, are now arguments for ending the importing of slaves, rather than for preparing them for freedom.

The case in the *Adresse* against the trade is strongly reminiscent of *La Cause des esclaves nègres*. Frossard stresses kidnapping and faked trials by African princes to provide more slaves for sale (8–9), the horrors of the crossing, the high death rate in the colonies, where ‘les planteurs s’estiment trop heureux, quand ils ne perdent dans les deux premières années qu’un esclave sur quatre nouveaux’ (13). We meet again the economic arguments, bound to interest the Convention for whose members it was vital that the colonies cost France nothing, the losses incurred by the slavers, the commercial potential of Africa and the possibility of its providing a more lucrative alternative trade.

A particularly thorny problem for many was the advantage which might accrue to England if France were to terminate the slave trade unilaterally. Here Frossard was confident. ‘La même objection est dans la bouche des armateurs anglois. Ils font redouter notre concurrence dans le sénat britannique, en même temps qu’on nous menace en France de la leur’ (27). The answer was a ‘sainte coalition’, led by French example. In acting first, ‘vous forcerez la chambre des pairs de la Grande Bretagne, encore si éloignée des vrais principes de la liberté, à sanctionner le décret voté par celle des communes’ (28). Here Frossard seems to have been too optimistic. The two countries were not at war when he wrote; that was to come in the spring of 1793. But England was hardly disposed to follow French example. In fact, the association in English opinion of changes of any sort with the French Revolution was to prove an obstacle, responsible for Wilberforce being repeatedly defeated.

Where Frossard’s work is most topical is in its extensive use of Revolutionary principles and vocabulary to support his case. His opening gambit is the claim that the *Déclaration des Droits de l’Homme* has implicitly ended slavery. That all men ‘naissent & demeurent libres’ is already the foundation of ‘la libération de la Guinée’ (2–3). Terms of Revolutionary rhetoric recur like a refrain. Slavery is ‘tyrannie’, the power of the masters a ‘despotisme arbitraire’, the trade in Africa has armed ‘le citoyen contre le citoyen, le tyran contre le tyran’ (6). In Africa ‘le despotisme a dressé ses tribunaux’, the princes selling the slaves exercise ‘la tyrannie la plus odieuse’, while in the colonies the planters are served by ‘des bras chargés de chaînes’ (18). The whole system is ‘cette affreuse portion du régime d’aristocratie que vous venez d’anéantir’ (28). It addresses the Convention in the language of the Convention. Frossard’s persuasive definitions portray the termination of the slave trade as an essential step in the Revolutionary process, a necessary consequence of the principles which the Convention and its predecessors had already accepted. A deliberate parallel is drawn between France and the American States who ‘prononcèrent l’abolition de la traite, à l’instant même où ils secoururent le joug honteux du despotisme Anglois’ (30). France too has

thrown off her yoke, and the slave trade must go with it. Its extermination will crown the work of the Revolution. 'Voilà le seul moyen d'annoncer à la Guinée qu'enfin la France n'a plus de tyrans' (31). Once again Frossard seeks a productive compromise. Better to end the trade than to risk wasting such a chance by asking too much.

In fact, the Convention was to abolish slavery early in 1794, but not primarily for humanitarian reasons, and without any of the safeguards which Frossard deemed essential. The action was based on military expediency. As early as June 1793, Santhonax, one of three French *commissaires* in Saint-Domingue faced with joint action by British troops, planters and armed slaves to take over the island,⁵⁰ sought help for French forces by declaring free those slaves who would support republican troops. Some ten thousand responded,⁵¹ but this, of course, affected only individuals and only one island, and lacked ratification by France. In August he announced general emancipation on the island, again in a bid to win support. Meanwhile, in France in June 1793, the second *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme* had been approved, without affecting slavery. Finally, on 16 Pluviôse, an II (4 February 1794), the Convention, with an eye to the military situation, abolished slavery 'dans toutes les Colonies'. Sadly, this was not all it appeared to be. Guadeloupe and Martinique were already in British hands, and therefore unaffected. Moreover, the *décret* was merely a statement, making no provision for implementation or enforcement. Its second clause referred 'les mesures à prendre pour assurer l'exécution du présent décret' to the Comité de Salut Public. The practicalities had not even been worked out before the decree was issued, and the Convention must bear full blame for the ensuing hardships. Then, in 1802, Napoleon re-established slavery in all the remaining French colonies. Gradually undermined during Louis-Philippe's reign, during which thousands of slaves were able to purchase freedom, or were liberated under the terms of their master's will, it was finally abolished as one of the first acts of the Second Republic, in 1848. The reality was even slower than Frossard's cautious scheme had envisaged.

If Frossard failed to realize all his hopes, he nevertheless set the tone of trying to consider the rights and needs of all sides, which was to reappear in nineteenth-century planning for the ending of slavery. Where he fails to be fair, it is through practicality rather than partiality, and not without some anguish. His works reflect an impressively conscientious attempt to suggest a workable humane framework for dealing with an evil for which there could be no perfect remedy.

⁵⁰ G. Lefebvre, *The French Revolution from 1793 to 1799* (London and New York, 1969), 358.

⁵¹ Martin, *Histoire de l'esclavage*, 222.