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978-1-108-06014-1 - An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species

Thomas Clarkson

Excerpt

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A N  
E S S A Y  
O N T H E  
S L A V E R Y a n d C O M M E R C E  
O F T H E  
H U M A N S P E C I E S.  
I N T H R E E P A R T S.

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P A R T I.  
T H E H I S T O R Y O F S L A V E R Y.

C H A P. I.

W H E N civilized, as well as barbarous nations, have been found, through a long succession of ages, uniformly to concur in the same customs, there seems to arise a presumption, that such customs are not only eminently useful, but  
A are

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are founded also on the principles of justice. Such is the case with respect to *Slavery*: it has had the concurrence of all the nations, which history has recorded, and the repeated practice of ages from the remotest antiquity, in its favour. Here then is an argument, deduced from the general consent and agreement of mankind, in favour of the proposed subject: but alas! when we reflect that the people, thus reduced to a state of servitude, have had the same feelings with ourselves; when we reflect that they have had the same propensities to pleasure, and the same aversions from pain; another argument seems immediately to arise in opposition to the former, deduced from our own feelings and that divine sympathy, which nature has implanted in our breasts, for the most useful and generous of purposes. To ascertain the truth therefore, where two such opposite sources of argument occur; where the force of custom pleads strongly on the one hand, and the feelings of humanity on the other; is a matter of much importance, as the dignity of human nature is concerned, and the rights and liberties of mankind will be involved in its discussion.

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It will be necessary, before this point can be determined, to consult the History of Slavery, and to lay before the reader, in as concise a manner as possible, a general view of it from its earliest appearance to the present day.

The first, whom we shall mention here to have been reduced to a state of servitude, may be comprehended in that class, which is usually denominated the *Mercenary*. It consisted of free-born citizens, who, from the various contingencies of fortune, had become so poor, as to have recourse for their support to the service of the rich. Of this kind were those, both among the Egyptians and the Jews, who are recorded in the \* sacred writings. † The Grecian *Thetes* also were of this description, as well as those among the Romans, from whom the

\* Genesis, Ch. 47. Leviticus xxv. v. 39, 40.

† The *Thetes* appear very early in the Grecian History.

ὅτι τινες αὐτῶν

ἤσαν ἐπὶ τῇ θάλασσᾳ ἐξαιρέτως; ἢ εἰς αὐτῶν

Ὅντες τε Δμῶες τε; Od. Homer. Δ. 642. They were afterwards so much in use, that “ Μυρία δὴ περ ἀπεδίδουτο “ ἑαυτοῖς, ὥς τε δουλεύειν κατὰ συγγραφήν,” till Solon suppressed the custom in Athens.

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class receives its appellation, the || *Mercenarii*.

We may observe of the above-mentioned, that their situation was in many instances similar to that of our own servants. There was an express contract between the parties : they could, most of them, demand their discharge, if they were ill used by their respective masters; and they were treated therefore with more humanity than those, whom we usually distinguish in our language by the appellation of *Slaves*.

As this class of servants was composed of men, who had been reduced to such a situation by the contingencies of fortune, and not by their own misconduct; so there was another among the ancients, composed entirely of those, who had suffered the loss of liberty from their own imprudence. To this class may be reduced the Grecian *Pro-*

|| The mention of these is frequent among the classics ; they were called in general *mercenarii*, from the circumstances of their *hire*, as “ quibus, non malè præcipiunt, qui ita jubent “ uti, ut *mercenariis*, operam exigendam, justa præbenda. “ Cicero de off.” But they are sometimes mentioned in the law books by the name of *liberi*, from the circumstances of their *birth*, to distinguish them from the *alieni*, or foreigners, as Justinian. D. 7. 8. 4.—Id. 21. 1. 25. &c. &c. &c.

*digals,*

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*digals*, who were detained in the service of their creditors, till the fruits of their labour were equivalent to their debts; the *delinquents*, who were sentenced to the oar; and the German *enthusiasts*, as mentioned by Tacitus, who were so immoderately charmed with gaming, as, when every thing else was gone, to have staked their liberty and their very selves. “The loser,” says he, “goes into a voluntary servitude, and though younger and stronger than the person with whom he played, patiently suffers himself to be bound and sold. Their perseverance in so bad a custom is stiled honour. The slaves, thus obtained, are immediately exchanged away in commerce, that the winner may get rid of the scandal of his victory.”

To enumerate other instances, would be unnecessary: it will be sufficient to observe, that the servants of this class were in a far more wretched situation, than those of the former; their drudgery was more intense; their treatment more severe; and there was no retreat at pleasure, from the frowns and lashes of their despotick masters.

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Having

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Having premised this, we may now proceed to a general division of slavery, into *voluntary* and *involuntary*. The *voluntary* will comprehend the two classes, which we have already mentioned; for, in the first instance, there was a *contract*, founded on *consent*; and, in the second, there was a *choice* of engaging or not in those practices, the known consequences of which were servitude. The *involuntary*, on the other hand, will comprehend those, who were forced, without any such *condition* or *choice*, into a situation, which as it tended to degrade a part of the human species, and to class it with the brutal, must have been, of all human situations, the most wretched and insupportable. These are they, whom we shall consider solely in the present work. We shall therefore take our leave of the former, as they were mentioned only, that we might state the question with greater accuracy, and be the better enabled to reduce it to its proper limits.

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C H A P. II.

The first that will be mentioned, of the *involuntary*, were *prisoners of war*.\* “It was a law, established from time immemorial among the nations of antiquity, to oblige those to undergo the severities of servitude, whom victory had thrown into their hands.” Conformably with this, we find all the Eastern nations unanimous in the practice. The same custom prevailed among the people of the West; for as the Helots became the slaves of the Spartans, from the right of conquest only, so prisoners of war were reduced to the same situation by the rest of the inhabitants of Greece. By the same principles that actuated these, were the Romans also influenced. Their History will confirm the fact: for how many cities are recorded to have been taken; how many armies to have been vanquished in the field, and the wretched survivors, in both instances, to have been doomed to ser-

\* “Νόμος ἐν πόσιν Ἀνθρώποις αἰδίος ἐστίν, ὅταν πολεμύνηται πόλις ἀλλῇ, τῶν ἐλόντων εἶναι καὶ τὰ Σώματα τῶν ἐν τῇ πόλει, καὶ τὰ χεῖρμα.” Xenoph. Κυρ. Παιδ. L. 7. fin.

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vitute? It remains only now to observe, in shewing this custom to have been universal, that all those nations which assisted in overturning the Roman Empire, though many and various, adopted the same measures; for we find it a general maxim in their polity, that whoever should fall into their hands as a prisoner of war, should immediately be reduced to the condition of a slave.

It may here, perhaps, be not unworthy of remark, that the *involuntary* were of greater antiquity than the *voluntary* slaves. The latter are first mentioned in the time of Pharaoh: they could have arisen only in a state of society; when property, after its division, had become so unequal, as to multiply the wants of individuals; and when government, after its establishment, had given security to the possessor by the punishment of crimes. Whereas the former seem to be dated with more propriety from the days of Nimrod; who gave rise probably to that inseparable idea of *victory* and *servitude*, which we find among the nations of antiquity, and which has existed uniformly since,

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in one country or another, to the present day.\*

Add to this, that they might have arisen even in a state of nature, and have been coeval with the quarrels of mankind.

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But it was not victory alone, or any supposed right, founded in the damages of war, that afforded a pretence for invading the liberties of mankind: the honourable light, in which *piracy* was considered in the uncivilized ages of the world, contributed not a little to the *slavery* of the human species. Piracy had a very early beginning. “The Grecians,” † says Thucydides, “in their primitive state, as well as the contemporary barbarians, who inhabited the sea coasts and islands, gave themselves wholly to it; it was, in short, their only profession and support.” The writings

\* “Proud Nimrod first the bloody chase began,

“A mighty hunter, and his prey was man.”

POPE.

† Thucydides. L. i. sub initio.

of

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of Homer are sufficient of themselves to establish this account. They shew it to have been a common practice at so early a period as that of the Trojan war; and abound with many lively descriptions of it, which, had they been as groundless as they are beautiful, would have frequently spared the sigh of the reader of sensibility and reflection.

The piracies, which were thus practised in the early ages, may be considered as *publick* or *private*. In the former, whole crews embarked for the † benefit of their respective tribes. They made descents on the sea coasts, carried off cattle, surprized whole villages, put many of the inhabitants to the sword, and carried others into slavery.

In the latter, individuals only were concerned, and the emolument was their own. These landed from their ships, and, going up into the country, concealed themselves in the woods and thickets; where they waited every opportunity of catching the

† Idem. — — — “ the strongest,” says he, “ engaging  
“ in these adventures, Κίρδης τῇ σφετέρῃ αὐτῶν ἔνεκα καὶ τοῖς  
“ ἀσθενέσι Τροφῆς.”

unfortunate