

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نپاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

By Luis Schwarz
18.02.2025

Dehumanization as a System

Violence as the Origin of Modernity: The History of the Transatlantic Slave Trade



People were crammed together in their hundreds on the slave ships (drawing from the 19th century)

On March 21, 1788, a petition in the name of the "African brothers" was presented to the British Queen Charlotte at an audience. In this petition, the author asked for sympathy for his millions of African compatriots "who groan under the whip of tyranny in the West Indies." He therefore called for the abolition of slavery in the West Indian colonies, i.e. the Caribbean, and a ban on the transatlantic slave trade. In this way, the enslaved should be "raised from the condition of animals to which they are now reduced to the rights and status of free men." However, due to economic considerations in the British Parliament, abolitionist efforts did not find a majority at that time.

The author of this petition was Olaudah Equiano, who also called himself Gustavus Vassa. Born in 1745 in what is now Nigeria, Equiano was enslaved at the age of twelve and taken to America. He was later able to buy his freedom and went to England, where he became one of the most important spokesmen for the abolitionist movement. In 1789 he published his

autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, which quickly became a key text of the abolitionist movement. This is the first autobiography of someone enslaved in the transatlantic slave trade. The text not only gives us an insight into the slave trade from the perspective of someone affected, but also documents the various stages of the so-called Passage, in which millions of Africans were abducted as human commodities and deported across the Atlantic.

Equiano was the first person to have the opportunity to write and publish his story. His voice also represents the millions of silenced people who were deported and murdered in the course of the transatlantic slave trade and who died as a result of inhumane living and working conditions.

People and Sugar

At the end of his life, Equiano lived and worked in England, the country where capitalism was the first to fully develop at the end of the 18th century. Here, technological advances such as the "Spinning Jenny" enabled the transition from mercantilism to industrialization. A system had already developed on the Atlantic and in its coastal regions that was beginning to revolutionize the way of working in cities such as Liverpool.

While economic development in Europe was still in its infancy, millions of slaves were already toiling on the plantations in the European colonies. Goods were produced on a proto-industrial scale without any regard for human dignity and were ultimately consumed in European coffee houses and castles. Here, topics such as enlightenment and human rights were thought about and discussed; there, people were abducted, exploited and murdered. At the same time, it was the accumulation of capital and the way the colonial companies did business that paved the way for the development of capitalism in Western Europe. This was as abstract as it was concrete. Even today, in American English, a factory is referred to as a "plant." So how did the Atlantic world come to become a center of profit and exploitation?

Before Christopher Columbus set sail in 1492 on behalf of the Portuguese crown, thus ushering in the European colonization of the American continent, he spent several years on Madeira. This island in the eastern Atlantic was colonized by the Portuguese from the 1420s onwards and quickly became the center of sugar cane cultivation, which almost completely satisfied European demand at the time. The workers employed in this colony were almost exclusively slaves who had been acquired by European merchants on the African coast. This brought the two commodities that would kick-start the trade of the "Atlantic Triangle": people and sugar.

The poorly productive land on this Atlantic archipelago was soon abandoned and the island was used primarily as a transshipment point for slave transports that stopped there on their way west. In the meantime, land had been found on the islands of the Caribbean that was much better suited to sugar production: on islands such as Barbados and Hispaniola, a plantation economy based on slave labor was quickly established. The so-called transatlantic triangular trade developed from this constellation. The steadily growing European demand for sugar and coffee fueled the purchase of people on the African coast, who were taken to the American colonies via the infamous "Middle Passage". There they had to grow sugar cane and coffee on plantations - goods that were then sold on the European market after further processing. Over the course of the 300 years that this complex existed, more than twelve million people were deported. Around two million did not survive the "passage." Meanwhile, previously unknown wealth was accumulating in the European metropolises. Especially in London, the place where Equiano wrote his biography.

Uprooting

The journey of those abducted usually began deep in the African hinterland. This was also the case for Equiano. As an eleven-year-old child, he and his sister were kidnapped from their village in what is now Nigeria. The slave catchers deliberately took advantage of the absence of the adults who were working in the fields to kidnap children and young people in particular. As Equiano reports, such attacks were so frequent that the children had to keep watch even when they were playing: "Usually, when the adults in the neighborhood were working far out in the fields, the children would gather (...), some of us would climb a tree to look out for possible attackers or kidnappers."

After the kidnapping, the abducted people began a months-long march to the coast, during which they were repeatedly sold like goods and separated from their caregivers. Equiano and his sister were also soon sold to different slave traders. He lived in different households and even became friends with his owner's son during one of his "stopovers". But even after this short break, which Equiano describes as a carefree time, he continued towards the coast, where he briefly met his sister again: "As soon as she saw me, she let out a loud scream and threw herself into my arms."

But the joy of their reunion lasted only one night. The next morning, the siblings were separated again, this time for good. This systematic destruction of family ties was an essential aspect of the slavery system. After months of marching, the abducted children finally reached the coast. There they were sold to European traders who took them onto their ships. Thus began the cruel crossing of the Atlantic.

Death and trauma

The "Middle Passage," the crossing of enslaved people from Africa to the Americas, was one of the most violent parts of the transatlantic slave trade. Equiano's eyewitness report shows the inhumane conditions under which the prisoners had to endure the week-long crossing. Even the first contact with the ship was traumatizing for the enslaved. Disused schooners with a steerage built into them were often used as slave ships. This meant that one ship could transport several hundred people.

Equiano described the situation on his ship as follows: "The narrowness of the place and the heat of the climate, in addition to the number on the ship, which was so crowded that everyone had hardly room to turn around, almost suffocated us. This led to profuse sweating, so that the air soon became unfit for breathing due to a multitude of disgusting smells and caused a disease among the slaves, from which many died and thus became victims of the careless greed, as I may call it, of their buyers." People were crammed together like goods, and many died of disease or suffocated. These inhumane conditions were a direct result of the profit-seeking of European merchants who tried to transport as many "pieces" - as they called the people - as possible.

The brutality of the white crew manifested itself in various forms: anyone who refused to eat was whipped. Attempted suicide was cruelly punished - anyone who tried to jump overboard, "preferring death to such a life of misery", was whipped "mercilessly" if he survived. This violence was completely alien to Equiano: "I had never seen such examples of brutal cruelty among any people." A regime of violence that lacked any humanity prevailed on the slave ships.

In some situations, it was more lucrative for the captains to throw their human cargo overboard and collect the insurance money rather than worry about caring for them. The modern system of insurance arose in connection with the transatlantic slave trade. Here, people became commodities whose value could be measured in money that could be reimbursed by an insurance company. Accordingly, they were treated like cattle when sold. Equiano reports: "We were immediately led to the merchant's yard, where we were all herded together like many sheep in a flock, without consideration of gender or age."

The "Middle Passage" marks a decisive step in the development of capitalism: people became commodities whose transport and sale were organized purely to maximize profit. The brutal efficiency of this system is evident in Equiano's comment about the separation of families and people from similar regions of origin during the sale: "Must every tender feeling also be sacrificed to your avarice?"

The plantation economy, which Equiano fortunately did not have to participate in, developed into a highly efficient but also brutal production system in the 17th and 18th centuries. The focus was on the production of export goods such as sugar, coffee and later cotton for the European market. This production required large areas of land, a lot of capital and, above all, a large number of workers.

A typical sugar plantation required at least 300 to 400 hectares of land and considerable start-up capital. According to contemporary estimates, around 1760, around 5,000 pounds sterling was needed for a small plantation of 300 acres (approx. 1.2 square kilometers) that produced 30 to 50 hogsheads (large barrels) of sugar per year. This would correspond to a purchasing power of around 1.3 million euros today. These high investment costs led to the formation of a small elite of plantation owners, who mostly invested from Europe. On the plantations themselves, it was usually administrators sent there who used force to maintain the plantation regime.

There are few first-hand sources from people who had to work on the plantations in the Caribbean. One of these texts is the memoirs of Mary Prince, which she had written and published in 1831. She vividly described how the plantations were not just a business, but a system based on everyday violence and the dehumanization of the enslaved.

The slaves' working day began before sunrise and often ended late at night. Using the example of her fellow slave Hetty, Prince describes the exhausting daily work routine: "She was the most active woman I had ever seen, and she was pushed to the limit." In a typical evening routine, Hetty had to "milk the cows (...), bring the sheep home and lock them in the pen; drive the cattle home and tie them up at the edge of the pond; feed and groom her master's horse (...), prepare the beds, and undress the children and put them to sleep." All this after a day in the sugar cane.

Such long working days were enforced by a system of brutal violence. Prince reports regular abuse for even the smallest offenses: "Stripping me naked - hanging me by the wrists and tearing my flesh with the bullwhip was a common punishment for even a minor offense."

The high mortality rate among the enslaved was a direct result of this inhumane treatment. This is shown by the fate of Hetty, who was brutally whipped while pregnant, suffered a stillbirth and died shortly afterwards. Prince comments: "All the slaves said that death was a good thing for poor Hetty; but I wept a lot over her death. The manner of her death filled me with horror."

Prince's report makes it clear that the economic efficiency of the plantation economy was based on a system of extreme physical and psychological violence that robbed the enslaved of

their humanity and degraded them to mere means of production. Mortality was correspondingly high; many plantation owners calculated that their slaves would be "used up" after seven to ten years and would have to be "replaced."

The plantations were enormously profitable. The yields from the plantations on Barbados alone were estimated at over three million pounds sterling in 1650. This corresponds to a profit of around 800 million euros today. Such profits contributed significantly to capital accumulation in England and financed the beginning of the industrial revolution. It was the enslaved people on the Caribbean islands who made European development possible in the first place. But why were it people of African descent who were forced to work on the plantations?

Racism as justification

The plantation economy in the Caribbean and the American colonies required immense amounts of cheap labor. The first attempts to meet this demand by enslaving the indigenous population or by using European contract or forced labor were unsuccessful. The indigenous population died from imported diseases or were murdered in the colonizers' brutal raids. The contract workers, in turn, were not only more expensive, but could also lay claim to land after their contract term had expired. And European forced labor could not meet the growing demand for labor either. In addition, this form of forced labor was quickly questioned on its morality.

From the perspective of European merchants, the enslavement of people of African descent offered several advantages: Firstly, there was a slave trade in the African interior and on the coast that could be used. Secondly, the enslaved could easily be socially and culturally isolated by deporting them and separating them from members of their ethnic groups. Added to this were the comparatively low "acquisition costs". What initially began as purely economically motivated exploitation soon led to the development of a comprehensive racist ideology. In order to resolve the moral contradictions between Christian values and the brutal practice of slavery, a pseudo-scientific justification was developed that portrayed Africans as inferior people.

This rationalization went through several phases: First, slavery was justified on religious grounds. Africans were seen as heathens whose enslavement would serve their Christianization. With the Enlightenment, a "scientific" racial theory developed that classified Africans as biologically inferior. Finally, slavery was glorified as a "civilizing mission" that was supposedly in the interests of the enslaved themselves. This development of modern racism is a consequence of slavery, not its cause. The historian Eric Williams put it succinctly

in his book "Capitalism and Slavery": "Slavery was not born of racism: rather, racism was the consequence of slavery."

The combination of economic exploitation and racist ideology had far-reaching consequences that continue to have an impact today. It had a lasting impact on the self-image of white societies, created persistent stereotypes and prejudices, and legitimized colonial rule even after the formal abolition of slavery. The reversal of cause and effect is particularly perfidious: the social and economic inequalities created by slavery and colonialism were cited as proof of the alleged inferiority of the oppressed.

The transatlantic slave trade and plantation slavery were thus not only a system of economic exploitation, but also created the ideological foundations for modern racism. Today's debates about structural racism and post-colonial continuities can only be understood against the background of the transatlantic slave trade. Modern racism developed within this complex. It is a historically grown construct to justify economic exploitation: an ideology to legitimize injustice, power and exploitation.

Let us return to the economic centre of the 19th century: London, the place where Equiano died on March 31, 1797. There, in the last ten years of his life, he campaigned for the abolition of the slave trade and slavery, as well as for a project for the return of enslaved people to Sierra Leone. His autobiography was distributed in many European countries during his lifetime and attracted a great deal of attention. However, his journalistic and political commitment only had success after his death. In 1807, England was the first colonial power to ban the transatlantic slave trade. However, forms of plantation slavery remained on the American continent for up to a hundred years. The history of slavery and its abolition is not yet complete: the consequences of enslavement still shape the social and economic structures on the American continent. Equiano's autobiography makes it clear that the history of slavery is not just a history of numbers and statistics. It is above all a history of people.