

THE SPIRIT OF REFORM (1820-1840)

Cours HD

Source : *Give Me Liberty*, Eric Foner, 2012

2. ABOLITIONISM

At first, the greatest evil in American society -i.e. slavery- did not seem to attract much attention from reformers who focused on drinking, Sabbath-breaking and illiteracy instead. For many years it looked as if the only ones who wanted to abolish slavery were Quakers, slaves and free blacks.

1) The colonization movement

Before the 1830s, Americans who wished to see an end to slavery couple dit with « colonization » of freed slaves, that is to say their deportation to Africa, the Caribbean or Central America. In 1816, its advocates founded the American Colonization Society (ACS), which promoted gradual abolition of slavery and settlement of black Americans in Africa. It soon established Liberia on the coast of West Africa, an outpost of American influence whose capital Monrovia (today Freetown) was named for President James Monroe. Colonization, though, struck many observers as totally impractical (on visiting the US, Harriet Martineau in her travels account *Society in America*, 1837, called colonization a way in which « slave owners ... might, by sending their slaves away over sea, relieve their conscience without annoying their neighbours. »)

Nonetheless, many prominent political leaders of the Jacksonian era, like Henry Clay, John Marshall, Daniel Webster and Jackson himself, supported this society. Many northerners saw colonization as the only way to get rid of slavery. Southern supporters of colonization devoted their energy to persuading free African- Americans to leave the US-free blacks, they said, were a « degraded » group whose presence posed a danger to white society. Other colonizationists beleived that slavery and racism were so deeply rooted in American life that blacks could never achieve equality if freed and allowed to remain in the country. Just like Indian removal, colonization rested on the premise that America was fundamentally a white society.

2) Black people and colonization

During the decades that preceded the American Civil War, several thousand balck Americans did emigrate to Liberia with the help of the American Colonization Society, either because they were emancipated on condition that they left or voluntarily, motivated by the desire to spread Christianity in Africa or to enjoy rights they were denied in the US.

But most African-Americans opposed the idea of colonization. In fact, the creation of the ACS galvanized free blacks to claim their rights as Americans. In 1817, three thousand free black gathered in Philadelphia for the first national black Convention. Their resolutions insisted that they were Americans, entitled to the same rights and freedom as whites.

3) Militant abolitionism

The abolitionis t movement that arose in the 1830s differed from its genteel, conservative predecessor. A new generation of reformers, who drew on the religious conviction that slavery was an unparalleled sin and a secular one in the sense that it contradicted values enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, rejected the traditional approach of gradual emnicipation, and demanded immediate emancipation. Unlike their predecessors, they insisted that blacks once freed should be incorporated as equal citizens of of the republic rather than being deported. White abolitionist themselves were not quite free of the racism that pervaded American society but nearly all of them insisted that economic, civil and political rights in the US should be equally enjoyed by without regard to race. The new spirit of abolitionism was represented in 1829 by the appearance of *An Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* » by David Walker, a free black who had been born in North Carolina and now lived in Boston. His Appeal called on black Americans to mobilize for abolition. He invoked the Bible but also the Declaration of Independence, but also called on black people to take pride in the achievements of ancient African civilizations and to claim all their rights as Americans. Walker died in mysterious circumstances in 1830. But a new kind of abolitionism was born and itw as supported by William Boyd Garrison 'weekly journal - The Liberator - published in Boston in 1831. Garrison's

rhetoric was inflammatory and outraged southerners who reprinted the latter's editorials to condemn them : this brought him instant fame. His idea that the North should abrogate the Constitution to end its complicity in the evil of slavery was rejected by many abolitionists. But this call for immediate abolition of slavery echoed throughout antislavery circles.

4) Spreading the abolitionist message

The abolitionist movement expanded quickly through the North thanks to the development of print technology and it used the expansion of literacy due to common school education to spread their message. Thus, millions of copies of pamphlets, newspapers, petitions, etc. were published. The movement counted people from all walks of life from ordinary citizens like farmers, shopkeepers, craftsmen (= artisans), etc. to prominent businessmen and merchants. Theodore Weld, a young minister, helped the movement's mass constituency (= circonscription). His fervent preaching, long meetings were marked by one simple message : slavery was a sin and therefore mainly a moral question. And to him, the only answer to the sin of slavery was its immediate elimination. Given Weld took all his examples from the Southern press they could not be dismissed as inventions of the northern imagination.

5) Abolitionists and the idea of freedom

Abolitionists challenged the common understanding of freedom in Jacksonian America. They helped popularize the concept that personal freedom derived from ownership of one's self and the ability to enjoy the fruits of one's labor. People who received a wage were free and embodied freedom because they could change jobs, own property and enjoy a stable family life which slavery deprived them of. On the other hand, abolitionists argued that slavery was so deeply rooted in American life that its destruction would require fundamental changes in the North as in the South. They asserted that inherent natural and absolute right to personal liberty, regardless of race, took precedence over other forms of freedom, such as the right of citizens to accumulate and hold property, or over self-government by local political communities.

6) A new vision of America

Abolitionists wanted to reinvigorate the idea of freedom as a truly universal entitlement. The anti-slavery crusade saw free blacks and slaves as members of the national community, a position summarized in the title of Lydia Maria Child's popular book of 1833, *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans*. She insisted that they were fellowcountrymen and should no more be considered Africans than whites were Englishmen. The idea that only birthplace, not race, should determine who was American or not, which was later enshrined (=entériner, inscrire, avaliser) in the 14th Amendment, represented a radical departure from the traditions of American life. Abolitionists maintained that once freed, blacks should be empowered to participate fully in the public life of the USA. They also pioneered the modern idea that human rights took precedence over national sovereignty. Angelina Grimké wrote that the fight against slavery was the nation's pre-eminent « school in which human rights are ... investigated. » Garrison burnt the Constitution for not relating to slavery as a covenant (= contrat) with the devil and Frederick Douglass came to believe it offered no national protection to slavery. But despite differences, abolitionists developed an alternative, rights-oriented view of liberty ; they invented the concept of equality before the law regardless of race, one all but unknown in American life before the Civil War. They identified their movement with the revolutionary heritage and interpreted the Declaration of Independence's Preamble as a condemnation of slavery. They adopted a bell as their symbol - « Liberty Bell » - as part of an effort to identify their principles with those of the Founding Fathers. Abolitionists only represented a small part of the North's population. But as the slavery controversy intensified, the belief spread far beyond abolitionist circles that slavery contradicted the nation's heritage of freedom.

3. BLACK AND WHITE ABOLITIONISM