

Speech by Olivier Grenouilleau

Mr. Chancellor,

Mr. Permanent Secretary,

Mr. President of the Association François Guizot,

Mr. President,

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury;

Dear Didier, you who knew how to show me, when I was a schoolboy, what history is;

Dear Peter, because without you everything would have been different,

Dear friends,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A great joy and honour it is for me to be here with you tonight to receive the Prix Guizot, which brings to mind the memory of this historian, thinker and statesman who left his mark on 19th century France.

I will address three points.

The first is about Guizot. As a researcher, it was when writing a biography of Saint-Simon, this “utopian socialist” (who was neither a utopian nor a socialist) that I first came across Guizot. In other words, this first contact was a bit rough. In 1816, distinguishing three main political trends, Saint-Simon had placed Guizot among the members of the “party of the stationaries” that wished to seek out an illusory mixture of the Ancien and Nouveau regimes. These men, writes Saint-Simon, “would like to rise to the rank of conciliators, but they only reach

that of house maids”.¹ We can be reassured by the fact that the members of the other two “parties” thus identified by Saint-Simon are not held in greater esteem, whether they be the “retrogrades” (defenders of the Ancien regime) or “liberals” (who betrayed the Revolution).

A few years later, Saint-Simon added another cutting remark. He accuses Guizot of having borrowed from him the idea of the revolutionary role of the emergence of communes since medieval times. “There are,” he writes, “men who do great service to inventors as well as to the public; they are the popularizers (...) Voltaire made Bayle's critical ideas known, Mr. Guizot has just popularized the observations I had published in *L'Organisateur*.” And to conclude, he writes, ironically: “I ask Mr. Guizot to receive my sincere thanks”.² The question of who was right, Saint-Simon or Guizot, is difficult to answer. Let us just say that both men developed in different but parallel forms—and this before Tocqueville—the idea that the French revolution should be understood in two ways. First, as a “revolution-event” (with the “slippages” later pointed out by François Furet), and second, as a “revolution-moment” inserted into one instant over the long evolution of civilization. Auguste Comte, former secretary of Saint-Simon, took a number of ideas from his previous master that were later attributed to him. And Saint-Simon undoubtedly first came into contact with the role of the communes from his first secretary, Augustin Thierry. Everyone borrowed a lot from everyone else back then.

I again came across Guizot while working on *La Révolution abolitionniste* and found some other acerbic comments. Serge Daget, in his State thesis on the French repression of the slave trade, points out Guizot’s hesitations above all, even if he underlines the mastery with which he emerged from the crisis of ship-boarding rights with England in 1845. Lawrence Jennings, one of the leading

¹ *Seventh Letter to an American, The Industry (Second Part. Politics)*, vol. 1, 1816, in *Works of Claude Henri de Saint-Simon*, vol. 1 Geneva, Slatkine, 1978, pp. 169-182.

² *Du système industriel, Deuxième Correspondance*, 1821, *Œuvres, op. cit.*, vol. 3, p. 191-192.

experts on French abolitionism in the first half of the 19th century, in no way questioned Guizot's commitment, but he qualifies it. He sees him as representative of those members of the Christian Moral Society who were in favour of abolition when they were in the opposition, but more inclined to the *status quo* once in power. Jennings thus criticizes a certain wait-and-see attitude on the part of Guizot, but he does insist upon his role in 1838 and thereafter, when he tried to force the Molé administration “to act” when in the opposition.³

Jennings could have seen this as the eternal dilemma of the man of ideas in touch with the realities of power especially as related to the question of the potential compensation to be granted—or not—to planters in the event of the abolition of slavery. Beyond that, what Jennings did not see was that Guizot perfectly illustrated the attitude of most abolitionists, including those who sometimes criticized him, namely that of radical men in principle and reformers in practice. Victor de Broglie, President of the French Society for the Abolition of Slavery was also of this tendency. This radical reformism undoubtedly led to procrastination, but was also, I think, one of the great strengths of the abolitionist movement that ultimately enabled it to succeed. This is especially true since real progress can be noted under the July Monarchy at the time of the height of Guizot's career—even if it was later eclipsed by the Republic of Schoelcher. Twenty-two ordinances, five laws and one decree put all free men, whether or not they were coloured, emancipated or not, on an equal footing under the July Monarchy. Procedures for emancipating slaves were made easier. The living conditions of slaves received increased attention, while efforts were being made to bring colonial law more into line with metropolitan law, thanks in particular to the case law of the Court of Cassation. The British abolished slavery and then set up a so-called “apprenticeship” system to ensure the transition from slavery to freedom. The France of the July Monarchy chose another path, working to

³ Lawrence Jennings, *La France et l'abolition de l'esclavage, 1802-1848*, Brussels, André Versaille, 2010, p. 119.

encourage this transition before abolition was decreed.

This brings me to the second point I would like to address, namely the place of the award-winning book in my research career; a quick point because I am not in the habit of talking about myself. Three phases can be identified in this itinerary. The first led me to work on the history of maritime trade in Nantes, France and Europe over the long term (17th-20th centuries), addressing various themes: economic, social, political and cultural trading strategies, relations with the State, and the relationship between colonial trade, growth and economic development. The second phase was devoted to the history of an infamous trade, the trafficking of living beings, focusing on that which occurred in sub-Saharan Africa between the 8th and 20th centuries. The last phase concerns the global history of slavery and its abolition. Perhaps I will address a new phase, with the global history of labour and the history of the great moralization of the world, that is, the desire to abolish everything that men in the 18th and 19th centuries considered to be vices of the human species (the slave trade and slavery, but also prostitution, poverty and war). What brings all this together, I hope, gives it a certain coherence—the willingness to study from different angles what is sometimes called “moral economics”—the constantly reconfigured relationships between economics, the life of society and ethics, a theme that Guizot, seeking to associate morality and reform, might have appreciated.

Third and last point: *La Révolution Abolitionniste*. Slavery is sometimes assumed to have been accepted for a long time. In fact, in the Western world it has always been a problem. If this had not been the case, why would it have been necessary to provide so many alibis in order to legitimize it? And Aristotle, author of the first theory that came to us, the so-called “natural slavery theory”, already responded to the objections of one or more unknown sophists. That said, for thousands of years, no one ever imagined that slavery would come to an end. One thought to improve the lot of slaves or make freeing slaves easier—but most

often this was in order to strengthen the effectiveness of the slavery system. Societies without slavery only appear in utopias and the slaves themselves, when they rebelled, sought to escape from slavery without working to destroy the system itself. For a long time, humanity thus managed, at best, to procrastinate, to seek in which cases the harsh realities of slavery might seem acceptable. This long period, from the “invention” of slavery in the Neolithic period to the end of the 18th century, constitutes what I call the era of casuistry. From the 1770s, establishing connections between Europe and the Americas, some individuals envisioned a new project, no longer a question of “reforming” slavery but of *abolishing* it. This amounted to a revolution in the long history of humanity.

I tried to study this revolution by using a “comprehensive” method (Max Weber), in motion (because there is both theory and practice), as well as a global historical method over the long term. The objective was to understand what motivated the abolitionist activists. A first element then appeared essential to me—the convergence of rights. The Roman jurist Ulpian could say that under natural law men are free and that under *ius gentium* (law of nations), they can be slaves. This did not bother him in the slightest any more than the generations of thinkers after him because rights (divine, natural, *ius gentium*) could be dissociated. At the origin of the abolitionist project is the idea that there are *universal* values, such as the naturalness of freedom, and that these values must be at the root of people's rights. If values are primary, and if, from now on, rights must be intertwined, then we can begin to consider abolition.

Four factors then make it possible to understand the crystallization of this project. The first is the convergence of secular morals (the Enlightenment) and Christian morals (both Catholic and Protestant), because faith and reason do not necessarily oppose each other in terms of abolition—on the contrary. Second factor: the followers of these morals do not wait for “progress” or the end of time to do their work; they militate for the effective transformation of the world as it

is. Third factor: as part of a broader democratization process, abolitionist discourse is heard by individual actors who position themselves according to their experience and conviction, and no longer only by tradition. Fourth, in addition to these root causal factors of the abolitionist movement, there are, of course, the multiple forms of slave resistance.

In addition to the factors of the emergence and crystallization of the abolitionist idea, there are those of its success, because the project was not beyond doubt. On the one hand, this was because it appears at the very height of the American colonial slavery system and, on the other hand, because, developing in the era of political revolutions, it sometimes led to anxiety, by appearing too “revolutionary”. In the end, at least four things led to abolition. First of all, the fact that this radical project was served by a reformist method of action - let us think, here again, of Guizot. The existence of ad hoc alliances between sometimes opposing political groups, as well as the use of an argument combining the “just” (abolition is a moral imperative) and the “useful” (it will *not* lead to the ruin of Western nations) contributed to this effort. For if abolitionists were driven above all by moral arguments, they had to convince their contemporaries and respond to the arguments of slave owners waving the flag of ruin. Finally, the force of law was also necessary in order to fight against illegal slave practices.

Let us be very clear: the abolition of slavery under the law was a huge step forward in the history of humanity. However, it did not put an end to all forms of human exploitation. In its time, the abolition of slavery was already linked to other struggles. In 1839, Félicité de Lamennais published *De l'esclavage moderne*, denouncing the way in which the proletarians of the industrial era were exploited. However, let us be cautious. While millions of people are probably *de facto* slaves worldwide today, not all forms of exploitation are slavery. To fight a plague properly, it is important to understand it to avoid confusion.

Once again, thank you, very sincerely, for the honour you have given me

by awarding me this wonderful Prix Guizot.