

FRANÇOIS GUIZOT AND THE SLAVE TRADE

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How could François Guizot (1787–1874) be associated with the abolitionist movement against slavery and the slave trade when after years of high political office and a notably conservative agenda he was ousted in February 1848 by a régime one of whose first acts was to abolish slavery in the French colonies? To my knowledge, his name never figures in the numerous histories of abolition, so why should one even ask the question about his position or action on the matter? My interest was aroused by a series of coincidences which led to my discovery of France's first elected black mayor, by name Louis Guizot (1740–94).¹

In his recent biography of François Guizot, Laurent Theis writes: 'Il est membre de la Société de morale chrétienne, créée en 1821, et qu'il préside en 1828 [jusqu'en 1830]. La Société, où les protestants sont nombreux et à laquelle appartient la fleur de l'opposition libérale [est à] vocation philosophique et philanthropique, en pointe dans la lutte contre la peine de mort en matière politique et la traite négrière, pour l'amélioration de la condition pénitentiaire et pour l'émancipation des Grecs – autant de convictions auxquelles Guizot restera toujours attaché [...].'² Guizot's main contribution seems to have consisted of his extensive efforts when ambassador to Great Britain to ensure the international signature of a treaty allowing ships of the participating nations to be checked that they were not carrying human cargo: 'Grâce au sang-froid des deux ministres [Guizot et Lord Aberdeen, on résolut] des questions mineures mais très sensibles pour l'opinion de chacun des deux pays, comme le droit de visite réciproque des navires des deux pays pour lutter contre la traite négrière, qui traîne de 1841 à 1845 [...].'³ Echoes of these protracted negotiations are to be found notably in volume VI of Guizot's *Mémoires* and in two speeches he made in parliament.⁴

It may seem curious that the slave trade still required such new legislation after it had been officially abolished in 1815, ironically under Napoleon, who in 1802 had re-established slavery in the French colonies after its first abolition by the Convention in 1794. The problem was in the application: interlopers continued the human trafficking, nation-states (especially the French) resented their ships being visited by foreign vessels (British in particular), and ships flying other flags were invulnerable. Successive attempts to come to a bilateral agreement proved unsatisfactory. Treaties were signed in 1830, 1833 and 1841, but ratification of the last was, for internal political reasons, delayed and then refused by Paris. The Société contre l'esclavage argued with impeccable logic: 'Abolissez l'esclavage, et il ne sera plus question de droit de visite' (*M*, VI, 232). Guizot writes: 'Les conventions [...] n'avaient réellement agi que contre la traite, et si elles eussent été acceptées et mises en pratique par toutes les puissances maritimes, elles étaient probablement le plus sûr moyen de réprimer cet odieux trafic' (*M*, VI, 240). Guizot realized that only international agreement would be effective. A treaty was finally signed in London on 29 May 1845. The complete text is given in the *Mémoires*, among its principal provisions being that 'S. M. le roi des Français s'engage à établir, dans le plus court délai possible, sur la côte occidentale de l'Afrique, depuis le Cap Vert jusqu'au 16° 30 de latitude méridionale, une force navale composée au moins de vingt-six croiseurs, tant à voiles qu'à vapeur' (article 1^{er}, *M*, VI, 447), Great Britain doing likewise to an exact

extent (*M*, VI, 448). ‘Lesdites forces navales françaises et anglaises agiront de concert pour la suppression de la traite des noirs [...] agissant ensemble ou séparément’ (art. 2, 3, *M*, VI, 447–48). ‘Attendu que l’expérience a fait voir que la traite des noirs, dans les parages où elle est habituellement exercée, est souvent accompagnée de faits de piraterie dangereux pour la tranquillité des mers et la sécurité des pavillons, [...] il est loisible de procéder à la vérification [...]’ (art. 8, *M*, VI, 450). ‘S. M. le roi des Français et S. M. la reine du royaume uni de la Grande Bretagne et d’Irlande s’engagent réciproquement à continuer d’interdire [...] toute traite des noirs dans les colonies qu’elles possèdent’ (art. 9, *M*, VI, 450). The treaty, valid for ten years, would be reviewed after five.

We have here a statesman negotiating on behalf of his country. It is in the house that a rather more personal attachment to the cause is heard. In the debate on the proposed treaty of 20 December 1841, which takes place on 20 and 22 January 1842, Guizot, now Minister of Foreign Affairs, uses his considerable eloquence to argue the case. ‘Le but du nouveau traité, comme des premières conventions, n’est autre, messieurs, que de réprimer efficacement, réellement, d’abolir, s’il se peut, la traite des nègres. [...] c’est un mouvement moral, c’est l’ardent désir de mettre fin à ce commerce honteux, c’est le désir d’affranchir une portion de l’humanité (*Très-bien! très-bien!*) qui a lancé et accompli cette œuvre’ (*H*, III, 529–30). ‘[I]l serait étrange, [...] il serait ridicule, au moment où vous préparez l’abolition de l’esclavage, de détruire, d’affaiblir du moins les mesures qui ont pour objet d’abolir la traite’ (*H*, III, 531). Since 1831, vessels flying flags other than those of France and Britain went unvisited and therefore potentially unpunished: ‘Elle [la traite] se faisait sous d’autres pavillons, sous des pavillons que ni la France ni l’Angleterre n’avaient le droit de visiter’ (*H*, III, 538), and that included ships flying United States colours.

Et le jour où toutes les nations auront contracté ce même engagement, le crime de la traite disparaîtra; et ce jour-là, les hommes qui auront poursuivi ce noble but à travers les orages politiques et les luttes des partis, à travers les jalousies des cabinets, à travers les rivalités personnelles, les hommes, dis-je, qui auront persévéré dans leur dessein, sans s’inquiéter de ces accidents et de ces obstacles, ces hommes-là seront honorés dans le monde; et j’espère que mon nom aura l’honneur de prendre place parmi les leurs. (*Bravo!*) (*H*, III, 541)

Politicians understandably demanded to know the cost involved to implement the convention of 29 May 1845 allowing the boarding of suspect vessels by ships specially designated for the purpose, but Guizot does not lose sight of the moral purpose of the legislation: ‘les deux gouvernements ont ainsi donné ce beau spectacle de leur union sincère dans une grande pensée commune de justice et d’humanité universelle. [...] la France et l’Angleterre ont donné la preuve qu’elles étaient toutes deux animées de ce grand et beau sentiment, et qu’elles poursuivaient en commun ce but [...]’ (*H*, IV, 580–81). The sustained plea on the point of principle lends support to the idea that it is sincerely felt.

Nowhere, however, in public or private discourse, is reference made to his distant cousin, Louis Guizot, ‘même s’il savait ce qu’il en était vraisemblablement par sa mère’, as Laurent Theis wrote to me in an e-mail of 7 July 2008. Indeed, there seems to be no trace in any of his myriad writings of any personal engagement with the issue of slavery or the slave trade. This is surprising not only because of his clear commitment to the principle of abolition but because Louis Guizot was a mulatto, the son of Paul Guizot, who had gone to Saint-Domingue to make his

fortune, and a black slave from the Guinea coast known as Catherine Rideau. In his village of Saint-Geniès de Malgoires (or Malgoirès: local practice accepts both forms), he was sufficiently well respected to win hands down the first local election for mayor held after the Revolution. But under the Terror, given his Girondin sympathies, he suffered the same fate as François Guizot's father André: both were sent to the guillotine at Nîmes, André on 8 April and Louis on 3 July 1794. A few more weeks, and they might both have been spared: on 27 July, it would be Robespierre's turn to mount the scaffold.

Given his silence on his father,⁵ François Guizot cannot have ignored Louis for racist reasons, nor is it likely that as a protestant he would have spurned a branch of the family which had converted to catholicism under pressures resulting from the 1685 Revocation of the Edict of Nantes and the consequent atrocities of the *dragonnades* committed precisely in the region of the Cévennes. Theis argues that it was the very depth of his attachment to his father's memory that led to his silence except on rare occasions in exchanges with his mother. His very anglophilia may have helped him to stiffen his upper lip. While his relationship to Louis was far slighter, a similar *pudeur* may have obtained, none the less prompting a long-standing commitment of principle to universal and specifically racial justice. His negotiating and oratorical skills clearly helped pave the way for the 1848 abolition of slavery in the French colonies for which Schœlcher is given the principal credit. His hope that his name would be associated with all those who fought for the definitive abolition of slavery and the slave trade has so far been disappointed. While we shall never know if having a black cousin influenced his thinking, it is appropriate to correct this injustice.

¹ I recount the history in 'A Black Mayor in 1790 France' in *The Enterprise of Enlightenment: A Tribute to David Williams from his Friends*, ed. by Terry Pratt and David McCallam (Oxford, Bern, Berlin etc., Peter Lang, 2004), pp. 159–73.

² Laurent Theis, *François Guizot* (Paris, Fayard, 2008), pp. 21–22.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁴ See François Guizot, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de mon temps* (henceforth *M* in the text) (Paris, Michel Lévy frères, 1862), V, 297–300 and VI, 1864, 130–241; and his *Histoire parlementaire de France: recueil complet des discours prononcés dans les chambres de 1819 à 1848* (henceforth *H*) (Paris, Michel Lévy frères, 1863), III, 521–43 (speech of 22 January 1842) and IV, 574–81 (27 June 1845). I am grateful to Laurent Theis for pointing me in the direction of these sources.

⁵ For a man so attached to his family, Theis notes his 'mutisme [...] surprenant' on his forebears. 'Plus troublant encore, le silence sur le père. Dans les 961 lettres conservées qu'il a adressées trente-huit ans durant à sa fille Henriette, il ne lui nomme jamais son grand-père paternel, [...].' *Op. cit.*, p. 172.

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TRAISSON ET MORT DE RICHAÏT DEUX AND SHAKESPEARE'S 'BARKLOUGHLY CASTLE'

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Act III Scene 2 of Shakespeare's *Richard II* opens thus:

K. RICHARD. Barkloughly castle call they this at hand? AUMERLE. Yea, my lord. How brooks your grace the air, After your late tossing on the breaking seas? K. RICHARD. Needs must I like it well. I weep for joy To stand upon my kingdom once again. . . .