

Slavery in the United States and in the Colonies and the Struggle between Abolitionists and Anti-abolitionists

1 The Chariot of Culture and Slavery

As we have already seen, the theorist of aristocratic radicalism pointed to the need for a 'new slavery'. Even while writing *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche tirelessly asserted that slavery was inseparable from culture. Towards the end of his conscious life, he stated: '[I]f you want slaves, then it is stupid to train them to be masters' (XIII, 30, cf. GD, 40 [216]). To give them an education meant only to whip up a slave revolt, with catastrophic consequences. At bottom, it was in the interest not only of culture as a whole but also that of the slaves themselves that they did not become unadapted to the condition they suffered and had to suffer. This culture could be likened to a 'a victor dripping with blood, who, in his triumphal procession, drags the vanquished along, chained to his carriage as slaves', slaves that under normal conditions were blinded by a 'charitable power' that stopped them from becoming aware of the chains that held them captive (CV, 3, I, 768–9 [167]). The ideologues that strove to proclaim foolish programmes of general emancipation were the cruellest enemies of those they claimed to favour: 'If a slave in prison dreams of being free and released from servitude, who will be so hard-hearted as to wake him and tell him he is only dreaming?' (B, I, 2, 229).

So, slavery is a troublesome presence that is as if suppressed in the philosophical historiography and boundless literature about Nietzsche. It is understandable that, in the case of an author so fascinating and often viewed as a theorist of individualism, interpreters tend to consider this obsessively recurring theme as a paradox or an innocent and charming metaphor. On the other hand, what is 'truth' if not 'a mobile army of metaphors' (*supra*, 2 § 3)?

And yet one must not lose sight of the historical context. Nietzsche's beginnings fell in a period in which slavery was abolished in the United States and serfdom in Russia. In the following years, while forms of slavery or semi-slavery persisted in both countries, the debate on these issues at the international level was intense. Britain, which abolished slavery in its colonies in 1833, proceeded in the 1870s and 1880s to institute a naval blockade of the East African coast to prevent the continuing slave trade, above all in the direction of Brazil, which

did not abolish slavery and the slave trade until 1888 – the year in which Nietzsche's conscious life drew to a close. It is also worth remembering that the entire historical period was notable for resolutions and treaties, like the one signed by Britain and Zanzibar in 1873, prohibiting the slave trade,¹ while in 1874 new states were founded or new settlements established on the coast of East Africa for former slaves, often at the instigation of Christian missions.² Finally, in 1884–5 in Berlin, the International Congo Conference delineated the spheres of influence in Africa of the colonial powers, which jointly undertook, not without a strong element of hypocrisy, to combat slavery. As the French Prime Minister Jules Ferry noted, the moral duty 'to fight the slave trade, this terrible traffic, and slavery, this infamy', was finally translated 'into positive law, into an obligation sanctioned by the signatures of all governments.'³

The debate also enveloped Prussia and Germany, at the highest political level, and not just because the conference was hosted in Berlin. It seems that at the outbreak of the American Civil War Bismarck had shown that he 'felt some sympathy for the people of the southern United States', even though he would have preferred a more humane treatment for blacks.⁴ Similar sympathies were widespread in the officer corps: a reception they organised in July 1864 for officers of the Confederacy led to a protest by the Union and to an embarrassed denial or distancing on the part of the Prussian government.⁵ The controversy did not end with the Civil War, but developed further with regard to the colonies. On 30 September 1890, shortly after his removal from office as Chancellor, Bismarck inspired an article in the *Hamburger Nachrichten* in which he distinguished between the slavery, cruel but now disappeared, in the southern United States, and the still existing slavery in the Muslim states, where the slave was basically a 'servant family member [*dienender Hausgenosse*]', well treated and content with his or her lot.⁶ Wilhelm II, on the other hand, became the target of Nietzsche's polemic and sarcasm, in which the philosopher criticised the Kaiser's enthusiastic engagement in the struggle for the liberation of the 'black domestic slaves [*Hausknechte*]' (*infra*, 17 § 3).

The debate also extended to the study of antiquity: in 1848 Henri Wallon published his *Histoire de l'esclavage dans l'antiquité*. In the long preface (a book within a book) he came out firmly in favour of the abolition of slavery in the

1 Renault 1971, Vol. 1, p. 89.

2 Hammer 1978, pp. 155, 295 f.; Warneck 1889, p. 36 f.

3 In Girardet 1983, p. 104.

4 Stolberg-Wernigerode 1933, pp. 60 f., 74.

5 Lutz 1911, p. 51.

6 Stolberg-Wernigerode 1933, p. 75.