

Proceedings of the Third Annual Gilder Lehrman Center International Conference at Yale University

## Sisterhood and Slavery: Transatlantic Antislavery and Women's Rights

October 25-28, 2001  
Yale University  
New Haven, Connecticut

### Women's Mobilization in the Era of Slave Emancipation: Some Anglo-French Comparisons

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In her recent history of European Feminisms Karen Offen discovers a significant linkage between slave emancipation and women's activism. As her principal evidence she notes the outburst of demands for women's political rights in 1848, immediately following the French Revolutionary government's proclamation of "universal" suffrage and slave emancipation. The connection purportedly harked back to the debates of the first French Revolution.<sup>1</sup>

Offen's wide-ranging survey of European developments, however, seems more reticent concerning the relationship between antislavery and women's mobilization in Britain. The most cursory glance at her opening chronological "Framework for the Study of European Feminisms," is particularly revealing. There is not a single entry denoting the history of British antislavery. The great series of campaigns from 1788 to 1838, and, of course, the role of British women does not warrant a single

entry. There are but three references to overseas slavery the "abolition (sic) of the slave trade at the Congress of Vienna in 1815; the [second] French abolition of colonial slavery in 1848; and US slave emancipation at the end of the Civil War in 1865. The sole reference to British antislavery (without reference to women) in the large book is a literally parenthetical remark that the aforementioned abolition of 1848 was "informed by earlier campaigns in England to end slavery"...<sup>2</sup>

European Feminisms, it should be noted, is an avowedly Francocentric account. It proceeds from the assumption that France was the leading nation in the development of feminism between 1790 and 1850. By way of contrast one might note the very different perspective emanating from the Anglo-American historiographic tradition. For example, Christine Bolt's comparative history of women's movements in the United States and Great Britain is intrinsically interwoven with their respective antislavery movements.<sup>3</sup> This divergence represents more than just a matter of picking one's paradigm nation, or one's preferred model of feminist development, or area of specialization. It reflects a substantive difference in the fortunes of antislavery and women's action in both countries for most of the century following the 1780s - the classic age of slave emancipation. Historiography can only benefit by a comparative approach that attempts to account for the differences in what turned out to be a convergent pattern only after the century of emancipation. Although I focus on Britain and France in this essay, these findings cast further light on what I have termed the "Anglo-American" and "Continental" variants of antislavery.<sup>4</sup>

## II Origins

I begin with two events that occurred almost simultaneously in Britain and France. Claire Midgley has perceptively identified the British campaign to abstain from slave-grown sugar as a major event in both the history of antislavery and of women's action. It helped to create a popular identification of sugar consumption and the Atlantic slave system. The campaign was also a major stepping stone in the development of female activism within the abolitionist movement. Abstentionism was launched in 1791, partially in reaction to Parliament's decisive defeat of Wilberforce's first motion to abolish the British slave trade. It was an attempt to overcome a failure in politics by action in the spheres of civil society and the market. The initiators of the movement believed that women were both susceptible to the message and essential to the campaign. Abstention did not overtly intrude into public space. It was an organized, unobtrusive and non-violent form of collective action. It did not even require the contentious gatherings that preceded other forms of antislavery agitation like national petitioning. The movement operated private encounters, door to door, family to family, and dinner table by dinner table.<sup>5</sup> In 1791-92, Thomas Clarkson, traveling the length and breadth of England and Wales in pursuit of a second mass petition, estimated that 300,000 persons of "all ranks," party preferences and denominations were participating. The boycott received press coverage in every major provincial town. The efficacy of women in linking sugar to slavery was widely recognized.<sup>6</sup>

Just as British abstentionism was peaking, in the winter of 1791-1792, women in France were also taking a prominent position in the sugar market. In January and February of 1792 Parisian citizens of the Faubourg Saint-Marceau, began a taxation populaire. They seized goods from a warehouse and sold it to members of the gathered crowd at the traditional "just price". The major novelty in this

particular taxation populaire, which had heralded many gatherings to come, was the principal item seized and sold - colonial sugar from the French Caribbean. This "sugar riot" triggered a chain of confrontations, arrests, trials and debate, from the local Assembly to the national Legislature. For our purposes, what distinguished the Parisian action was not its violent means, but its goal, to maximize popular consumption a product that contemporary abolitionist women were trying to get fellow Britons to renounce.<sup>7</sup>

The Parisian crowd, "above all the women, were most enraged" against having to pay double the price for an item that they had come to regard as an essential part of their consumption. Its use in colonial coffee kept them going until their late afternoon main meal.

At the more exalted (and affluent) Jacobin Society a speaker responded to the journée by asking his fellow patriots to take a collective patriotic oath to abstain from sugar, except in cases of illness, until the price fell to its normal level. According to one account, the galleries rose and cried with one voice: "Yes, yes we make this same commitment", and the Society ordered that this patriotic act be given an honorable mention in the minutes. What the crowd redistributed the patriots renounced. What neither they, nor anyone in the local or national assemblies, discussed, was the fact that the price rise had been caused by an unprecedented rising for liberty, in the world's most dynamic sugar colony. So silent are the sources on this theme that the most eminent historian of French Revolutionary crowds did not even mention the words slavery or slave revolution in his accounts of the sugar riots of 1792.<sup>8</sup>

In Britain a similar price rise occurred at the end of 1791. It stimulated much press criticism of

the sugar merchants and the "overprotected" planters. The latter, of course, had little need of immediate protection in the wake of the St. Domingue uprising. The British abstention campaign was not aided by the rise in the price of sugar. In fact, St. Domingue sounded the death knell for abstention as an effective political tactic, because many of the erstwhile consumers of French slave sugar on the Continent more than compensated the British sugar business any loss of abolitionist consumers.

British anti-saccharites were also more highly selective than their counterparts across the Channel. As a movement they primarily targeted the slave trade. They selected only one tropical product to boycott. And they never gave primacy of place to price.<sup>9</sup> At no point during the next half-century of battles against British slavery did British abolitionists, let alone its women's organizations, agitate for a free trade in sugar in order to maximize benefits to consumers. Sugar abstention was a strategically chosen target, designed to put maximum pressure on the British slave interest without doing irreparable harm to the British domestic economy. During Clarkson's campaign tour of 1791, Katherine Plymly responded to the discussion of the slave sugar boycott by asking the logical question. Why there was no parallel mobilization against cotton? Clarkson noted that the livelihood of a vast number of wage laborers depended upon its continued importation, whatever the source. Targeting cotton would have undermined the movement in all of the towns of Lancashire, a hardcore antislavery county. Clarkson could hardly have considered turning on the men and women of all classes in Manchester who had transformed abolitionism into a national mass movement.<sup>10</sup>

In the 1820s, abolitionist women would make a symbolic gesture to extend the boycott to cotton by stuffing antislavery pamphlets into workbags made of East India ("free labor") cotton, but sugar remained the main target of the movement. Only in the post-emancipation era, after the victory of

free trade over free-labor produce as a national policy, did a now marginalized women's antislavery expand the boycott movement to include cotton as well as sugar - to little effect. In none of these phases or variations did the abstentionist movement against slavegrown produce ever have a parallel in France.<sup>11</sup>

By 1792, then, the "problem of slavery" was already embedded in British political culture.<sup>12</sup> And women were present at the creation. In the fall of 1787 scattered sentiment against the slave trade was being transformed into public action. In Manchester, the pioneer urban center of that process, a special appeal to women was launched. Ladies were targeted as, and credited with, having an inherent sensitivity to the sufferings of slavery, especially its female victims. This male-sanctioned feminization of the abolitionist appeal may well have been designed to forestall an anticipated counterattack from Manchester's slaving interests. Yet, as Claire Midgley aptly concludes, Manchester's "feminization" of the abolitionist appeal was a theme that would remain integral both to women's writings on slavery and to the rhetoric of antislavery in general.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast, the Amis des Noirs, established in Paris 1788, were never able to replicate either the popularization or feminization of abolitionism within France. In Britain antislavery petitions flooded Parliament in 1788, and accounted for more than half of such documents. A comparison between the first British petition campaign and the Cahiers de doléances of 1789 underscores this disjuncture. In France, calls for taking any action whatsoever on the question of Atlantic slavery appeared in only a handful of general cahiers. Even such mentions were absent from the thousands of cahiers drawn up by

the peasantry. One would certainly not expect the cahiers to be dominated by slave-related items in documents voicing all the grievances in France. Nevertheless, concern with overseas slavery lagged behind almost every other form of unfreedom: prisons, galleys, serfs, corvees, etc. The only category whose condition seems to have aroused less specific concern in the cahiers was that of women. Gilbert Shapiro and John Markoff's exhaustive investigation of the cahiers ranked enfranchising women at the bottom of the table of subject frequencies: 1088 for the parish cahiers, 1121 and 1125 respectively for the Third Estate and the nobility.<sup>14</sup>

The comparative weakness of French antislavery is starkly revealed by the outcome of Thomas Clarkson's visit to Paris in 1789. He was attempting to stimulate the Amis to more vigorous public action. Clarkson hoped to set in motion a national petition campaign on the English model. He was dismayed to discover that his French counterparts also placed their hopes in a petition to the new French National Assembly- from the people of Britain. Clarkson correctly anticipated that external pressure would expose the French movement to the charge of submission to foreign influence. It was a charge that enemies of abolition were to use to good effect for the next five decades.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the fact that the ideological basis for women's emancipation stemmed from the same revolutionary principles that drove analogous movements for the rights of Jews and blacks, the fate of women's emancipation in France diverged sharply from that of colonial slaves. For almost two years after the sugar riots in Paris, women escalated demands for equality far more aggressively and publicly than anything that occurred across the Channel. French women were more militant than either of their Anglo-American counterparts. They were in the forefront of parades to the National Assembly demanding discussions of subsistence; they spectacularly marched to Versailles and brought the royal

family to Paris as virtual prisoners; they began to enter political clubs in 1790; they did not sit quietly in the galleries of political assemblies; they petitioned, contributed to journals and joined the mobilization of the nation in arms; and they formed fifty women's Jacobins Clubs in 1791-93. On the opposite side they also demonstrated against revolutionary religious and civil festivals; they boycotted the national clergy; they repaired churches;; they defended the traditional Church; and they helped to swing the tide against revolutionary radicalism.

Even among the majority of radical male revolutionaries, however, their commitment to civil equality did not include equal political rights for women. The most vociferous segment of the women's movement was briefly tied to the same political group that had founded the Amis des Noirs, reconstituted as the Circle Social. Unfortunately that group, the Girondins, were destined to perish under the attacks of the radicalized Jacobins. One of the charges against J.P. Brissot, a leader of the Amis, was convicted of having fomented rebellion in the colonies. Most of the former Amis were in prison, guillotined, or in flight by the Fall of 1793 and the Jacobins closed all women's clubs and their autonomous collective activity (November, 1793).<sup>16</sup>

By the time the Revolutionary Convention dramatically decreed colonial slave liberation in February of 1794, it had nothing to do with the defunct Amis, or manifestations of public support by women's groups. Emancipation was the ratification of the successful revolution by the slaves of Saint Domingue.<sup>17</sup> The freedmen of Haiti would ratify that emancipation by bloody conflict against French armies in 1803. The aftermath of the French Revolution therefore placed a heavy legacy on both French antislavery and women's activism. The position of French women following the Revolution was in some respects worse than before that upheaval, and France's only ex-slaves, after 1802, were



those who maintained their status by force of arms.<sup>18</sup>

## II. Continuities

The first half of the nineteenth century continued the dual burden with further cycles of revolution and reaction, and with similar effects on antislavery and women's movements in France. Between the late 1790s and the early 1830s there was no organized antislavery movement in France. The Abbe Gregoire, one of the few surviving supporters of blacks and women, was treated like a political pariah. Under considerable British pressure the twice restored Bourbon monarchy reluctantly agreed to prohibit the slave trade. Enforcement was consequently reluctant and retarded. Domestic abolitionist pressure on the French government was minimal. The Bourbons, and their Orleanist successor in 1830, were intent on both minimally accommodating the British and minimally rousing nationalist resentment against a colonial policy identified with British hegemony.<sup>19</sup>

However, in the wake of British slave emancipation in 1833, some French politicians deemed it imperative to prepare for an emancipation on their own colonial islands. A French Society for the Abolition of Slavery was formed a few months after the implementation of British emancipation in 1834. It consisted of, and largely remained, the preserve of a small group of notables meeting in Paris in tandem with the sessions of the French Chamber of Deputies. Until pressured by more radical and provincial individuals in the late 1840s it confined its activities to parliamentary debates and official

investigating committees. It made no effort to found provincial branches or to organize large scale propaganda campaigns.<sup>20</sup>

The first half of the nineteenth century reinforced the differential development foreshadowed by the early divergence between British and French antislavery. On the British side the story is now a familiar one. While Napoleon was forcing a second slavery on the French tropical colonies, the British antislavery began to revive. The abolition of the British slave trade was achieved in 1807. Under further British pressure, the great powers at the Congress of Vienna issued a joint declaration in favor of slave trade abolition. at the Congress of Vienna in 1815.<sup>21</sup> In 1823, the British Parliament resolved on the gradual abolition of its overseas slave system, and fulfilled that commitment in 1833 and 1838. Popular antislavery was integral to each legislative advances against both the slave trade and slavery . Abolitionists selectively successfully intervened in the general elections of 1806 and 1807 to seal the fate of the slave trade. Petitioning was revived as a mode of collective action, selectively in 1806, massively and nationally in 1814, 1823, 1830, 1833, and 1838. The movement developed more permanent local and national associations in the 1820. The more formal structures of communication, fund raising and agitation fostered the endurance of antislavery societies for generations after the formal ending of slavery in the 1830s and even of the transatlantic slave trade in the 1860s. The British antislavery society the became the world's oldest and most enduring non-governmental organization monitoring human rights.<sup>22</sup>

The women's component of this movement evolved in tandem with the growth and

development of British antislavery. But it did more than that. As Clare Midgley has abundantly demonstrated, women proceeded to feminize the British antislavery movement, organizationally, symbolically and ideologically.<sup>23</sup> Women participated only peripherally in the submission of early petitions, the hallmark of antislavery's distinctive power as a national and popular movement. The first generation of abolitionists clearly had a well-founded fear that female signatures might be used to popular delegitimize petitions. Yet women felt free to participate as canvassers for both signature and votes long before they could participate more directly in other political forms of agitation. By the time of the passage of slave trade abolition in 1807, women's canvassing was a signature activity of the movement<sup>24</sup> The evidence for the process of feminization is abundant from the earliest mobilizations in 1787-92, through the boycott campaigns of the mid-1820s and still more in the later and multiform activities of the 1840s and 1850s. What had been a family movement in the 1790s became a more gendered associational division of collective labor by the 1820s. Women's role in radicalizing abolitionism from "gradualism" to "immediatism" is well documented. The formation of autonomous women's locals is indicative of a growing feminine presence in the movement. The rate of associational growth on the eve of the climatic political mobilizations of 1830-1833 is especially impressive. In 1826 the ratio of male to female associations was eight to one. By 1831 it was only two to one. There is evidence that women's role reached its peak in the final anti-apprenticeship campaign of 1837-38. Thereafter ladies associations remained more active than their male counterparts during antislavery's declining decades of the 1840s and 1850s.<sup>25</sup> The most decisive evidence for the acceleration of women's participation lies in their takeover of British antislavery's signature institution, the mass national petition.

From 1788 to 1838 British abolitionists set the standard for what constituted a mass petition. They set the records in terms of numbers of petitions, of signatures and, above all, in their ability to outmobilize their opposition. That was the major reason why the news media universally acknowledged that public opinion had spoken definitively at each stage in the dismantling process . During the first four national petition campaigns (1788, 1792, 1814, and 1823) the signers were almost exclusively male. Thereafter, the direct participation of women became massive and decisive. The final breakthrough came in 1830, when Baptist and Methodist organs began to welcome and soon to plead for women's petitions. Separate signings obviated charges of illegitimacy raised against mixed gender petitions. Women innovated brilliantly in the presentation of petitions by maximizing the visual impact of their signatures. In May 1833, on the day scheduled for the introduction of the Emancipation Bill to the House of Commons, the largest single antislavery petition in history arrived at the doors of Parliament - "a huge featherbed of a petition." It was "hailed into the House by four members amidst shouts of applause and laughter." It bore 187,000 signatures "one vast and universal expression of feeling from all the females of the United Kingdom."<sup>26</sup>

As with the establishment of women's local societies, the proportion of women's signatures increased with each successive campaign. Probably 30 percent (c. 400,000) of the 1.3 million signers of the 1833 petitions for immediate emancipation were women. In 1837-1838 the 700,000 female signatures "addressed" to the Queen amounted to more than two-thirds of the 1.1 million signatures reaching the House of Commons. The female "address" from England and Wales, carrying 400,000

signatures was once again the most broadly single signed ever sent up from the country.<sup>27</sup>

In terms of an Anglo-French comparison, the number of British women's signatures gathered in each of those two years was probably greater than the total number of signatures on all reform petitions presented to the French Chamber of Deputies between the founding and overthrow of the July Monarchy (1830- 1848). The contrast between antislavery was still greater. Two modest French campaigns in 1844 and 1847 gathered about 21,000 signatures. In Britain the rate of women's antislavery signatures per thousand was well over twenty times the rate of Frenchmen and Frenchwomen combined. The large national antislavery women's petition of 1833 probably accrued nearly ten names for every antislavery signature in France between the re-establishment of France's second slavery in 1802 and the second emancipation in 1848.<sup>28</sup>

If British women's antislavery petitioning was overwhelming by comparison with that of French antislavery as whole, the woman to woman comparison is still more telling. The impact of English women's petitioning was not unknown in France. One of the earliest women's political journals took note of the mobilization of 1838. Individual women attempted to use one of their few political rights, the right to petition.<sup>29</sup> For the working-class antislavery petitions of 1844, the organizers welcomed female signatures. Their subscription lists included laundresses, dressmakers and milliners. One of the petitions contained the names of, what one French colonial agent disparagingly dubbed, "one hundred maidens." Obviously the evidence for women's participation was minuscule in proportion to the massive effort undertaken during the British antislavery campaigns of the 1830s.<sup>30</sup>

In the French campaign of 1847 another small "Petition from the women of Paris" was sent to the Chamber of Deputies. This document consciously followed the English precedent, using the wedge of shared empathy with female slaves to legitimate female participation. Victor Schoelcher, a prominent abolitionist and leader of the campaign, welcomed the petition, but sadly took note of the small number of signers. He remarked that French women hesitated to compromise themselves by "too eccentric" an act, and did not wish to have the "pretention of putting themselves forward." Schoelcher urged them to rival their sisters across the channel.<sup>31</sup> The women's petition was an exception but one that emphasized the rule—the difference between the roles of women in the two national movements. If French antislavery had two small women's petitions to its credit, its organizational history was still bleaker in one respect. From the formation of the Amis des Noirs in 1788, to the second emancipation sixty years later, there was no women's antislavery organization in France, nor any women's presence in the French Abolitionist Society. Schoelcher reprimanded French Catholic women, like the wife of a good friend, for lack of commitment to the abolitionist cause, in sharp contrast to the example of British and American women.<sup>32</sup>

The Revolution of 1848 brought no closing of the gap between antislavery and the women's movement. Victor Schoelcher convinced the Revolutionary Government to decree preparations for immediate slave emancipation on March 4, 1848. The following day the government decreed suffrage as the universal right of male citizens and the new source of constituent authority in the new French republic. A women's political club formed in the wake of two decrees. It seems to have focused on the male suffrage decree rather than slave emancipation as the primary grounds of its appeal to the

Provisional Government. There was apparently no political interaction between the newly formed Comité des Droits de la Femme and the Club des Amis des Noirs. Neither club is reported to have petitioned in support of the emancipatory demands, nor even taken notice, of the other.<sup>33</sup>

The women's Comité was certainly not among those petitioning Schoelcher's emancipation committee in March and April of 1848. As far as I can tell, the women's rights claimants grounded their demands for the suffrage on the example of the government's action in favor of proletarians not colonial slaves. For its part the Revolutionary Government also clearly separated its degrees of obligation, to French men and to slaves, from what was due to the rights demanded by the Parisian radical women. The government proclaimed the immediate abolition of slavery and universal male suffrage by revolutionary decree and on its own authority. The Provisional Government insisted, however, that the National Constituent Assembly, elected by male citizens, could alone decide on the enfranchisement of women.

The difference in its treatment of Frenchmen, and colonial slaves, on the one hand, and women on the other, is stark. Indeed, Schoelcher rushed to publish the of slave emancipation proclamation before the opening of the National Assembly. He admitted that he did so in order to forestall its possible postponement by the new Constituent Assembly.<sup>34</sup> Once more, slave emancipation and women's rights were handled quite differently by a French revolutionary government. These were also two significant differences between the political situations of the three affected groups. Although there was never evidence of broad national support for antislavery, emancipation had been on the French legislative agenda for at least a decade before 1848. The petition campaigns of 1844 and 1847 reinforced the impression that there was at least some popular momentum in favor of emancipation. Moreover, in

February 1848, supporters of colonial slaves, like those of the workers of Paris, could raise the specter of potential collective violence before an insecure revolutionary government.

Radical women had no presence, no record of recent public agitation and no credible threat of violence. Nor from the existing political record could they make the case that they represented the demands of French women at large. Women did rise in revolt alongside men when the Parisian National Workshops were closed in June 1848. The government's closure of all women's clubs during that same month triggered no mass resistance. Once again, the confirmation of French slave emancipation coincided almost perfectly with a parallel suppression of autonomous women's political activity.

### Aftermath

The post-emancipation pattern of women's relationship to antislavery in Britain and France continued the general pattern established over the half-century before their respective emancipations. Organizationally, French antislavery ceased to exist when the French, or rather Parisian Abolition Society suspended its operations. Louis Napoleon Bonaparte's coup d'etat of December 1851, only insured that many of abolitionism's former leaders were once again dispersed into physical or internal exile. The coincidence of the American Civil War and the gradual liberalization of the Second French Empire stimulated a revival of antislavery sentiment. The French protestant clergy launched a collective letter of support for the North. After Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, some Catholic Bishops urged their flocks to pray for American slaves.



In the wake of President Lincoln's assassination a French public campaign was launched in favor of a commemorative gold medal gift to be presented to his widow. After the campaign had attracted 40,000 subscribers, the government became alarmed over its potential domestic implications. The 40,000 names represented the largest mobilization in French history for a cause remotely connected to antislavery.<sup>35</sup> A second venture organized in the wake of the conflict was the formation of a fund-raising drive on behalf of the ex-slaves. In forming the French Freedman's Aid movement women's leadership finally came to the fore. Launched in June 1865 the movement's largest rally was held in Paris on November 3, 1865. Women now took the podium at an antislavery rally of 1,000 people. Madam Coignet, called for a national mobilization led by the females in the audience. In England, she noted, it was estimated that one woman was worth 132 men for propaganda and charitable purposes. The French women, could not yet match the capabilities of their more organized British sisters. The French group collected about \$10,000 as opposed to \$800,000 in Britain. Nevertheless, for the first time, in this (more charitable than political) campaign, Frenchwomen briefly assumed roles of national organizational leadership on behalf of newly freed slaves.<sup>36</sup> The antislavery and women's rights groups would finally converge, at least symbolically, when Victor Schoelcher became a leading speaker at the first women's rights banquet of the Third French Republic, in 1872.

Organized British antislavery continued to exist and to play a role in the generation following colonial slave emancipation. The British and Foreign Antislavery Society, the major heir of the earlier national movement, relied heavily on the local ladies' associations. They proved to be more durable and active than most of their male counterparts. The men's associations underwent a serious decline in the

1840s and 1850s. The areas in which females had predominated, such as fund-raising, boycotts and mobilizations for international activities, such as support for American antislavery, became the main focus of British abolitionists.<sup>37</sup>

Women were also responsible for the most massive antislavery action in Britain during the 1850s. In response to Harriet Beecher Stowe's triumphal visit to Britain, British women launched two Addresses to "...Their Sisters, the Women of the United States of America" in November 1852. Although one of the addresses was criticized by the established antislavery movement for its failure to insist on immediatism, and both were criticized by most of the British press for their interference in the explosive politics of another nation, these addresses constituted the major abolitionist popular mobilization of the post-emancipation generation. No male or mixed gender address or petition in Britain remotely approached their combined numbers of more than 750,000 women. It was the last great mass harvest of names in the history of British antislavery and authoritatively 100 per cent female.<sup>38</sup> The address and the multiple lesser actions of women in support of antislavery policies in America, Africa, and Asia had no parallel in France. Indeed, in their geographic scope they had no parallel in any other national movement during the half century after 1820.

#### IV Antislavery and women's movements

A comparison of women's national mobilizations within the framework of antislavery can help us to explore a number of important historical issues. Women's entry into public space in modern Europe was inevitably conditioned by gendered asymmetries of power and culture. If women were to find a

new place within a civil and political society of equal citizens they had to come to terms with both the opportunities and constraints opened up to them in specific situations. In the case of Britain abolitionism initially imposed many of the traditional constraints involved in all other political activities. Men held and would continue to hold on to the commanding heights of national prominence within national legislatures and within the non-governmental associations that conducted the extra-parliamentary campaigns.

Nevertheless, antislavery offered peculiar opportunities for the insertion of women into the processes of popular mobilization.. Everywhere the perceived attributions of women could be used to rationalize both women's participation and a particular ideological strategy. Overseas slavery differed from all forms of labor in Europe in two major respects. Its formation resulted from the forced and massive destruction of the family, the sphere of social life most easily identified as women's space. Secondly, slavery subjected women's bodies to a degree of sexual control and disciplinary control unmatched in Western Europe. Masters could routinely escape punishments in the treatment of overseas slaves for acts that would have cost them their liberty or their lives in the metropolis.

Some historians have seen this ideological opening as a low equilibrium trap, rather than as an opportunity. It reinforced the conservative male-dominated separate-spheres hierarchy. It separated middle-class antislavery activists from their sisters in the working classes both at home and overseas, retarding the development of more fundamental challenges to the patriarchal hierarchy of European society. If one confines the history of women in slave emancipations to Anglo-America it may be difficult to decide where the balance of costs and benefits to lay in relation to the emancipation of

European women. (I set to one side the issue of the contribution of "separate spheres" to colonial women, although I think that it was probably most helpful to slave women immediately before and after their emancipation).<sup>39</sup>

Expanding the comparative perspective beyond Anglo-America casts the results of massive women's involvement antislavery in a different light. The tangible activities of women in British antislavery constitutes crucial evidence for Linda Colley's thesis of the role of British women in simultaneously forging the British nation, while forging a public role for themselves, between the American Revolution and the accession of Queen Victoria. It would not be impossible to imagine a historian of France (or Spain, the Netherlands, or Portugal) c. 1750-1850, calling one section of a chapter on nation-building, "Womanpower", or another, "A Woman's Place is in the Nation."<sup>40</sup> But it is difficult to imagine the history of antislavery as one of the major building blocks in the schema of any historian of a Continental nation.

Even in Britain the road was uphill. As late as 1829, a British Peer, introducing a petition signed by "a great many ladies," could have the petition instantly ridiculed by another noble Lord inquiring "whether the petition expressed the sentiments of young or old ladies." Just four years later Daniel O'Connell, with the great mass of antislavery women's names on the table of the House of Commons, could mobilize both the old habits of mockery and the new ideology of 'separate spheres' to shame opponents into respectful silence:

He [O'Connell] would say - and he cared not who the person was of whom he said it - he would that that person had had the audacity to taunt the

maids and matrons of England with the offence of demanding that their fellow-subjects in another clime should be emancipated. He would say nothing of the bad taste and the bad feeling which such a taunt betrayed - he would merely confine himself to the expression of an opinion, in which he was sure that every Member of that House would concur with him, namely, that if ever females had a right to interfere, it was upon that occasion. Assuredly, the crying grievance of slavery must have sunk deep into the hearts, and strongly excited the feelings of the British nation, before the females of this country could have laid aside the retiredness of their character to come forward and interfere in political matters...and, he hesitated not to say, that the man, whoever he might be, who had taunted the females of Great Britain with having petitioned Parliament - the man who could do that, was almost as great a ruffian as the wielder of the cart-whip.<sup>41</sup>

Not a single Member of Parliament was prepared to risk responding with either humor or disapproval. Even those, like William Cobbett, who resented the interference of "187,000 ladies" almost as much as he detested abolitionists and blacks alike, had to await a more convenient and less solemn moment to scold the ladies for their foolish abuse of political power.<sup>42</sup>

In France the same traditions and sneers could not be breached by antislavery. Women

hesitated to use same cultural artifacts at hand to further either their own interests or those of their overseas brothers and sisters. French antislavery never became sufficiently embedded as part of the national culture and organization to make it either a pathway to the exercise of power or to allow women to gain organizational experience. In Britain antislavery was part of what it never was in France, the vanguard of a new mode of collective action. In the half century before British slave emancipation, British popular contention switched from older forms, still exemplified by the Paris sugar riots of 1792, to a new repertoire of public meetings, demonstrations, and special interest associations, while using newspapers to project their demands onto a national and international stage.<sup>43</sup> Antislavery was a primary example of that transformation. Indeed, British antislavery made a successful "new mobilization" look all too easy.<sup>44</sup> In France, the crucial changes in forms of popular contention became standard instruments of popular policy only in the 1840s and 1850s. Harbingers of popular French antislavery were nipped in the bud by both the Revolution and the Emancipation of 1848.

More was involved in the intertwining of a British women's movement and antislavery than a new mode of contention. The development of the modern social movement was embedded in a larger transformation - a new form of civil society. In the 1830s Alexis de Tocqueville observed with astonishment the enormous use that Americans made of political associations. But American political associations seemed to be only one variety amidst an immense proliferation of civil associations. People of "all ages, all conditions, all minds," he wrote, were constantly uniting, not only for commercial and industrial undertakings, but for matters religious and moral, solemn, and frivolous - to create festivals and seminaries, to distribute books to the unread and missionaries to the antipodes. Along with

the free circulation of ideas in newspapers, the right of acting in common struck Tocqueville as "almost as inalienable in its nature as individual freedom."<sup>45</sup>

The development of voluntary associations was not confined to the United States, nor was it entirely new. Rapid economic development, combined with a reduction of governmental authority and the decline of governmental censorship in Britain produced the conditions for a rapid expansion of newspapers and voluntary associations in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. The number of clubs in Britain tripled between the 1760s and the 1790s. In the Anglo-American world as a whole, their number stood at around 6,500 at the time of the abolitionist explosion.<sup>46</sup>

By contrast, the expansion of voluntary associations was hampered both by government and civil institutions in eighteenth-century Continental Europe. French governmental control over the formation of associations remained far stronger than in England. New forms of association in religion and welfare areas were also hampered by the institutional dominance of the Catholic Church. Competition from still vital networks of confraternities and journeymen campagnonages added to the difficulties entailed in creating of new forms of association.<sup>47</sup> The pattern changed during the three generations after the French Revolution, but not always such a way as to encourage the development of enduring associations. The revolutions of 1789, 1830, and 1848 exponentially expanded the number of clubs, especially in the political arena. The longer lasting periods of repression that followed them, however, dramatically curtailed that potential. The turbulence of the "Aassociational revolution" in France only reinforced the linkage of voluntary associations with instability and violence.

Even where the French pattern of dramatic expansion and repression was absent, Continental

antislavery societies exhibited a pattern of inhibited female participation. In the Netherlands, as in France, women's participation was restricted to charitable organizations for aid to slaves and ex-slaves. South of the Pyrenees, in 1865, the newly formed Spanish Abolition Society published a series of letters from British women's antislavery societies to the "Ladies of Madrid." Spanish women were advised to exercise influence over their male relations in favor of emancipation. Harriet Brewster de Vizcarrondo, the North American wife of a Puerto Rican abolitionist in Madrid, organized an ephemeral woman's chapter of the Spanish Society.<sup>48</sup>

Already by 1800, an increasing variety of clubs in Britain, including debating and mutual benefit societies, had been opened to or created by women. However, women's organizations remained a small fraction of all-male counterparts throughout the age of Anglo- American abolitionism. Thus the path to feminine participation was open but narrow. The main advance came with the nineteenth-century upsurge of public subscription associations, of which the Manchester abolition society of 1787 was a harbinger. These more structured societies could and did accommodate numbers of women as participants or in auxiliary branch units.<sup>49</sup>

One must carefully distinguish between the right to participate and alter the policies in voluntary associations and the ability to hold formal power within them. Some associations, and women's antislavery organizations foremost among them, offered women opportunities to create institutions, to master the arts of debating, formulating resolutions, holding office, negotiating with other branches, and forming contacts and alliances at the local, national and international level. In short, it was



a major pathway in the formation of what might be called feminine social capital, the art of building effective networks, coalitions and leaders.<sup>50</sup> The full quantitative and qualitative evaluation of antislavery as a mechanism for the production of social capital still awaits its historian or social scientist. We already have sufficient evidence however, to savour one irony. Tocqueville carefully segregated his commentaries on women's political role in democracies from his encomiums on associations. Yet he ended his fervent hymn to voluntary organizations by feminizing it: "the science of association is the mother science; the progress of all the others depends on the progress of that one."<sup>51</sup>

The advances of antislavery women toward, if not into possession of national power involved clear constraints as well as opportunities. It has been widely noted that English women activists were less inclined to form more radical feminist associations from the 1830s to the early 1850s than were those in France and the United States.<sup>52</sup> Radical English feminists had to "go international" linking up with counterparts in France or America. Neither the rebuff to American abolitionists at the International Antislavery Conference in London in 1840, nor the Revolutions of 1848 on the Continent immediately caused Britons to form a woman's group with a specifically women's rights agenda. Was it, as some have speculated, because, absent the "heat" generated by revolution, British women were too conservative, or too bloated with pride in their political and industrial systems, and "a unique sense of national superiority"? Or, lacking the stimulus of revolution, were they simply unable to get over the personal animosities that women transcended in the United States, France and Germany?<sup>53</sup>

There might be more plausible ways to explain the failure of British women to imitate some

of their American sisters immediately after they were refused official seats at the World Convention in London in 1840. The hesitancy of British antislavery women did not stem from nationalist pride in their political or economic system. It was rooted in their deep investment in a spectacular demonstration of their own efficacy within the most successful antislavery movement in the world. Some were more impressed by the disruptiveness of the "woman question" to antislavery in the United States immediately after the 1840 convention. Their power and commitment acted as a pragmatic check on their feminism.<sup>54</sup> British women still found ample room to extend their range of associational skills in the ever-broadening range of social problems being addressed by voluntary associations in a state officially committed to laissez-faire in both economy and society. As Sir James Stephen, British antislavery's long-term insider at the Colonial Office wrote in 1849, there was now "an association for every sorrow."<sup>55</sup>

There was also a cultural and class bias among most British antislavery advocates of both genders that limited the appeal of some types of radical affiliations and French-style agitational forms. The confrontational language adopted by some feminist agitators in France and the confrontational street tactics of black women in the Caribbean were both alien to them. The rhetorics of the victimized colonial slave and of feminine domesticity, well served the goals of both West Indian slaves and abolitionists before 1838. Post- emancipation reports of female-led confrontations in the churches and streets of Jamaica and on the barricades of Paris were at odds with both of these ideal types.<sup>56</sup> So, while British women rallied against the excesses of Governor Eyre after the suppression of the Morant Bay uprising in 1865, other women rallied to support the other side. This did not occur in the 1820s

and 1830s. The Freedman's Aid Movement split over the decision to send help to Jamaica as well as the USA. Women's meetings condemning military behavior also routinely condemned murders by the rioters.<sup>57</sup>

In assessing the constraints on radical action fostered by antislavery, one must also note its relative insignificance in comparative perspective. In the three generations after the rise of abolitionism in Britain feminism failed to achieve mass support in France. In the wake of four major revolutionary surges in France between the 1780s and the 1870s the women's movement remained the concern of a small, divided minority. Far more women were organized under the banner of traditional religious institutions than of secular feminists of all varieties combined. Lack of an antislavery movement, and of a tangible female presence within it, availed the often resurrected women's movements very little. Well into the fourth quarter of the nineteenth century French men and women who wished to rally around a feminist banner found inspiration across the Channel, in the same region that had once formed the heartland of British antislavery. After all, between the end of the American Civil War and the consolidation of the French Third Republic at the end of the 1870s, British suffragists sent close to 1,000 petitions and over three million signatures up to Parliament.<sup>58</sup>

The great crusade against slavery had probably helped to foster the emancipation of women in many ways we have yet to discover. Comparatively speaking, it hindered that process very little. Taking a longer and broader view of Atlantic slavery in the age of slave emancipation, one conclusion

seems warranted. Where popular antislavery flourished women's participation generally flourished.

Where antislavery associations encountered a hostile or repressive environment receptivity to women's movements was usually nasty, boorish, and short-tempered.

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1 - Karen Offen, European Feminisms 1700 - 1950: A Political History (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 109. As far as I can determine the radical women of 1848 sought inspiration in their Revolutionary metropolitan forebears, not in colonial slaves or Caribbean slaves of either gender. See Laura S. Struminger, "Looking Back: Women of 1848 and the Heritage of 1789", in Women and Politics in the Age of Revolution, eds. Harriet B. Applewhite and Darlene G. Levy (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1990), 259-285.

2- Offen, European Feminisms, "Chronology", xx-xxii and, 109. See also Offen, "Women and the Question of 'Universal Suffrage' in 1848: A Transatlantic Comparison of Suffragist Rhetoric," NWSA Journal, 11:1 (Spring, 1999), 150-177. European Feminisms also aspires to be a comprehensive and comparative account of the phenomenon reviewed.

3 - Christine Bolt, The Women's Movement in the United States and Britain from the 1790s to the 1920s (Amherst Mass: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 4 ff.

4 - Seymour Drescher, "Two Variants of Anti-Slavery: Religious Organization and Social Mobilization in Britain and France, 1780-1870," in Anti-Slavery, Religion and Reform, ed Christine Bolt and Seymour Drescher (Hamden, Conn: Archon Books, 1980), 43-63.

5 - Clare Midgley, Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780-1870 (London: Routledge, 1992) esp. 35-40, 49-50; and Midgley, "Slave Sugar Boycotts, Female Activism and the Domestic

Base of British Anti-Slavery Culture," Slavery and Abolition 17:3 (December, 1996), 137-162.

6 - In addition to Midgely's see Thomas Clarkson, The History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade by the British Parliament 2 vols. (London: Longman, etc. 1808), II, 350.

7 - See Women in Revolutionary Paris 1789-1795, ed. Darlene Gay Levy, et al (Urbana, Ill: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 103-122.

8 - Ibid 111-113; 115-118. Cf. also George Rudé, The Crowd in the French Revolution (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 95-98.

9 - See Seymour Drescher, Capitalism and Antislavery (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 78-79, 217 n. 54; Drescher, Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977) 116 and 247n.

10 - See Salop County Record Office, "Katherine Plymly Diaries, 1791-1814," vol 5, entry of 27 February, 1792. On the significance of Manchester, see Drescher, Capitalism and Antislavery, 67-77, 82-83; Drescher, "Whose Abolition? Popular Pressure and the ending of the British Slave Trade" Past and Present, 143 (May, 1994), 136-166, esp, 142-144; Midgley, Women Against Slavery 18-19.

11 - See Midgley, "Slave Sugar Boycotts, 142-150; Midgley, Women Against Slavery, 43-50.

12 - See also, Charlotte Sussman, Consuming Anxieties: Consumer Protest, Gender, and British Slavery, 1713-1833 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000). See also David Brion Davis, The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture [1966] 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) preface.

13 - Midgley, Women Against Slavery, 19-20.

14 - See Drescher, Capitalism and Antislavery, 53-54; and Gilbert Shapiro and John Markoff, Revolutionary Demands: A Content Analysis of the Cahiers de Doleances of 1789 (Stanford, 1998), Appendix I.

15 - Clarkson, Rise,

16 - See, inter alia, Daniel P. Resnick, "The Sociétié des Amis des Noirs and the Abolition of Slavery," French Historical Studies 7 (1972), 558-569; Valerie Quinney, "Decisions on Slavery, the Slave Trade and Civil Rights for Negroes in the Early French Revolution," Journal of Negro History 55 (1970), 117-30; Yves Bénot, La Revolution Française et la fin des colonies (Paris: La Decouverte, 1988); Gary Kates, The Cercle Social, the Girondins, and the French Revolution (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 214-219. On women, see inter alia, the essays of Dominique Godineau, Harriet Applegate, Darlene Levy, and Gary Kates in Women and Politics in the Age of the Democratic

Revolution, op.cit.

17 - Bénot, La Revolution, ch 7; Carolyn Fick, The Making of Haiti: The Saint Dominique Revolution From Below (Knoxville TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1990); D. B. Gaspar and D. P. Geggus eds. A Turbulent Time: The French Revolution and the Greater Caribbean (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1997).

18 - Candice E. Proctor, Women, Equality and the French Revolution (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990) ch 10.

19 - See Ruth F. Necheles, The Abbé Grégoire 1788-1831: The Odyssey of an Egalitarian (Westport, 1971); Paul Michael Kielstra, The Politics of Slave Trade Suppression in Britain and France, 1814-48: Diplomacy, Morality and Economics (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).

20 - Lawrence C. Jennings, French Anti-Slavery: The Movement for the Abolition of Slavery in France, 1802-1848 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

21 - Kielstra, The Politics of the Slave Trade, ch 2; Betty Fladeland, "Abolitionist Pressure on the Concert of Europe, 1814 - 1822," Journal of Modern History 38 (1966), 355-373.

22 - Peter Dixon, "The Politics of Emancipation: The Movement for the Abolition of Slavery in the



British West Indies, 1807 - 1833, Oxford University D. Phil thesis, 1971; Seymour Drescher, Capitalism and Antislavery: British Mobilization in Comparative Perspective, chaps. 3-5.

23 - Clare Midgley, Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780-1870 (London: Routledge, 1992), ch 2-3. on the ideological dimensions of that feminization, see ibid ch 1 and Moira Ferguson, Subject to Others: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1670-1834 (London, 1992).

24 - Seymour Drescher, "Whose Abolition? Popular Pressure and the Ending of the British Slave Trade," Past and Present, 143 (May 1994), 136-166.

25 - Midgley, Women Against Slavery, 45, 51, 174.

26 - Ibid, 62-66.

27 - Seymour Drescher, From Slavery to Freedom: Comparative Studies in the Rise and Fall of Atlantic Slavery, 44-46; 57-77.

28 - Ibid, 62-64.

29 - Claire Goldberg Moses, French Feminism in the Nineteenth Century (Albany: SUNY Press, 1984), 104-105.

30- Drescher, Capitalism and Antislavery, 240n.; Jennings, French Anti-Slavery, 199.

31- Ibid, 239. A special plea for petitions was addressed to women by the provincial French abolitionist, Guillaume de Felice, Emancipation immmediate et complete des esclaves: Appel aux abolitionistes (Paris :Delay, 1846 ).

32- Jennings, French Anti-Slavery, 239.

33 - For the Club des Amis des Noirs see Drescher, From Slavery to Freedom, 180, 193n 60; For the Droits de la Femme I have relied on the documents published by Karen Offen, in "Women and the Question of Universal Suffrage," 150-177. David Barry, in Women and Political Insurgency: France in the Mid-Nineteenth Century, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996) refers to 20 revolutionary clubs, but not the Amis des Noirs. Neither slavery nor Victor Schoelcher appear in the index.

34 - See Offen, European Feminisms, 111. It would be interesting to see whether the Parisian women's newspapers supported Schoelcher when he ran for a seat from Paris to the Constituent Assembly in the Spring of 1848. I doubt it. He was not supported by the electoral coalition of workers' corporations and radical clubs, and he was charged with focusing on slave liberation rather than universal

emancipation. See Drescher, From Slavery to Freedom, 181, 193 n. 58.

35 - Serge Gavronsky, The French Liberal Opposition and the American Civil War (New York, 1968), 186.

36 - Le Lien 16 December 1865; 16 January 1866; 5 June 1867. As far as I can determine this was the first public antislavery manifestation in which women were the initiators and speakers.

37 - Midgley, Women Against Slavery, 124-127.

38 - Ibid, 148-149;

39 - Mimi Sheller, Quasheba, mother, queen: black women's public leadership and protest in postemancipation Jamaica, 1834-1865", Slavery and Abolition, 19 (Dec. 1998) 90-117.

40 - Linda Colley, Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), ch 6, and 350-360.

41 - Ibid, 279-280.

42 - Drescher, Capitalism and Antislavery

43 - Charles Tilly, Popular Contention in Great Britain 1758-1834 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1994), ch 2.

44 - David Brion Davis, Slavery and Human Progress (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 168-230.

45 - Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Debra Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 184, 489.

46 - Peter Clark, British Clubs and Societies 1580-1800: The Origins of an Ancestral World (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 128, Fig 4.1.

47 - Ibid, 18.

48 - Christopher Schmidt-Nowara, Empire and Antislavery: Spain, Cuba and Puerto Rico, 1833-1874 (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999), 91-97, 117-118.

49 - Clark, British Clubs, 130-132; 198-199.

50 - On Manchester, See Midgley, Women Against Slavery, 18-19; Christine Bolt, Women's Movements,

51 - Tocqueville, Democracy, 492.

52 - Midgley, Women Against Slavery, 157.

53 - Bonnie S. Anderson, "The Lid Comes off: International Radical Feminism and the Revolutions of 1848," NWSA Journal vol 10(2) (1998), 1-12, esp. 8.

54 - Bolt, Women's Movements, 68 - 69

55 - Clark, British Clubs, 471.

56 - Midgley, Women Against Slavery, 190-194.

57 - Midgley, Women Against Slavery, 192.

58 - See Sophia A van Wingerden, The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain, 1866-1928 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).