

Abstract from the Eighth Annual Gilder Lehrman Center International Conference at Yale University

Slavery and Public History: An International Symposium

November 2-4, 2006
Yale University
New Haven, Connecticut

Public Remembrance of Slavery and the Slave Trade in the French Caribbean

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Available online at www.yale.edu/glc/publichistory/giraud.pdf

Remembrance is not history - even though the subjectivity of those writing the latter can never be entirely suppressed. This distinction is a statement of the obvious, not a problem. The problem lies in remembrance champions' pretence (although remembrance brings about all sorts of value judgements) to disseminating historical knowledge. This is particularly the case when one tends to make remembrance a duty and a norm, sometimes going as far as starting dubious legal proceedings in its name.

I have come across this problem in the particular socio-historical context of Guadeloupe and Martinique, two *départements* of the French Republic. This context is mainly characterised by traditions based on the assimilationist ideology, which is allegedly the trademark of colonisation *à la française*, and which is thought to have led to the systematic hiding of these Caribbean societies' slavery past.

As a result there has recently emerged in the French Caribbean – often regardless of facts widely ignored because little studied – a discourse postulating widespread denial of that past, which tends to become « gospel ». Behind this discourse, there is in my view an attempt to reformulate the old claim to national independence in a context and at a time when it has lost a great deal of credibility and attraction among Antillean populations.

In order to fight such utilization of the slave past and to bring objective foundations to the debates that accompany it, it had become imperative to undertake

a field survey of effective memories shared by all those who, in Guadeloupe and in Martinique, have inherited them. Laurent Dubois and I have devoted these past months to such a survey.

The first findings of our survey show how diverse and profoundly complex the relations the Antillese have with their tragic past are, as well as how varied are the issues discussed in relation to the so called moral and political obligation of remembrance. All these things revealing the assumed widespread denial of slavery in the French Caribbean for what it is: an unfounded assumption.