

# Scholarship and political correctness: popular and unpopular views on forced labour in the Atlantic during the era of European expansion, 1500–1850

Pieter Emmer<sup>1</sup>

Department of History, University of Leiden, The Netherlands

## Introduction

All things of value are defenceless and that goes for scholarship as well. Usually, the free flow of scholarly research has been endangered by a variety of reasons. The classic example is the story of Galileo Galilei, who had to renounce his views that the earth circled the sun and not vice versa. More recently, in The Netherlands, a *cause célèbre* was that of Professor Wouter Buikhuizen, a criminologist. When he was appointed at Leiden University, he announced that he would start a research programme to explain criminal behaviour by studying biological rather than environmental factors. Several of his staff together with some influential journalists waged a vendetta against these plans and in the end Professor Buikhuizen had to resign and he now lives in Spain as a successful antique dealer [1].

Political pressures to produce results that are in line with the demands of governments, religious organizations, pressure groups or political ideologies have been with us for a long time and will continue to exercise considerable influence on scholarship in the future. Again, I remember a case in The Netherlands, where a professor of chemistry at the technical university in Eindhoven had discovered a cure against AIDS. Obviously, the researcher had fallen victim to the challenge to be the first to present a remedy. As no other scholar was able to duplicate the experiment, the professor was forced into early retirement [2].

When it was first thought that the Mexican ‘swine-flu’ of 2009 would become pandemic, patients who contracted the virus could not be protected by a specific vaccine, as that was still in the making. Instead, they were given Tamiflu, a drug against any type of flu. However, recently, a researcher has pointed out that the positive effects of that drug were never proven beyond doubt and that the major study advocating the positive results of this vaccine was financed by the firm producing... Tamiflu. No doubt, there are many more such examples in

<sup>1</sup>Email: p.c.emmer@hum.leidenuniv.nl

the medical world as the amounts of money to be gained (and lost) in the drug industry are indeed remarkable [3].

Another interesting result of politically incorrect medical scholarship was the publication of an article by a Dutch medical scientist showing that the brain formation of homosexual men deviated slightly from that of heterosexuals. One night his private residence was attacked and most of the windows on the ground floor of his house were broken that evening [4].

## Political correctness and Atlantic history

Perhaps more so than other fields of scholarship, history is prone to fall victim to ideological pressures such as nationalism, socialism and fascism. The Third World uses history in order to explain its present predicament. The latter is of particular importance for the history of the Atlantic world as in no other area did such clear divisions between losers and winners come into existence. Tropical Africa is perhaps the poorest region in the world, whereas the opposite is true for North America. That divide must have historical roots. The underdevelopment of Africa and the low socio-economic status of blacks in the New World are often linked to the European slave trade. African countries as well as groups of blacks have claimed reparations from the West for the harm done to their nations and forefathers. In fact, Martin Luther King had set the tone for such claims by calling the slave trade and the period of slavery “the black Holocaust”. Popular interest in the history of the slave trade and slavery is most pronounced in the U.S. as blacks constitute the largest minority in that country. Some years ago, Louis Farrakhan, leader of the Nation of Islam in the U.S., claimed that Jews were heavily involved in the slave trade and, in an unprecedented step, the American Historical Association issued a statement that there existed no evidence to support this claim [5].

In France, the history of the slave trade hit the headlines in a different manner. In quick succession, French parliament adopted a set of laws threatening to prosecute: (i) those who denied the fact that the Turkish treatment of its Armenian minority was anything else but genocide; (ii) those who denied the existence of the holocaust; and (iii) those who denied that the Atlantic slave trade was a crime against humanity. The latter law was called the ‘Loi Taubira’ after the deputy for French Guiana, who introduced it. In a remarkable turnabout a year or so later, the lower house in the French parliament adopted a law that encouraged history teachers at secondary schools to talk about the positive impact of French colonialism. However, that law was never signed by the then French president Jacques Chirac.

These laws would have had no effect on everyday life in France, if it had not been for the fact that a young historian attached to the small provincial university of South Brittany, Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau, wrote a highly acclaimed study of the African slave trades (*Les traites négrières*) comparing the Atlantic slave trade dominated by Europeans and Americans to the internal African slave trade conducted by Africans and the trade in African slaves dominated by Muslim traders [6]. With reference to the Loi Taubira a complaint was lodged in

a Paris court, because this book denied the uniqueness of the Atlantic slave trade as genocide. Fortunately, the complaint was later withdrawn, I suppose because several scholars of international repute had written statements asserting that a comparison between the various slave trades was a normal scholarly acceptable method. As a result, a leading French historian, Pierre Nora, founded the society 'Liberté pour l'histoire' (Freedom for History) that gained massive support from professional historians all over the world [7].

### **The clash between popular and scholarly history: Africa and the impact of the European slave trade**

In the history of the Atlantic, there is a growing gap between 'popular history' and history with a high degree of political correctness on the one side and scholarly history on the other. I will demonstrate this by discussing briefly the impact of the Atlantic slave trade on the economic and social development of Africa.

In the politically correct story, the dramatic impact of the European demand for slaves on the African societies is stressed, in spite of the fact that slaves had a far larger internal market in Africa. African slavery, however, was reputed to have been much more benign than and radically different from the type of slavery existing in the European colonial world. In virtually every aspect of that trade the Africans lost out. First of all, it seems unlikely that the Africans, who sold slaves to the Europeans, had any idea about the future life of these slaves at the other side of the Atlantic. Secondly, the slaves were exchanged for trinkets and valueless barter products and that was seen as proof of the fact that the Africans were the weaker party in this trade and that Africa received virtually nothing in return for the forced export of its best people. Thirdly, the slave trade affected the demography of Africa in many more ways than the numbers could tell. Africa lost more men than women and that impacted negatively on Africa's population. In addition, the slaves ferried across the Atlantic had been the best and the healthiest, in the prime of their lives. That showed that the slave trade not only depleted the African population, but also affected the demographic composition of the remaining population negatively as the best had gone. And last but not least, the barter products that Europe introduced into Africa in exchange for the slaves caused more harm than would appear at first sight. The guns that were exchanged for slaves were brought to Africa on purpose as their use increased the number of conflicts, interstate wars and civil wars, and increased the number of prisoners of war in Africa, who in turn could be enslaved and sold to the Europeans. In addition to this gun-slave cycle, the Europeans destroyed the nascent African textile and iron industries by importing ready-made textiles and iron into Africa in exchange for slaves. In sum, the Atlantic slave trade 'underdeveloped' tropical Africa and that is why that continent is as poor as it is today. Without the Atlantic slave trade, not Europe, but tropical Africa might have been the leader in economic growth in the world. However, due to the Atlantic slave trade Africa experienced depopulation and in sparsely populated areas it is difficult to develop a good infrastructure for transportation and urbanization, both vital prerequisites for an industrial take-off [8].

This politically correct view of history has had a long tenure and the government of Nigeria has actually claimed reparations from the West for the slave trade, whereas Ghana and Benin have done the opposite and apologized for their involvement in the slave trade. Which position is supported by recent scholarly research? Much of our recent information comes from the slave trade database, a project headed by David Eltis at Emory University [9]. It provides information on virtually every slave ship that crossed the Atlantic. Slaves were expensive objects of trade and in Western culture large investments usually require careful administration. That is why virtually all of the information incorporated in the slave trade database comes from the archives of shipping firms, port authorities, tax collectors and various government departments.

The first outcome of the new database stresses African agency in the trade. The slave trade database has destroyed the idea that the powerful Europeans and Americans dominated the supply of slaves in Africa. Had the Europeans dominated the trade, they would have bought most of their slaves in those parts of coastal West Africa that were closest to the New World. That would have reduced the risks during the infamous Middle Passage between Africa and the areas in the New World, where most of the slaves were sold. In reality, most slaves were offered for sale on those sections of the African coast that were much further away from the shores of the New World, usually had no harbours and required crossing latitudes with frequent doldrums, prolonging the period in which the slaves were bought, as well as the passage to the New World, both of which impacted negatively on slave mortality.

More proof of the dominating importance of African agency is the sexual composition of the slaves offered for sale. If the Europeans had their way, they would have bought mainly men. In reality, however, the Europeans were forced to buy increasing numbers of women and children. As a result the percentage of women among the slaves was more than 50% higher than among the migrants from Europe going to the New World during the same period; more than 90% of the children entering the New World came from Africa. As a result, the sexual division of labour in those areas in the New World, where many slaves had been landed, was more akin to African than to European practice.

Another remarkable outcome of the massive effort to document all slave voyages is the new information on mortality during the voyage. In the political correct view of the slave trade, the explanation for the staggeringly high mortality during the Middle Passage (60 per 1000 for every 30 days) was disinterest in the life of the Africans among the crews of the slave ships. Had these crews been more attentive to the needs of the slaves, many more lives could have been saved. The slave trade database, however, shows that the rate of mortality is directly linked to the place on the African coast where the slaves had been purchased. The physical condition in which the slaves boarded the ships was vital for their survival. It seems doubtful whether the training of the surgeons on board and the number of slaves carried per ton made much of a difference [10].

Another feature of the politically correct interpretation of African history is underdevelopment. The idea behind this term is that while European countries were able to develop and show economic growth, Africa was 'underdeveloped' by the commercial contacts with the Europeans. Many African historians and a

number of European specialists are convinced that the import of European goods at the time of the slave trade was damaging for Africa. What arguments do they put forward? In the first place they point out that only ready-made, useless and even harmful goods were imported into Africa at that time. In any case, no products were imported that required reworking and thus might have stimulated African craftsmanship. Large-scale imports of textiles prevented Africa from developing a textile industry of its own. At first sight that may not seem so important, but some Africa specialists disagree. They point out that in Europe the need for textiles provided the stimulus for mechanized spinning and weaving whereby the textile industry became one of the most important leading sectors of the Industrial Revolution that has made the West so rich. In Africa such a development was nipped in the bud by the European slavers, who in exchange for gold, ivory and slaves each year brought countless rolls of textiles to the African market.

Similarly, the imported guns and gunpowder caused great harm to Africa. Most of these weapons naturally ended up in the hands of states that sold slaves to Europeans. A number of these slave-trading states became powerful enough to expand at the expense of states that were not able to get hold of European weapons. The European slave traders knew what they were doing. The export of ever-increasing quantities of firearms to Africa led to a growth in armed conflict and warfare, and thus to more prisoners of war who could be sold to the Europeans as slaves.

Popular history usually stresses the fact that other products supplied by the European slave traders to Africa were probably less harmful than textiles and guns, but were certainly useless. That human beings were exchanged for a crate of beer, wine or brandy, or for imitation pearls, cutlery and cheap necklaces reflects the depths to which the African rulers and slave dealers had sunk. Many African intellectuals are ashamed of the former slave-trading elites of West Africa but nevertheless consider Europe to be the main culprit. The Europeans 'rewarded' the African dealers for their collaboration by shamelessly fobbing them off with trinkets in exchange for men and women in the prime of life whom Africa herself could have put to good use.

This is not the place to pass judgement on this highly charged debate. Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that modern Africa at the turn of the 21st Century is still very much the underdog in world trade and that by locating the causes for retardation in the period of the slave trade, Europeans can conveniently be blamed for much of the poverty and misery in modern-day Africa. Any attempt to stand back and assess the impact of the slave trade objectively is quickly shot down as a transparent pretext for white-washing or justifying European imperialism.

In attempting to measure the role of Africa in intercontinental trade during the period of the slave trade, the first observation must be that Africa was relatively isolated. We should bear in mind that by modern standards the scale of long-distance commercial exchanges before 1800 was extremely small. All the commodities that were carried from one continent to another in 1500 would have fitted into two modern supertankers and by 1800 about five such ships would have sufficed. The great majority of those goods went to the European settlements and plantation colonies of North and South America, and not to Africa. By head of

population, the value of imports and exports in Africa was less than a twentieth of that for North America and only a fortieth of that for Great Britain. These figures suggest that the impact of foreign trade on Africa must have been extremely small. The entire value of foreign imports into Africa was worth less than 5% of domestic production. The vast majority of Africans never saw a foreign commodity; the food they ate, the clothes they wore and the tools they used were all produced locally.

In any case, were the goods supplied by the slave traders really so harmful? In those days the bulk of intercontinental trade in the world consisted of textiles, guns and gunpowder. The assortment of trade goods going to Africa was not exceptional. African imports differed only in so far as there were relatively fewer guns and relatively more textiles than on average. The total quantity of these goods imported annually into Africa was simply too small to have much effect on the African economy [11].

## Slave demography

Another highly charged debate is that of the constant demographic decline of many slave populations in the New World. In the politically correct view of history the only possible explanation for the decline was the planters' maltreatment of the slaves. Indeed, it was a wonder that any children were born at all on the plantations. The inhumane labour regime, the cruel physical punishments: what further explanation was necessary? Emancipation would solve the problem overnight. Unfortunately, events proved otherwise. Even after the slaves were emancipated their numbers in the West Indies continued to fall. It is still not known whether the slaves simply bore too few children or whether mortality, particularly child mortality, was so high that demographic growth was impossible. Both explanations need to be considered separately.

Why should the female slaves bear too few children? From a politically correct point of view the answer seems self-evident. Who would like to see their own children grow up as slaves? Refusing to bear children was one way of protesting against slavery and most of them were well aware that their children would be worth a great deal to the planters. But is this a plausible explanation? We shall never know since there is no hard evidence and the plantation records contain nothing. And yet, the term 'birth strike' crops up frequently in the literature. The female slaves were empowered, as were no other group, to use their reproductive organs as a weapon against exploitation and oppression.

Although an interesting theory, it is probably untrue. In the first place, abortion and childlessness went against the grain in Africa where there were hardly any women who did not or would not bear children. The bearing of children, and preferably many of them, was highly regarded, whereas childlessness was not, let alone infanticide and abortion. Of course, it is possible that a cultural 'U-turn' occurred among the exported slaves and that they foreswore African culture on their arrival in the Caribbean, but it seems highly improbable. All the evidence indicates the opposite. Visitors to the West Indian plantations regularly reported that the slaves seemed so 'African', doubtless because more than half of them

had been born in Africa and because the burgeoning slave trade ensured that the cultural links between the West Indies and Africa remained strong.

There is a further argument that undermines the ‘birth strike’ theory. The birth rate among slaves in the southern U.S. was particularly high, and hardly deviated from the birth rate among white settlers. Indeed, no other black population in the world grew so fast. So many slaves were born that the importation of slaves from Africa fell significantly. Around 1800, although at least a third of the slave population in the New World lived in the U.S., no more than 7% of African slaves had been transported there. It is therefore safe to conclude that at least in the southern U.S. slave women did not use the ‘birth strike’ as a weapon against slavery [12].

## Slave resistance

Why did the slaves put up with it all? That is a question which is being asked more and more frequently, and not only with respect to the slaves. The Jews in Nazi Germany and the kulaks in Stalin’s Soviet Union have also been reproached for allowing themselves to be led like meek lambs to the slaughterhouse.

Yet, during the voyage across the Atlantic the slaves could achieve equally little even if they succeeded in taking over the slave ship. After all, they were not capable of sailing back to Africa. And if they escaped from the hold when their ship was still on the African coast, they might not get further than the beach before being rounded up. The inhabitants on the coast were well aware that returning a fugitive slave would fetch a reward. Alternatively, recaptured slaves could just be put back on the market.

Much has been written about slave revolts. Many publications give the impression that the slaves were constantly rebelling, running away, setting plantations and buildings on fire, or destroying tools and equipment. That is an attractive point of view as it is no longer politically correct to assume that the great majority of slaves only wanted to stay alive and make the best of their situation, in so far as that was possible. However, if the slaves did revolt, it was not to combat or to put an end to the institution of slavery. During the great slave rebellion of 1763–1764 in the small Dutch plantation colony of Berbice (now a part of former British Guiana), the leader of the rebels notified the governor by letter (!) that his aim was to divide the colony in two. In one part, the planters and their slaves could continue to cultivate their plantations as before, while the other part would be reserved for the rebels allowing them to build a new life outside the plantations as free men and women. In Suriname too, rebellious slaves do not seem to have considered abolishing slavery. As late as the 19th Century a conspiracy among a number of Suriname slaves was uncovered. They were plotting to make whites work for them on the plantations as . . . slaves. The only successful slave revolt occurred on Haiti, the former French colony of Saint-Domingue, on the western section of the island of Hispaniola. The revolution that broke out in 1791 ultimately led to the first black republic. Its success was due to the dissension among the colony’s white population caused by the outbreak of the French Revolution.

However, at the same time the Haitian revolution was a failure as it was never repeated elsewhere in the slave-holding New World. After the Haitian revolution slave prices everywhere in the New World continued to rise, indicating that slave owners had every confidence that investing in a slave remained a profitable economic proposition [13].

### **Conclusion: the gap between popular and scholarly history**

The popular and scholarly history of the slave and slavery are both booming businesses despite the fact that there is a growing gap between the two. The popular history of these phenomena seems to be written in order to serve an ulterior purpose, such as explaining the high number of single mothers among the Afro-American population, or the relatively low number of university graduates among this group or the high number of prison inmates. On the other side of the Atlantic the popular history of the slave trade and of slavery is used in order to ask for financial compensation from the former slave trading nations in Europe [14].

At the same time, the evidence-based history of the slave and of slavery seems to destroy many of the popular ideas about the past. The records show that it was not the Europeans, but the Africans who dominated the supply of slaves and that the European slave-ship captains were very much at their mercy. Furthermore, recent scholarship time and again points to the stability of slave families during the time of slavery, albeit that these family arrangements sometimes deviated from the Western norm of a two-headed family. In addition, there is little evidence that the Atlantic slave trade out of Africa caused more damage and had fewer advantages than the simultaneous migration out of Europe. In fact, no region in the Atlantic between 1500 and 1850 lost more people than Portugal or the British Isles. As a matter of fact, there is reason to assume that the slave trade out of Africa might have increased the standard of living for those who remained behind.

What goes for the history of the slave trade and slavery goes for many other histories as well. In The Netherlands popular history claimed that during the German occupation between 1940 and 1945 a substantial portion of the Dutch actively took part in the Resistance and that there was a general tendency to hide the persecuted Jews. Evidence-based research shows that more people collaborated than resisted, that in no other occupied country did so many volunteers enlist in the German army in order to fight the Soviet Union and that in no other country was the survival rate of Jews so low.

Popular history can be outright dangerous. The ethnic hatred between the Christian and Muslim population in parts of former Yugoslavia was based on history. In a sick joke a man in Bosnia returned home during the period of the civil war of the 1990s, covered with blood, and his startled wife asked him what had happened. The man proudly announced that he had just killed his Muslim neighbours. "But why?", his wife asked, "Our families have lived next to one another for generations. We have been invited to all the wedding parties of their children just like we have always invited them." "Yes", the man responded, "but the Muslims killed the Serbian tsar during the Battle of Kosovo." His wife



responded: “That was long ago, in 1389.” The man responded, “That might be true, but I only heard about it yesterday!”

In sum, the growing popularity of history can be a double-edged sword as some topics seem to remain immune from developments in evidence-based history. And that applies to other fields as well. The widening gap between popular notions and scholarship is also very pronounced in the medical field, where ‘alternative medicine’ flourishes as never before. Today, using non-evidence-based medical treatment might even be covered by the regular insurance companies.

We have come a long way from Galileo Galilei, but we must learn to live with the fact that ‘popular scholarship’ will always remain a contradiction in terms. And to end on an optimistic note: at long last the French House of Representatives has agreed to abstain from making laws about how the past should be commemorated, but in case it feels the need to make judgements about the past it will issue only (non-binding) declarations.

## References

1. [http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wouter\\_Buikhuisen](http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wouter_Buikhuisen)
2. [http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henk\\_Buck](http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henk_Buck)
3. <http://medischcontact.artsennet.nl/discussie/Nieuwsartikel/Geen-bewijs-dat-oseltamivir-ernstige-complicaties-voorkomt.htm>
4. <http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transseksualiteit>
5. Drescher, S. (2001) Jews and new Christians in the Atlantic slave trade. In *The Jews and the Expansion of Europe to the West, 1450 to 1800* (Bernardini, P. and Fiering, N., eds), pp. 439–470, Berghahn Books, New York
6. Pétré-Grenouilleau, O. (2004) *Les traites négrières*, Gallimard, Paris
7. [http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Libert%C3%A9\\_pour\\_l'histoire](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Libert%C3%A9_pour_l'histoire)
8. Rodney, W. (1973) *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, London and Tanzanian Publishing House, Dar-Es-Salaam
9. <http://www.slavevoyages.org/tast/index.faces>
10. Eltis, D. and Richardson, D. (1997) *Routes to Slavery. Direction, Ethnicity, and Mortality in the Atlantic Slave Trade*, Frank Cass, London
11. Eltis, D. (1987) *Economic Growth and the Ending of the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, Oxford University Press, New York
12. Fogel, R.W. (1989) *Without Consent or Contract. The Rise and Fall of American Slavery*, Norton, New York
13. Emmer, P. and Drescher, S. (2010) *Who Abolished Slavery? Revolts and Abolitionism: A Debate with João Pedro Marques*, Berghahn Books, Oxford/New York
14. Oostindie, G. (2009) History brought home: postcolonial migrations and the Dutch rediscovery of slavery. In *Migration, Trade, and Slavery in an Expanding World. Essays in Honor of Pieter Emmer* (Klooster, W., ed.), pp. 305–327, Brill, Leiden/Boston