

**GLOBALISATION AND THE
BLACK DIASPORA**

Ronald Segal

WPTC-98-15

November 1998

The author welcomes any comments you may have. Please send them through:

Anna Winton
Administrator
Transnational Communities
Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology
51 Banbury Road
Oxford
OX2 6PE

anna.winton@anthro.ox.ac.uk

GLOBALISATION AND THE BLACK DIASPORA

Ronald Segal

Both Christianity and Islam asserted the unique value of the individual human being as created by God to serve a divine purpose. Adherents of both religions, from societies of more or less expressly related devotion, long preyed for their own purposes upon black Africans: to procure, own and exploit slave men, women and children.

The statistics connected with the Atlantic Trade, of the slaves loaded onto boats and to the survivors landed in the Americas, for the development and replenishment of labour stocks there, have been comprehensively researched. Total numbers are now widely accepted as subject to no more than relatively minor adjustment in the light of new evidence. It is now estimated that some 11,863,000 slaves were shipped across the Atlantic; that the overall death rate during the Crossing was in the range of 10-20%; and that the total for those landed alive must accordingly lie somewhere between 9,600,000 and 10,800,000.

The Islamic Trade was conducted on a different scale. Unlike the Atlantic Trade, which began late and grew prodigiously, it involved largely lower average annual volumes, except in the 9th and 19th centuries. But it had begun eight centuries earlier and would long outlast the end of the Atlantic Trade. We do not have remotely such plentiful and precise statistical information on the Islamic as on the Atlantic Trade, and there is, indeed, considerable argument over the volume of slaves exported in the Islamic. I believe that Paul Lovejoy, drawing on the research of Ralph Austen, is almost certainly right in his estimate, to the end of the 19th century, of some 11,512,000; or a total close to that of the numbers loaded onto ships in the Atlantic Trade. (Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery*, Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 24, 60; and 'The Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on Africa: A review of the Literature' in *Journal of African History* 30 [1989], p. 368).

In short, with the inclusion of several hundred thousand for the Islamic trade this century, it is reasonable to regard the volume of slaves involved in each of the two trades as much the same. In their dynamic and impact, however, the two trades were very different, and this difference was related to the different economic systems involved.

Historians may dispute the degree to which the Atlantic Trade was responsible for the development of Western capitalism and its industrial revolution. But there can be no doubt of the connection. Relevantly, indeed, the reason that the statistics on the Atlantic Trade are so plentiful and precise is that capitalism kept such damning good books. Much of industry developed to supply the trade goods required for the procurement of slaves in black Africa, and some of the huge profits engendered by the trade were invested in the further development of industry. Not least, there developed too, from the predominant use to which slaves were put and from the very nature of emergent industrial capitalism, a view of slaves as essentially units of labour, in a productive process which disregarded or denied their personality.

Symbolically and substantially, the *asientos* or contracts, issued by Spain for the supply of slaves by foreign shippers, specified not the number of slaves to be delivered within a stipulated period, but the quantity of what were termed 'pieces of the Indies', representing units of potential labour. In what became the standard measure in the trade, each piece corresponded to an adult male in prime physical condition, with a female, child, or adult mate beyond his prime, variously valued as some part of a piece.

Slavery in Islam developed differently. To be sure, a system of black slave agricultural labour, much like that which would emerge in the Americas, had early been tried, but with such dire consequences in the great so-called Zanj rebellion of the 9th century in southern Iraq as discouraged all but rare and reduced subsequent engagements of the sort. Moreover, the need for such labour, in an Islam with large peasant populations, was nowhere near as acute as in the Americas, where European conquest led, in so many of the colonies it established, to the

virtual extermination of the indigenous peoples, from the new diseases it brought and the forced labour it recklessly exacted.

Slaves in Islam were directed mainly at the service sector, as concubines, housemaids, nurses, cooks, porters, guards and soldiers. There were others employed as dockers, artisans, builders; these last, sometimes used in large numbers for public works. There were factories too, mainly in textile manufacturing, reliant on slaves. But for all such activities, slavery constituted primarily a form of consumption rather than a factor of production. The most telling evidence of this is to be found in the gender ratio. Among black slaves traded in Islam over the centuries, there were roughly two females to every male; while in the Atlantic Trade, there were two males to every female.

The difference between the two trades was related to the very nature of the state in Islam, as distinct from that in Christendom. Indeed, the term 'Christendom' effectively became an anachronism for states whose religious allegiances increasingly gave place to national preoccupations and the secular employment of power. In Islam, the state itself was a religious extension, without meaning, let alone legitimacy, beyond it.

To a degree unmatched by the various developing societies of Christendom, for all their sectarian wars, the societies of Islam were informed by references to the divine will, as communicated in the Koran. And the Koran dealt in detail with slaves. That pretensions to piety might coexist with disregard for the spirit and even the letter of such details did not exclude their overall influence. Slaves were to be regarded and treated as people; and more often than not, beyond the killing fields of their procurement and the cruelties or callousness of many dealers, this was extensively their experience.

This is not, for a moment, to romanticize their condition. A slave was a slave for all that. And owners were endowed with such power over their slaves that few can have failed to abuse it. Even masters persuaded of their own piety and benevolence would have sexually

exploited their concubines, without a thought of whether this constituted a violation of their humanity. In one particular, indeed - the provision of eunuchs - Islamic slavery was crueller than its Western counterpart. Yet, except when and where the use of slaves came close to their use in the American plantations, their treatment was, at least relatively, benign.

There was a reason for this, apart from the influence of specific religious teachings on slavery. The very development of a Western-style capitalism, with the effective subjugation of people to the priority of profit, was inhibited by the values and attitudes inculcated by Islam. So crucial was the religious dynamic to Islamic society that those who served the faith, by scholarship or soldiering, enjoyed greater prestige than those who grew rich by economic enterprise. In fact, while trade was accepted as necessary and useful, enrichment by speculation, or by any other pursuits that might be construed as in conflict with the welfare of the community, was not only regarded with suspicion but often made to pay some suitable, chastening price.

Among related factors was the absence of primogeniture as the principle of inheritance. The distribution of estates among the family members of the deceased might well have been both fair and compassionate; but it did little to advance the concentration of wealth and its corresponding investment. Similarly, Muslims tended to respect the prohibition of usury in the Old Testament, while Jews and Christians tended to ignore it. In short, while the advantages of investment were widely recognized in the world of business, the conditions for capital accumulation on a socially transforming scale were lacking.

It was no accident that in the Ottoman Empire, for instance, charitable foundations were a prime source of investment capital, but spent most of their income on building mosques, establishing or subsidising schools, and providing some measures of social welfare; that wealth so often went into the purchase of property rather than into productive assets; and that foreign goods were permitted so damagingly to compete with domestic production, because their relative cheapness served the needs of the poor in the community. Far,

therefore, from pursuing the development of an economic system which promoted the depersonalisation of labour, and in particular of slaves, Islamic influence was responsible for impeding it.

Not least, such influence successfully confronted the emergence of racism as a form of institutionalized discrimination, sanctioned and even required by law. For the Koran expressly condemned racism, along with tribalism and nationalism. It was a very different matter in the West, where economic enterprise had no room for such messages from the Saviour as that the meek would inherit the earth. There, the treatment of slaves in the Americas and, in particular, the character of the slave trade were so inconsistent with the teachings of Christianity - and even with the decent sensibilities of the more secularly minded - that they required some rationalization to sustain them.

The Bible was scrutinised to find support, however specious, for a divine curse on blacks; and science was perverted to support a biological case for their enslavement. In the Americas themselves, where black slaves were not only crucial to the economies but numerically dominant in regions or whole colonies, fear promoted a very rage of racism. In the French colony of Saint-Domingue, for some time the richest colony in the world, a single part of black blood among the 128 into which blood was divided was sufficient to disqualify a free person from holding public office or practising any of the liberal professions. In the South of the United States, it became illegal for owners, whose rights to their property were otherwise virtually absolute, to free their own slaves.

Christianity did come to play an important part in the movement of opposition, primarily in and from Britain, first to the slave trade and then to slavery itself. Many leading abolitionists were those who took their religion seriously. Yet it is doubtful that they would have succeeded as they did, without the powerful support of industrial capitalists. The workshop of the world had outgrown dependence on slave-labour colonies whose principal product, sugar, was internationally uncompetitive and required costly subsidies. The campaign

for free trade and free labour was directed against slave-worked colonies, latterly Portuguese Brazil and Spanish Cuba, which produced an abundance of low-cost sugar from still richly productive land. The hovering promise was that the elimination of slavery would enable Britain to sustain her industrial primacy and extend its scope to new markets, including an Africa rescued from pillage to such prosperity as would afford a much greater demand for British goods. When this combination of moral and economic campaigns captured the state, so that British financial, diplomatic and naval power came to be deployed in their cause, the days of the Atlantic slave trade and then of slavery itself in the West were numbered.

Yet racism vigorously survived the end of slavery. If old habits die hard, racism would already have been old enough to take an unconscionable time dying. But there were reasons why it thrived rather than declined. The colonial powers, engaged in extending their rule across so much of the world, found a pretext in the concept of 'the white man's burden', with its corresponding presumption of the cultural and even biological inferiority of blacks and others of colour. Within the metropolitan societies themselves, there were many whites at the lower social levels who derived comfort or consolation from asserting their membership of a superior race. White workers, particularly in the United States, found in racism a cause with which to confront the competition for jobs from blacks now free to sell their labour. Racial segregation, written into law or so secured by custom as to have hardly less force, took elaborate form.

Neither law nor custom had precluded miscegenation during slavery. But with the notable exception of Brazil - where the lack of sufficient white immigrants had long allowed a selective merging of mulattos into the white population - those descended from such unions were no less barred than blacks from social assimilation with whites. And they remained so under the reinvigorated regime of racism after slavery. This did not prevent them from practising imitative colour discriminations of their own; investing lightness of complexion with corresponding value.

Yet for all that, white exclusiveness was the fundamental factor. And it was this that essentially promoted and secured the existence of a vast black diaspora, gatheringly conscious of its peculiar identity, its collective past and its cultural heritage. Relevantly, in a movement which might have emerged somewhat tentatively but which developed an assertive assurance, leadership came from the 'coloured' as well as the black; while the term 'Negro', rejected for its historical associations with racial disparagement, eventually gave place to 'black' as the term used of themselves by even many of light complexion.

It is not inconsistent both to deplore the causes and conditions which created a black diaspora in the West and to exult in its achievements: the expression of its identity and experience in every artistic form, if especially music, and in that very passion for freedom which belongs to a people born in enslavement and released into racial victimisation.

Alongside such victimisation, the history of Islam emerges to considerable credit. This is not remotely to suggest a record of general virtue. Too many Muslim regimes were notable for their repressions, no more acceptable when conducted in the cause of moral purification; for the luxury and splendour sustained by exactions on the poor; for the corruptions and cruelties of the rulers they served. But in the treatment of existing and former slaves, Islam was notably more humane than the West proved to be, with a markedly different impact on the social assimilation of blacks.

The freeing of individual slaves by their owners, in conformity with Koranic precepts, was far more common. As slaves, blacks were subject to no peculiar racial discrimination in law; and, once freed, they enjoyed in law equal rights as citizens. If colour prejudice did affect market prices, the treatment accorded by individual owners, and the social advancement of the freed, this was a very different matter from the institutionalized racism in the West.

If religion was undeniably a major force in accounting for this, there were also other factors. The very uses to which slaves were predominantly put affected in turn the way slaves

were regarded and treated. The essentially domestic function and female gender of most slaves promoted relations between owner and slave less distant and depersonalising than were those prevalent on the plantations of the Americas. And the military use to which so many male slaves were distinctively directed relied for its very purpose on the promotion of trust and loyalty. Some military slaves rose to such positions of power that their status as slaves was more symbolic than substantial. A few, indeed, rose to become rulers themselves and by definition ceased to be slaves.

Not least, there was long in Islam no such exclusive correspondence between slavery and colour as came to exist in the West. Large numbers of slaves were drawn from among Turks and Slavs; and by the time that the difficulty of acquiring so-called white slaves had led to an overwhelming reliance on black ones, attitudes to slavery and the treatment of slaves were effectively fixed. Institutionalized racism was precluded not only by the force of religion but by social pragmatism.

To be sure, even today, it does not require exhaustive exploration to encounter in parts of Islam some correlation between blackness and poverty. But given the likely numbers of black slaves which the Islamic trade involved over the centuries, this is indicative of a marginal prejudice, whose consequences have perpetuated themselves. The comparative smallness of a black diaspora in Islam is not an argument against the largeness of the numbers carried by the trade, but of the degree to which large numbers were absorbed in the wider population. Further evidence may be drawn from the darkening of the gene in certain countries, for which such absorption provides an obvious explanation.

What we have, therefore, is essentially two black diasporas, the products of divergent historical experiences and contemporary attitudes. The Western one, numbered in the tens of millions, possesses in varying degrees and forms a sense of peculiar identity, the more assertive for being sustained by the persistence of racial discrimination in the national or hemispheric

environment. The Islamic one is to be numbered rather in the millions and, with marginal exceptions, reveals little identifiable consciousness, let alone assertion, of a peculiar identity.

The concept of globalisation, albeit now reverberant with the shock of the new, is nonetheless an old one. It is, after all, intrinsic to universalist religions; in particular, Islam and Christianity. As one Muslim commentary has expounded the paramount claims of the *ummah* or Muslim community:

'The ummah is a universal order comprehending even those who are not believers. It is an order of peace, a Pax Islamica, forever open to all those individuals and groups who accept the principle of the freedom to convince and to be convinced of the truth, who seek a world order in which ideas, goods, wealth, or human bodies are free to move. The Pax Islamica is an international order far surpassing the United Nations, that child of yesteryear, aborted and warped by the principles of the nation-state.' (Isma'il R. al Faruqi and Lois Lamya' al Faruqi, *The Cultural Atlas of Islam*, Macmillan, New York, 1986, p. 84) In fact, as we know, this order of peace was often extended by wars of conquest, on a principle of freedom that extended no further than acceptance of the summons to Islam.

Moreover, the *Pax Islamica* has not precluded a devotion to nationalism, whose initial development was a response to Western imperial expansion; nor even, as in Mauritania and the Sudan today, regimes that have pursued policies with a distinct racist component. Yet, for all that, the universalist message of Islam has been markedly successful in reaching beyond nationalism and racism, so that even those, among the disadvantaged and disparaged, who feel driven to revolt, seek their salvation collectively within the fold of Islam. It is this which has repeatedly given rise to movements of fundamentalist reform, against corrupt and repressive regimes. And the fact that such movements have, with their success, so often developed into being as corrupt and repressive as the regimes they displaced, has not notably diminished the appeal of fundamentalism itself as the source of reform.

It is no accident, therefore, that Islam has come to exercise a growing attraction within the Western black diaspora; most strongly in the United States, where the Islamic message of a global community beyond race and united in faith has been - not altogether consistently - combined with a militant movement of black separatism. Nor is it an accident that, from Britain to Brazil, among blacks who still profess some sort of Christianity, most do so in virtually black congregations; belong to virtually all black sects; or are increasingly turning to such others, as Pentacostalism, which have black origins, along with elements of black culture in their forms of worship, and no record of white organizational dominance.

This is in part a legacy of historical racism, reflected in churches so subservient to dominant social attitudes that they provided separate seating areas for black and white in their congregations. And while certain Christian sects, such as the Methodists and Baptists, took a socially less supine position, they remained reluctant to cede exclusively white organizational control. Not least, enforced or functioning residential segregation led blacks to found local churches and even sects of their own. The connection between racism and elements of organized Christianity is, moreover, not altogether historical. There is, most markedly in the United States, a distinct relationship between Christian fundamentalism and the politics of a white populism that is no less racist for expressing itself in transparent camouflage.

It is not, however, religion that is currently meant by the much celebrated gospel of globalisation. It is the triumph of free market, as opposed to state, capitalism; along with, and reinforced by, that of an information technology whose promised culmination is the 'global village'.

The extent and permanence of this process may well be seriously questioned. Indeed, recent events suggest that the solutions provided by free market capitalism have, in the 'irrational exuberance' of their functioning, generated formidable problems. The free movement of capital, whose arrival promoted such a boom in certain countries, permitted a departure from them even more rapid, to induce or intensify the ensuing bust. The connection

between the globalisation of corporate economic power and the globalisation of economic welfare is even less evident now than it was. The connection between such power and the vaunted democratic values of individual freedom and equality of opportunity has always been in doubt.

Two instances, among the many available, may be cited. Corporate economic power is in large measure responsible not only for the degradation of the global environment but for the defeat so far of adequate measures to arrest, let alone reverse, the process. It would be the cruellest mockery to suggest that the current victims in Central America, of the impact made on the global climate by environmental mayhem, were party to the development of the policies which promoted this.

It is trite, but no less true, that in a democracy, anyone is free to publish a newspaper, who has the many millions available to afford it. The price of publishing in the 'global village', with news, entertainment, information and opinion increasingly purveyed by corporate conglomerates of film, television, newspaper, book and computer interests, is hugely higher. It is scarcely irrational to find more cause for fear in this than for faith in the liberating possibilities of the Internet.

In so far as such globalisation continues, therefore, it is unlikely to make much difference to either of the two black diasporas, beyond the collateral damage done by the magnified impact of the economic spasms to which capitalism is prone. Within Islam, the initiative may well remain with fundamentalism as the primary expression of social revolt. If there is to be a significant change to the black diaspora there, it may come in the Sudan, with a sustainable settlement to the long civil war. For this would formally or effectively end the predominantly Arab rule in the north over the predominantly Christian and animist south, with that part of the black diaspora reverting to the black Africa homeland.

Within the West, Brazil contains the largest component of the black diaspora. Of the country's more than 150 million inhabitants, some 11 % are estimated to be black, while a further 34% are estimated to be of 'mixed race'. But the census returns on which such estimates are based reflect the colour identifications which respondents provide for themselves; and in a society of vertical colour values, respondents tend to levitate upwards, from black to brown, and from brown to white, with yellow or red as possible intermediate, if not evidently credible, alternatives. Certainly, by the historical definition in the United States, where all those of some black ancestry are black, by far the most of those in the 'mixed race' category are blacks.

Enough money has, however, always made a difference in Brazil, where it is able to translate the mulatto pragmatically into the white. This is capitalism in spades; and it is the possibility of such a metamorphosis that is the pride of what Brazil has long called, curiously and revealingly, its 'racial democracy'. It is doubtful that this ascription altogether accounts for the still marginal black consciousness movement in Brazil. One factor may well be the isolation of Brazilian blacks, in the hemispheric uniqueness of the national language, from the militant ideas and movements which have elsewhere swept the Western black diaspora. Another may be a cultural sublimation; an implicit consciousness in the adhesion to religious and artistic, predominantly musical, forms which express the black heritage, but which have been incorporated, not without a little bleaching, into the Brazilian national identity.

Yet, alongside this, newspapers commonly carry advertisements for jobs that specify such qualifications as 'of good appearance' or 'with good hair', which are accepted euphemisms for those without black complexions or features. Even bourgeois blacks, correspondingly clothed, are directed to the tradesmen's entrance at apartment blocks where they are not known. And it is overwhelmingly black children who are killed by police or vigilante traders as a form of street cleaning, to widespread public indifference. It is difficult to believe that such rampant racism will long continue merely to claim victims and not ignite a militant response.

Elsewhere in the Western black diaspora, the historical connection between capitalism and racism shows no signs of fracturing under the impact of globalisation. It is scarcely a coincidence that in the leading capitalist economy of the United States, a study in the early 'nineties of 219 major metropolitan areas reported: 'the majority of the nation's 30 million black people are as segregated now as they were at the height of the civil rights movement in the '60s' (*USA Today*, 11 November 1991). And the Census Bureau reported in September 1992 that while one in seven Americans were living in poverty, the figure for blacks was almost one in three; and for black children 46%, or close to half. Furthermore, across the country, almost one in four blacks in their twenties was, at any given time, in prison, on probation, or on parole (Elliot Currie, *Reckoning*, Hill and Wang, New York, 1993, p. 19)

Indeed, across the white-majority societies of the West which encompass most of the black diaspora, blacks are, in undeniable disproportion, to be numbered among the poor, the unemployed, the ill-educated, the imprisoned, and - even where such barbarism still survives - the judicially killed. In similar disproportion, they inhabit functionally segregated areas of shanty towns or inner city decay. There has, to be sure, been a notable growth in the black middle class, in part a response to government measures which black militancy wrested from a liberal commitment, now largely abandoned under white populist pressure. Yet a black middle class that has abandoned the ghettos, to the momentum of their deprivation and the sense of disparagement among their inhabitants, has not lost its colour in the process. Settlement in the suburbs or in sleek apartment complexes provides no protection against the evidence and consequences of racial discrimination in the society at large.

For all the supposed sophistication of global capitalism, one need not look far to find the essential impact of its mechanism, in the sharpening of inequalities. There is certainly little evidence to suppose that it will mean for the black diaspora any more than the writing of an old message in larger letters.