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John Donoghue

Loyola University Chicago, jdonoghue@luc.edu

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Transatlantic Discourses of Freedom and Slavery during the English Revolution

JOHN DONOGHUE

Loyola University Chicago, Department of History

Three themes in the discursive history of freedom and slavery during the English Revolution are explored here: the liberty of conscience, the liberty of the body, and the liberty of commerce. In the contests waged to define these liberties, contending factions of revolutionaries refashioned their opponents' concepts of freedom as forms of bondage. Although explored in discrete fashion by historians, these discourses of religious, bodily, and commercial liberty hardly operated independently from one another. Indeed, they became increasingly entangled as the Revolution reached its imperial turn (ca. 1649-1655), accompanied as it was by the rise of the slave trade in the West Indies and debates over the nature of «free trade» that circulated between England and the colonies. Ultimately, to recover the entangled nature of these languages of liberty and their importance in the Revolution's history of ideas, we must move beyond England itself and into the wider Atlantic world to grasp the material contexts that conditioned the Revolution's discursive history.

Nel saggio sono esaminati tre temi nella storia del discorso su libertà e schiavitù durante la Rivoluzione inglese: la libertà di coscienza, la libertà del corpo, la libertà di commercio. Nei contesti in cui questa libertà vennero definite, fazioni contrastanti di rivoluzionari riformularono i concetti di libertà dei loro oppositori come forme di servitù. Gli storici hanno già in parte analizzato questi discorsi di libertà religiosa, corporale e commerciale, che però non erano indipendenti l'uno dall'altro. In verità essi si intrecciarono in maniera crescente quando la Rivoluzione raggiunse la sua svolta imperiale (ca. 1649-1655), accompagnata come fu dall'inizio del commercio degli schiavi nelle Indie occidentali e da dibattiti sulla natura del «libero commercio» che circolava tra Inghilterra e colonie. Perciò, per scoprire la natura intrecciata di questi linguaggi della libertà e la loro importanza nella storia delle idee della Rivoluzione, è necessario andare oltre la stessa Inghilterra e addentrarsi nel più ampio mondo atlantico per comprendere i contesti materiali che condizionarono la storia del discorso della Rivoluzione.

In recent decades, the so-called Cambridge School has produced some of the most exciting work on the intellectual history of early modern Europe. Historicizing the study of political thought, these scholars have employed close linguistic analysis to deconstruct the competing and often conflicting meanings of political ideas, stressing how such ambiguity reflects the diverse historical inheritances and contextual contingencies of discursive political traditions. In essence, the practitioners of the Cambridge School have illustrated the fruitlessness of attaching historically transcendent meaning to political concepts, which can be understood in their various permutations in time and over time, but never beyond time. Perhaps the best work done by historians working in this mode has focused on the languages of liberty that flourished in the age of the English Revolution (ca. 1640-1660). Their studies of the Revolution have shown us how «liberty» was rarely understood or discussed in its own right in the mid-seventeenth century. Instead, contemporaries constantly resorted to the language of slavery, a seemingly self-evident concept, to define liberty through its antithesis. My discussion here focuses on three discourses of liberty in the wider discursive history of freedom and slavery in the age of the English Revolution: the liberty of conscience, the liberty of the body, and the liberty of commerce. Although all the revolutionaries prized these liberties, no conceptual consensus existed regarding either their ideological substance or their proper political applications. In the discursive contests the revolutionaries waged to rightly define these liberties, contending factions, predictably, applied the rhetorical device of slavery to reconfigure their opponents' views of freedom as the harbingers of bondage. Crucially, these discourses on the liberties of consciences, bodies, and commerce hardly operated independently from one another, although their interdependence during the Revolution has attracted little scholarly attention. Indeed, they became increasingly entangled as the Revolution reached its imperial turn (ca. 1649-1655), accompanied as it was by the rise of the slave trade and debates over the nature of «free trade».

To recover the history that explains both the entangled nature of these languages of liberty and their historical importance requires a historiographical intervention. As a growing body of literature has demonstrated, the English Revolution was not merely an English, British, or European affair; it was most decidedly an Atlantic event. Although most Cambridge School studies of the Revolution contain themselves to European sources, its languages of liberty were not merely European transmissions; instead, they were generated by the circulation of ideas and experience within a wider historical geography that encompassed the Atlantic world. The observation involves more than mere spatial considerations. I argue here as I have elsewhere that broadening our view of the Revolution's impact from the national to the Atlantic yields rich rewards for intellectual history; specifically, restoring the Revolution's authentic Atlantic context can help us recover the origins of abolitionist thought, an event that most historians place in the eighteenth century. Wedded as it was in the mid-seventeenth century to a transatlantic radical republican program, abolitionism represented perhaps the most important breakthrough in the early modern history of ideas, although for reasons discussed below, the existence of this breakthrough, let alone its significance, has eluded the English Revolution's most talented intellectual historians.

Samuel Gorton, a fiery-tempered clothier from Lancashire, braved the Atlantic crossing to America in 1636 seeking «liberty of conscience in respect to God» following his experience with religious persecution in Old England. But on the afternoon of October 14, 1643, Gorton was forced to endure what he thought he had left behind, as soldiers from Massachusetts burned Shawomet, the village that Gorton had founded in Rhode Island, to the ground. Five years before, Gorton and several of his comrades had been exiled from Massachusetts for «sedition» after refusing to conform to puritan clerical orthodoxy. In their Rhode Island exile, Gorton and his followers vowed to protect their liberty of conscience by leaving religious belief and practice free from magiste-

rial restriction. But fearing heretical corruption from such a «fountain of error», the Massachusetts government deputed its militia to destroy Shawomet and arrest Gorton and his confederates. Early that November, after a forced march in shackles to Boston, the Massachusetts Court punished the dissenters to a year of bondage and hard labor in chains. Although popular protest in the Bay Colony against Gorton's «enslavement» forced his release months later, his fight against religious persecution was far from over; indeed, it could not be contained to the colonies. To seek justice, Gorton transformed his colonial persecution into an Atlantic event during the age of the English Revolution, fleeing to London to plead before the Revolutionary Parliament for a colonial charter to promote religious tolerance in New England.

While in London, Gorton wrote a pamphlet that he entitled *Simplicity's Defense*. Published in 1646, the work recounted the Shawomet attack and the Boston trial. Here Gorton described how the government of Massachusetts had acted arbitrarily, ruling as a law unto itself and against the laws of both God and Old England. As «freeborn Englishmen in America», England's ancient constitution protected the colonists' property and bodies from wanton violence and warrantless captivity. But instead of living under «the laws of our native country (which) should be named amongst them, yea those ancient statute laws», Gorton observed that Massachusetts had made his community subject to «pretended and devised laws (which) we have stooped under, to the robbing and spoiling of our goods, the livelihood of our wives and children». He saluted Winthrop as the «Great and Honoured Idol General» who by the «sleights of Satan» endeavored «to subject and make slaves» of all those within and without his jurisdiction. But despite their appeal to English law, as antinomians, Gorton and his followers believed that their first duty was to pursue the completion of the Protestant Reformation by remaining obedient not to puritan clerics and magistrates, but to «the law that God had written on our hearts», which they discerned through their consciences as guided by scripture and the holy spirit. «Now the

rule is evident», Gorton wrote,

that if the ministration of justice and judgment belongs to no officer, but to a man as a brother, then to every brother, and if to every brother, whether rich or poor, ignorant or learned, then every Christian in a commonwealth must be king, and judge, and sheriff and captain, and Parliament man, and rule, and that not only in New England but in Old, and not only in Old, but in all the Christian world; down with all officers from their rule, and set up every brother for to rule.¹

Samuel Gorton, *Simplicity's Defense Against Seven-Headed Policy* (London, 1644), William R. Staples, ed., (Providence: Marshall Brown, 1835), 80–83

But finding them to be a company of gross and dissembling hypocrites, that, under the pretence of law and religion, have done nothing else, but gone about to establish themselves in ways to maintain their own vicious lusts, we renounce their diabolical practice, being such as have denied in their public courts that the laws of our native country should be named amongst them; yea, those ancient statute laws, casting us into most base, nasty and insufferable places of imprisonment, for speaking according to the language of them; in the meanwhile, breaking open our houses in a violent way of hostility, abusing our wives and our little ones, to take from us the volumes wherein they are preserved thinking thereby to keep us ignorant of the courses they are resolved to run, that so the vitiosity of their own wills might be a law unto them; yea, they have endeavored, and that in public expressions, that a man being accused by them, should not have liberty to answer for himself, in open court... But the God of vengeance, unto whom our cause is referred, never having our protector and judge to seek, will shew himself in our deliverance out of the hands of you all; yea, all the house of that Ishbosheth and Meribbosheth, nor will he fail us to utter and make known his strength wherein we stand, to serve in our age and to minister in our course, today, and to-morrow; and on the third day, can none deprive us of perfection... the Lord never gives a name as an empty title, but according to the nature of the thing named, so that if he speak, I have said ye are gods, of any besides himself, it is to declare, that they have not only the name but the very nature of the god of this world; and therefore he saith, they shall die even as Adam, who aspired and usurped the place of God...

¹ Gorton 1644 [1835], 80–83.

No man, no king, no court could rightfully claim to limit the divine sovereignty of the discerning liberty with which God had endowed his creation. When man-made authorities, such as the Massachusetts court, ruled arbitrarily over their fellow creatures, they not only violated English law, they usurped the very sovereignty of God. In New England, as Gorton wrote, such tyrannical hubris bound not only the consciences of the people, but their bodies as well. The radical's days in chains as a convict laborer made his testimony to bondage in the Bay Colony personal.

The transatlantic circuit through which Gorton tendered his petition and thus his radical reformation mission would impact the struggle for liberty of conscience in Revolutionary England. Gorton's foe, Edward Winslow, a founder of Plymouth Colony and a commanding figure among the political elite of New England, left for London to make Massachusetts' case against the radicals. Countering the latter's argument that the Bay Colony had violated any colonists' liberty of conscience, Winslow argued instead in his own pamphlet, *Hypocrisy Unmasked* (1647), that puritan clerics and magistrates were the absolute champions of liberty of conscience. It was proper, just, and necessary, he argued, for godly ordained authorities to protect the people's consciences, and thus the commonwealth as a whole, from spiritual corruption and error; to allow antinomians such as Gorton and company to persist in their heresies would promote sedition and pollute the spiritual estate of the commonwealth. As Winslow wrote in *Hypocrisy Unmasked*, «the Civil Magistrate is the minister of God, a Revenger to execute wrath on him that doth evil. And therefore a broad difference is to be put between such evil doers and those tender consciences who follow the light of God's word». Here Winslow defined liberty of conscience not as Gorton had, as religious toleration, but as the liberty to worship God free from corruption and error in an orderly commonwealth commanded by godly magistrates. He bolstered this line of thought by drawing atten-

tion to Gorton's increasingly radical profile in London.² While residing in the City, Gorton had attracted the ire of more moderate puritans by preaching to congregations of Levellers first in London and eventually in the New Model Army. Antinomian radicals, the Levellers had fostered the most successful popular republican program of the Revolution, organizing a mass movement based in London that forged links with the provinces and the military. Their program strove for a religiously tolerant constitutional settlement to the English Revolution based on a democratic franchise. When Winslow republished *Hypocrisy Unmasked* in 1649, he retitled it, *The Danger of Tolerating Levellers in a Civil State*. In the new edition, Winslow cautioned the English that just as Gorton and his like had seditiously undermined the authority of God's anointed in America, he and his Leveller allies would do the same vis-à-vis Parliament and the puritan clergy in England. Winslow did not exaggerate the Leveller threat; mass meetings and unruly protests in London and mutinies in the New Model Army, occasioned by petitioning campaigns gathering tens of thousands of signatures, forced the army high command, at the behest of Parliament, to crush the Levellers, which it did so through waves of arrests and executions.³

Edward Winslow, *The Danger of Tolerating Levellers in a Civil State* (London, 1649) (from the title page)

The danger of tolerating levellers in a civil state, or, An historicall narration of the dangerous pernicious practices and opinions wherewith Samuel Gorton and his levelling accomplices so much disturbed and molested the severall plantations in New-England : parallel to the positions and proceedings of the present levellers in Old-England : wherein their severall errors dangerous and very destructive to the peace both of church and state.

² Winslow 1646.

³ Winslow 1649. For Gorton's time in London and the rise and fall of the Leveller movement, see Donoghue 2013, 170-197.

Soon after its violent repression of the Leveller movement, the English state, via the newly established Revolutionary Republic, embarked upon its first concerted program of imperial expansion. The program included the colonial conquest of Ireland (1649), the armed subjugation of Royalist colonies in the West Indies and the Chesapeake (1651), and a victory over the Dutch (1652-1654) in the first of three seventeenth century naval wars against its most potent maritime rival. But the Republic turned to legislation as well as force of arms to bring its Atlantic empire into being, most notably through the first Navigation Act (1651), which opened up what its authors called a «free trade», a long-held goal of the Revolutionaries, for all English merchants. Written chiefly by Maurice Thomson and Martin Noell, two slave traders and absentee plantation owners with estates in the Chesapeake and Caribbean, the Navigation Act closed off the colonies to foreign trade and ended any existing English trading monopolies in the nation's Atlantic colonies.⁴

The Navigation Act (1651), printed in Henry Scobell, *A Collection of Acts and Ordinances of General Use, Made in Parliament... in Two Parts* (London, 1658), 2: 176

For the increase of the shipping and the encouragement of the navigation of this nation, which under the good providence and protection of God is so great a means of the welfare and safety of this Commonwealth: be it enacted by this present Parliament, and the authority thereof, that from and after the first day of December, one thousand six hundred fifty and one, and from thence forwards, no goods or commodities whatsoever of the growth, production or manufacture of Asia, Africa or America, or of any part thereof; or of any islands belonging to them, or which are described or laid down in the usual maps or cards of those places, as well of the English plantations as others, shall be imported or brought into this Commonwealth of England, or into Ireland, or any other lands, islands, plantations, or territories to this Commonwealth belonging, or in their possession, in any other ship or ships, vessel or vessels whatsoever, but only in such as do truly and without fraud belong only to the people of this Commonwealth, or the plantations thereof, as the proprietors or right owners thereof; and whereof the master and mariners are also for the most part of them of the people of this Commonwealth, under the

⁴ For the Navigation Act, see Scobell 1658, 2: 176. For scholarship on free trade and the Navigation Act, see Farnell 1964, 439-454; Armitage 2000, 100-124; Leng 2005, 933-954.

penalty of the forfeiture and loss of all the goods that shall be imported contrary to this act; as also of the ship (with all her tackle, guns and apparel) in which the said goods or commodities shall be so brought in and imported; the one moiety to the use of the Commonwealth, and the other moiety to the use and behoof of any person or persons who shall seize the goods or commodities, and shall prosecute the same in any court of record within this Commonwealth.

While all merchants saw commercial expansion as vital to English empire-building, the exact nature of the «free trade» clamored for in England and the colonies remained in dispute. As Dudley Digges wrote in 1615 «well-minded merchants like Hercules in the cradle» would make England «a staple of commerce for all the world to advance the reputation and revenue of the Commonwealth». ⁵ In 1641, at the outset of the English Revolution, Henry Robinson urged Parliament to help the nation's merchants make «England the Emporium or Warehouse from whence other Nations may bee furnished with forraine commodities». ⁶ Commerce was clearly described as crucial for English empire-building, but as its discursive context reflects, the Navigation Act of 1651 intervened in an international, seventeenth century debate about the nature of imperial «free trade». Hugo Grotius sparked the debate in 1609 with the publication of *Mare Liberum*. Here, the Dutch jurist argued that unlike landed territory, the sea could not be divided into politically exclusive dominions; it was in the interest of each state, and thus of humankind in general, to leave the seas to open navigation and thus unrestricted commerce. ⁷ John Selden, taking the opposite tack in his 1635 book, *Mare Clausum*, found that England's imperial destiny lay in circumscribing English waters, both in Europe and in ports abroad, to English commerce, to protect English sovereignty and the prosperity that such

⁵ Digges 1615, 2-3.

⁶ Robinson 1641, 20.

⁷ Grotius 1609.

sovereignty assured when applied to England's watery dominions.⁸

The English free trade debates of the Revolutionary era fell along the ideological fault lines established by Grotius and Selden. In a 1651 pamphlet entitled *The Advancement of Merchandize*, Thomas Violet argued that free trade should end merchant monopolies among English merchants and allow foreign merchants to trade in English ports at home and abroad. He warned Parliament that «we must match the Dutch at their own weapons, and give them as great privileges, as they have given to our Clothiers [...] and by this way you will make England truly the Empress of the Sea, when every Sea-Port-Town will be an Amsterdam».⁹ A year later, the Republic's propagandist in chief, Marchmont Nedham, sought to bolster public support for the Navigation Act and by virtue the naval war with the Dutch by translating Selden's two volume *Mare Clausum* into English under the title, *Of the Dominion, or Ownership, of the Sea*.

Free trade under the auspices of the Navigation Act pleased English merchants who had wished to do away with pre-existing commercial monopolies. The Act, however, proved equally unpopular with English sugar planters in the West Indies, who had depended on Dutch merchants for many commodities; the most profitable of these so-called commodities came in human form in the way of enslaved Africans. Without Dutch slave traders, as the planters knew, the wildly lucrative sugar boom on Barbados would never have exploded. The Council and Assembly of Barbados responded to the Navigation Act with a *Declaration* that they published not in London but in The Hague, obviously to reach their Dutch commercial allies in the most direct fashion possible. The *Declaration* flatly stated that the people of Barbados were refusing to obey the Act, particularly the clause forbidding «all Forraigners

⁸ Selden 1635. See Book I: xx-xxiii for the colonial and imperial implications of Selden's argument.

⁹ Violet 1651, 10-11.

from holding any commerce with the inhabitants of this Island». For the islanders, restricting commercial liberty in this way was economically unfeasible. According to the *Declaration*, they had depended upon «the Dutch for their subsistence». They would, furthermore, never «be so ungratefull to the Dutch for former help as to deny them or any other Nation the freedome of our Ports and Protection of our laws». Moreover, as the colonists observed, the Dutch sold «us [commodities] much cheaper to us then [the merchants] of our own nation». The Barbadians also felt that the Navigation Act was as politically unjust as it was economically destructive. The colonists had settled Barbados without any assistance from a far off Parliament that proposed to rule over their commercial lives even though the colonists had «no representatives no persons there chosen [by them] to propose or consent». The *Declaration* concluded by calling for «free trade both at home & abroad», a customary liberty that they argued had long been enjoyed by all «true Englishmen» [*Declaration* 1651, 1-5].¹⁰

A Declaration Set forth by the Lord Lieutenant General (and) the Gentlemen of the Council and Assembly (The Hague, 1651) [The Barbados Assembly's declaration against the Navigation Act], 1-2

Shall we be bound to the Government and Lordship of a Parliament in which we have no Representatives, or persons chosen by us, for there to propound and consent to what might be needful to us, as also to oppose and dispute all what should tend to our disadvantage and harm? In truth, this would be a slavery far exceeding all that the English nation hath yet suffered. And we doubt not but the courage which hath brought us thus far out of our own country, to seek our beings and livelihoods in this wild country, will maintain us in our freedoms; without which our lives will be uncomfortable to us... By the abovesaid Act... [foreign] nations are forbidden to hold any correspondence or traffic with the inhabitants of this island; although all the ancient inhabitants know very well, how greatly they have been obliged to those of the Low Countries for their subsistence, and how difficult it would have been for us, without their assistance, ever to have inhabited these places, or to have brought them into order; and we are yet daily sensible, what necessary comfort they bring to us daily, and that they do sell their commodities a great deal cheaper than our own nation will do; but this comfort must be taken

¹⁰ *Declaration* 1651, 1-2.

from us by those whose will must be a law to us: but we declare, that we will never be so unthankful to the Netherlanders for their former help and assistance, as to deny or forbid them, or any other nation, the freedom of our harbors, and the protection of our laws, by which they may continue, if they please, all freedom of commerce and traffic with us.

The planters also knew that English slave traders within and outside Parliament had written the bill in part to promote their own investments, and so the planters regarded the Navigation Act as the height of corruption that had «enslaved» them to a regime of grasping regicides. Having established their arbitrary government in England through the sword, the Revolutionaries had violated the rights of free born Englishmen in the colonies to protect the property they had accumulated through «free trade», which they, in contrast to Parliament, defined as nationally unrestricted commerce. Here we see how partisans in the Navigation Act debates used the same language of liberty to define conflicting policies, a discursive pattern that also marked the struggle over liberty of conscience. But free trade discourse revolved around a common economic interest that surpassed the historical significance of rhetorical patterns. For both merchants in England and English planters in the West Indies, free trade meant the freedom to trade slaves.¹¹

Exploring the ideologically-conflicted discourse of freedom and slavery in the age of the English Revolution becomes even more illuminating when, in circum-Atlantic fashion, we move from England and Barbados and back to Rhode Island. In 1652, as the debates over free trade and, by virtue, the future of the English slave trade, began in earnest, Samuel Gorton steered legislation through the Rhode Assembly to end slavery and slave trading in the colony. As the ordinance stated,

«whereas there is a common course practiced amongst English men to buy negers to that end they may have them for service or slaves forever;

¹¹ For the Barbados sugar boom and ensuing boom in slave trading to the island, see Gragg 1995, 65-84; Menard 2006.

for the preventing of such practices among us, let it be ordered, that black mankind or white being forced by covenant bond, or otherwise be set free as the manner is with the English servants». The law also prohibited colonists from selling their slaves by charging a fine, 40 pounds sterling, for any who attempted such a sale; the fine was more than twice the going rate for a slave in Barbados; in this way, the assembly legislated the profitability out of the slave trade. The Rhode Island abolition law was the first of its kind in the early modern Atlantic, and it was informed by knowledge of slavery and slave trading around the Atlantic. The first clause of the ordinance makes this clear, taking note that it had become «common course amongst Englishmen to buy negers to have them as slaves forever.¹²

Rhode Island's 1652 abolition law printed in John Russell Bartlett, *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in New England, 1636-1663*, 2 vols. Providence, RI, 1857), 1:242-243

Ordered, whereas there is a common course practiced amongst English men to buy negers to that end they may have them for service or slaves forever; for the preventing of such practices among us, let it be ordered, that no black mankind or white being forced by covenant bond, or otherwise, to serve any man or his assigns longer than ten years, or untill they come to be twenty four years of age, if they be taken in under fourteen, from the time of their coming within the liberties of this colony. And at the end or term of ten years to set them free, as the manner is with the English servants. And that man that will not let them go free, or shall sell them away elsewhere, to that end that they may be enslaved to others for a long time, he or they shall forfeit to the colony forty pounds.

Importantly, five years before the abolition ordinance, Rhode Island had ratified a religiously tolerant, republican constitution entitled *The Acts and Orders of Rhode Island*. The whole body of the colony's freeman had met in their separate towns, where they participated in drafting, deliberating, and ratifying the constitution, which rejected the ancient constitutional mix of monarchical, aristocratic, and democratic forms of government, stating explicitly «that the form of government established

¹² Russell Bartlett 1636-1663 [1857], 1:242-243.

is democratical; that is to say, a government held by ye free and voluntary consent of all, or the greater part of the free inhabitants». Although democracy was commonly held to be the gateway to anarchy in the early modern period, the *Acts and Orders* declared that far from having democracy «prove an anarchy and so a common tyranny», the Rhode Islanders believed that «popular» government prevented anarchy by making elected officials directly accountable to the people and the rule of law, thus ensuring against the lawlessness of arbitrary government.¹³

While historians of republican thought in the English Revolution have largely neglected the influence of colonial experience, contemporaries did not, as we know from Winslow's discursive conflation of Gorton's radicalism with Leveller republicanism. Putting the *Acts and Orders* in Atlantic context is particularly revealing in this regard. The Rhode Islanders established their constitution in 1647, the same year that the Levellers proposed their own, called the *Agreement of the People*, which like its colonial counterpart, combined the ideals of religious toleration with democratic republicanism. Linking the radical republican programs that unfolded diachronically in Old and New England, we see how the Atlantic dimensions of Leveller ideology carried the struggle against political slavery into a protest against the rise of economic slavery in the colonies. The historical significance of this process can hardly be understated, as it undid the classical link between slavery and republican liberty, with the former providing the material foundations for the latter to thrive. Indeed, in the midst of the English Revolution's imperial turn, the classical inheritance of the slave-holding republic was experiencing an early modern renaissance, one that would be affirmed over a century later by the framers of the Constitution of the United States. While many southern delegates to the Constitutional Convention sought to guard against their political «enslavement» by ensuring their liberty in the property of their slaves, the colonial radicals of the

¹³ Russell Bartlett 1857, 1: 38–65.

Atlantic's first revolutionary age believed that the tyranny and vice that flowed from slavery and slave trading would destroy republican virtue in a reformed commonwealth.

In conclusion, the discourses of liberty of conscience, liberty of the body, and commercial liberty evolved in a historically interdependent fashion, circulating around the Atlantic world within the wider discourse of freedom and slavery that characterized the political culture of Revolutionary England and its colonies. From the magistrate's perspective, Samuel Gorton's liberty of conscience, once made a civil liberty, would enslave the body politic to the arbitrary power of democratic seditionists bent on the anarchic project of usurping the divinely ordained prerogatives of the puritan magistracy. But from Gorton's perspective, the puritan magistracy's discretionary power to enforce religious conformity on behalf of the public good actually usurped the divine sovereignty of the believer's conscience. From the perspective of Gorton and the antinomian radicals of Rhode Island, only democratic forms of government could protect the divine prerogative of universal religious freedom. Complete liberty of conscience was critical for antinomians, as spiritual experimentation provided the way to discern the true path to reformation. Magistrates, however, reconfigured spiritual experimentation into sedition, producing in Gorton's own words, a condition of political «slavery» that had led the court to claim «dominion over bodies» via hard labor in chains as the ultimate means to preserve its own misguided notion of religious liberty. Turning to the debate over the Navigation Act, both sides used the term «free trade» to define their support for antithetical imperial policies regarding mercantile competition. But the contentious discourse that evolved from a shared political language nonetheless promoted a common, commercially lucrative goal: free trade in any discursive guise would promote slave trading. Transcending the rhetorical dialectics that wed English liberty to the slave trade via the promotion of free trade, radical Rhode Islanders tried to abolish the slave trade, viewing it not as a form of commercial liberty, but as a threat to

republican liberty. In the end, without an Atlantic perspective on English Revolutionary discourse, recognition of such a milestone in early modern political thought remains impossible.

Finally, the Atlantic context that illuminates the abolitionist dimensions of radical republican discourse in the English Revolution also sheds light on the limitations of the linguistic turn in the study of political thought. To put a finer point on the matter, the real question here involves the emphasis that historians of the Cambridge School of political thought have placed upon language, as if it more than anything else can reveal the mutability and historically transient meanings of terms like freedom and slavery. Although it has contributed invaluablely to our understanding of the history of ideas in the early modern period, the Cambridge School has confined the study of slavery in the English Revolution to the discursive realm, using it as a mere metaphor for the condition of subjection to political tyranny. Yet the Revolutionary period marked the rise of plantation slavery in the English Atlantic; not coincidentally, the discourse of freedom and slavery in the free trade debate occasioned by the Navigation Act reflected a turf battle over how the slave trade was to be conducted in the West Indies. Colonial radicals in Rhode Island transcended this debate by passing an abolitionist law that conveyed their belief that the tyranny of chattel slavery would corrupt the virtue of republican liberty in a just commonwealth. To be grounded in any kind of authentic reality, the history of political thought in the English Revolution, like the history of any political event, must take into account material contexts as well the linguistic and high political. Without broadening the contextual universe of discursive analysis, we risk reducing the history of freedom and slavery in the English Revolution to the interplay of rhetorical devices, when it ultimately produced the original attempt to equate republican liberty with the end of chattel slavery.

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