

Condorcet, *Reflections on Negro Slavery* (1781)

Marie Jean de Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet (1743-94) published a powerful pamphlet attacking slavery in 1781, under a pseudonym. This nobleman described the slave system as a crime and demanded its abolition. He associated the abolition of slavery with other reforms like civil rights for Protestants, the elimination of the last vestiges of serfdom and the rights of women. In 1788, Condorcet helped to found a French Society of the Friends of the Blacks based on earlier groups. Affiliated with the Girondins, he was executed during the Terror for opposing the growing power of the state.

...

My Friends,

Although I am not the same color as you, I have always regarded you as my brothers. Nature formed you with the same spirit, the same reason, the same virtues as whites. . . . Your tyrants will reproach me with uttering only commonplaces and having nothing but chimerical ideas: indeed, nothing is more common than the maxims of humanity and justice; nothing is more chimerical than to propose to men that they base their conduct on them. . . .

Reducing a man to slavery, buying him, selling him, keeping him in servitude: these are truly crimes, and crimes worse than theft. In effect, they take from the slave, not only all forms of property but also the ability to acquire it, the control over his time, his strength, of everything that nature has given him to maintain his life and satisfy his needs. To this wrong they add that of taking from the slave the right to dispose of his own person. . . .

If follows from our principles that the inflexible justice to which kings and nations are subject like their citizens requires the destruction of slavery. We have shown that this destruction will harm neither commerce nor the wealth of a nation because it would not result in any decrease in cultivation. We have shown that the master had no right over his slave, that the act of keeping him in servitude is not the enjoyment of a property right but a crime; that in freeing the slave the law does not attack property but rather ceases to tolerate an action which it should have punished with the death penalty. The sovereign therefore owes no compensation to the master of slaves just as he owes none to the thief whom a court judgment has deprived of the possession of a stolen good. The public tolerance of a crime may make punishment impossible but it cannot grant a real right to the profit from the crime.

The protection accorded to rapacity against the Negroes, which in England and Holland is the effect of the general corruption of these nations, has for its cause in Spain and in France only the prejudices of the public and the taking unawares of governments that are deceived equally about the necessity of slavery and the supposed political importance about both the necessity of slavery and the supposed political importance of the sugar colonies [in the Caribbean]. A foreigner's writing can be especially useful in France, for it will not be so easy to destroy the effect of a single word by saying that it is the work of a *philosophe* [supporter of Enlightenment reform]. This name, so respectable elsewhere, has become an insult in this nation. . . . If writers protest against the slavery of Negroes, it is the *philosophes*, their opponents say, thinking they have won their case. . . . If some people have been saved by inoculation from the dangers of

smallpox, it's by the advice of the *philosophes*. . . . If the custom of breaking the bones of the accused between boards to make them tell the truth has been recently suppressed, it's because the *philosophes* inveighed against the practice; and it is in spite of the *philosophes* that France has been lucky enough to save a remnant of the old laws and conserve the precious practice of applying torture to condemned criminals. . . . Who is it who dares to complain in France about the barbarism of the criminal laws, about the cruelty with which the French Protestants have been deprived of the rights of man and citizen, about the harshness and injustice of the laws against smuggling and on hunting? Who had the culpable boldness to pretend that it would be useful to the people in accord with justice to insure liberty of commerce and industry? . . . We can see clearly that it was surely the *philosophes*.

Source: Marie Jean de Caritat, "Reflections on Negro Slavery," in *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History*, ed. and trans. by Lynn Hunt (Boston: Bedford, 1996), 55-57.