A Closer Look at Paul Cuffe's Emigrationist Project:
Bridging the Gap Between Two Generations of Antislavery Activists: 1808-1817

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One of the challenges of studying antislavery in America over the long period spanning the years 1776 to 1865 is to avoid the traditional dichotomy between a « first wave » of antislavery activism between 1776 and 1830, and a second, immediatist, wave between 1830 and 1865. In her major synthesis, Manisha Sinha does not really attempt to question that traditional division, though she insists on the necessity to see antislavery as just one movement embracing the whole period (Sinha). There are many ways to address that issue and show how the first decades of the 19th century were a turning-point in the movement (Newman). One obvious solution is to focus on one individual embodying the transition between one type of activism and another. In my paper, I am going to focus on Paul Cuffe, a fascinating man whose actions in the 1810s heralded 19th century black nationalism but at the same time still benefited from the kind of international networks and support which had characterized antislavery in the late 18th century. Though his plan to return to Africa might suggest that he anticipated the creation of the American Colonization Society, Cuffe's project must be studied for its own sake and framed within the context of the international collaboration which had existed between activists on both sides of the Atlantic since the 1770s, and was then declining (Oldfield).

While the first two decades of the 19th century have been described as "the neglected period of antislavery in America" (Adams), they must be contrasted with victories for antislavery forces in Great-Britain, and a growing overall commitment of the British state at the global level on behalf of antislavery (Huzzey). Starting in 1787, British abolitionists had used Sierra Leone, on the African coast, to settle freed slaves there. The abolitionists' purpose was not simply to expel this black population which was not thriving in London, or Nova Scotia. They meant to bring « civilization » to Africa, and to crush any colonial slave traffic between Africa and the Americas, by developing tropical crops in Africa. Their reasoning went as follows (Benezet): if tropical crops such as sugar or coffee could be grown in Africa by local farmers, this would create such an economic incentive that local African kings would no longer be interested in the slave trade. Instead of trafficking in slaves, they would re-direct their energies to commercial trade with Europe, and Caribbean colonies would no longer serve any purpose.

Those British initiatives, however originally unsuccessful in practice (Hochschild), did elicit positive reactions among the communities of free Blacks in the North of the United States. British literature on the « colonization » of Africa was circulated in their associations (Fortin). African-Americans were interested in the fate of Africa, drawing community pride from their ancestral land which was presented positively in the abolitionist and philosophical literature of the late eighteenth century (Benezet, Volney). Consequently, they could not but rejoice when the British state decisively took action on behalf of Africa, or so it seemed to them. Indeed, in 1807, Britain, the largest importer of slaves from Africa, abolished the slave trade, but also turned Sierra Leone into a crown colony (Schwartz). In addition, the "African Institution," a British association also created in 1807, intended to use Sierra Leone as a point of entry on the continent to spread commercial, moral and religious "civilization" and turn the tide of slave trafficking inside Africa. Enlisting "civilized" African-Americans in this enterprise could be very helpful as they could set an example of "good conduct" and "religious principle" (Wiggins 56).

In 1808, relations between the United States and Britain were already strained given the context of the Napoleonic wars, but they had not yet reached the breaking point (Rossignol). Antislavery networks such as the Quaker Atlantic connection could still be

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active on both sides of the Atlantic (Davis). James Pemberton, a Quaker and the president of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, in close contact with his London fellow-Quakers, started urging Paul Cuffe, a wealthy black Boston shipowner and Quaker, to support the British "African Institution" in 1808. Born in 1759 of native American and African parentage, Cuffe had been freed by his master in the mid-1740s. His commitment to the cause of black rights became particularly visible during the War of Independence when he refused to pay taxes to the state of Massachusetts since free black men like him did not have the right to vote in Massachusetts. His petitions on the subject led to Massachusetts granting black men the vote in 1783 as the state abolished slavery unilaterally.

Convinced by his fellow-Quaker Pemberton, Cuffe started organizing the emigration of free Blacks from the United States in 1809 (Wiggins 81). Since this was to be a voluntary departure, not a coerced migration, as the American Colonization Society was later to plan, some historians have considered Paul Cuffe as the forerunner of black nationalism and panafricanism (Fortin). But first, Paul Cuffe went to Sierra Leone on a reconnaissance trip between 1810 and 1812. There he met with settlers and local kings about whom he talks respectfully in his correspondence. Beyond settling African-Americans in Africa, his goal was also to develop trade between Sierra Leone and America through a dedicated company, the Friendly Society (Wiggins 108-109). Returning to the United States in the spring of 1812, just as war broke out between the United States and Britain, Cuffe toured Northern cities speaking about the benefits of emigration and colonization to black audiences. As a result of his endeavors, a chapter of the British "African Institution" was created in Philadelphia. James Forten, a wealthy sail-maker from that city, became president and Russell Parott, another influential black Philadelphian, vice-president (Tomek). Other chapters opened in New York and Boston. In the fall of 1813, as war was raging between the United States and Britain, Cuffe even requested funding from Congress to help African Americans move to Africa, in order to "promote the civilization of Africa." This was not exactly the same thing as the type of colonization later proposed by the American Colonization Society, as according to this plan, African-Americans were only to go to Sierra Leone on a temporary basis, on some sort of humanitarian mission, even if those terms are totally anachronistic (Harris, Wiggins 252-253).

Though Congress refused this request for funding, Cuffe's correspondence in 1814 and 1815 reveals the growing interest of African-Americans in the North of the United States for emigration to Sierra Leone, whether permanent or temporary. This correspondence also underlines Cuffe's continued contacts with the British "African Institution" (Wiggins 297), as well as the implication of white antislavery activists such as Jedidiah Morse or Samuel J. Mills, later to be a key member of the ACS (Wiggins 341-343). As he was preparing for a new trip to Sierra Leone in 1815, Cuffe laid out his analysis of the complex Sierra Leone situation: on the one hand, he was aware that the recently-arrived black settlers felt let down and even swindled by European traders, and were having trouble developing their colony; on the other hand, he could see that African kings resented the end of the slave trade, which meant the collapse of their economic prosperity (Wiggins 341-343).

Receiving no news from Britain but enjoying the support of the free African-American community in the United States, Cuffe did organize an emigration journey to Sierra Leone in the fall of 1815, once the war between the United States and Britain was over. Eighteen men-including one methodist minister-, as well as twenty women and children, embarked for Africa under his leadership. On arriving, Cuffe realized he was not welcome, and he came back to Boston a poorer man since the venture was not commercially successful. Yet he was still convinced of how necessary an American "civilizing" influence was for the African population: one of the historians who has written on Cuffe, Fortin, even calls his point of view "imperialistic". However, the study of Cuffe's correspondence confirms his continuous respectful and nuanced approach of the black settlers, as well as of the native people in Sierra Leone. He had not lost hope in developing connections with Sierra Leone since he again applied to Congress for funding in 1816, to no avail.

By 1816, when Cuffe returned from Africa, the question of emigration was starting to reach beyond the African-American community: it was raised by the annual convention of abolitionist societies in its 1816 meeting (Tomek); and in December 1816, the first meeting of the ACS was organized, leading most African-Americans to vigorously reject a plan that denied their American citizenship (Jones). Paul Cuffe had advised two of the founders of the ACS, evangelical ministers Samuel J. Mills and Robert Finley (Mills had taken part in the creation of the first American missionary society to Africa and the rest of the world, the American Board of Commissioners) but was alarmed at the racism of some of its founders (Wiggins 490-493). Cuffe died in September 1817, at a time when most African-Americans were starting to rethink their antislavery positions in the wake of the creation of the ACS.

Conclusion

Among the "Black Founding Fathers" (Newman), Paul Cuffe stands out as a "transitional figure" highly revealing of the shifts taking place in the early nineteenth century regarding slavery and antislavery in the United States. First, his initiatives took place within the framework of the international network of antislavery activists in the Atlantic world which had been most visible and influential from 1787 to 1808 but was already collapsing after 1808: while Britain was seriously committing itself to the abolition of the slave trade internationally, making it a central pillar of its foreign policy (Huzzey, Cottias and Rossignol), the United States was opening new land to the West, making possible the rapid development of cotton cultivation and the rise of a second slavery across the nation (Tomich). Second, his promotion of emigration to Africa was revealing of the ideology of the first antislavery movement as it was based in a belief in the development of fair trade with Africa but it was also deeply tinged with the rising preoccupation with the "civilization" and "christianization" of Africa in Britain and the United States after the War of 1812. By 1815 the image of Africa was definitely changing in western eyes, even in the eyes of abolitionists, or maybe especially in the eyes of abolitionists. Third, Cuffe's dogged support of emigration in the early 1810s reflects the growing realization on the part of African-Americans that prejudice and discrimination were rising, not declining, in the new American nation.

All in all, Cuffe's efforts indicate that antislavery in the United States can no longer be studied only through the prism of a first and then a second wave, as still maintained by Manisha Sinha. It would probably be more appropriate to study antislavery around a series of moments, one more or less gradually fading into the next. First would come " the revolutionary and post-revolutionary moment between 1754 and 1800," when hope was raised due to a series of emancipations in the North and upper South. Then a second moment could be defined, and called "the rise of a second slavery" or "towards immediatist abolitionism," according to one's point of view. This second moment would roughly span the years between 1800 and 1830, and more specifically the years between 1815 and 1831. The "Garrisonian moment" would follow from 1831 to 1846: those were years when the ideas of the abolitionist movement had not yet managed to conquer Northern public opinion, and moral suasion, Garrison's motto, still retained its hold over the most active abolitionists. Finally, the "republican moment" would cover the years between 1848 and 1850, when Northern public opinion started radicalizing in the wake of the Mexican-American War and the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, and 1865/1875, when Republicans under Lincoln, then Grant, did lead the fight against a Southern ideology which was to conquer the nation at the end of the century. But that is another story…

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