

# Is Violence Sometimes a Legitimate Right? An African-American Dilemma

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## Abstract

The contrast, often painted in simplistic colours, between Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X as civil rights campaigners bolsters an erroneous reading of the freedom struggle of African-Americans, leaving the impression that the resort to violence and self-defence propounded by Malcolm X was a purely circumstantial departure from the general strategy of the civil rights movement.

In fact, both of them reflected long on the capacity of violence and *a contrario* of non-violence to bring about political and social transformation in the context of the extreme brutality and oppression being suffered by African-Americans. Their dilemma stemmed from an old intellectual tradition of the America of the slave period. Well before the ideas of Gandhi won over the African-American elite, and even before Henry David Thoreau laid the theoretical basis for civil disobedience, African slaves gave thought to the legitimacy and effectiveness of violence to amend their situation. The importance of the non-violent movement in the United States and the historical significance of Martin Luther King cannot be understood unless a true measure is taken of the anti-slavery struggle. While within the religious domain, the Black Church played a major role in dissuading violence, secular thought in favour of legitimate forceful rebellion also found itself confronted by a counter-argument which advanced the power of social change and resistance to injustice that non-violence could effect. This article particularly addresses the challenges to their consciences that confronted the militants of non-violence in their campaign for the abolition of slavery and notably those facing the central figure of that struggle, the former slave become the apostle of liberation, Frederick Douglass.

The contrast, often painted in simplistic colours, between Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X as civil rights campaigners bolsters an erroneous reading of the freedom struggle of African-Americans, with the fame of the Nobel Peace Laureate in effect leaving the impression that the

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resort to violence and self-defence propounded by Malcolm X was a purely circumstantial departure from the general strategy of the civil rights movement, a deleterious radicalization which was associated with a demographic shift in the movement in the 1960s (where young Black people, particularly from the ghettos of Northern cities, did not show the Baptist faith-oriented endurance of those from the South), and which was ideologically influenced by the *Nation of Islam* or more particularly by the high-powered personality of its spokesman, Malcolm X, who projected a greater level of indignation and intransigence than the sober Reverend King.

In reality, both of these prophets of change reflected long on the capacity of violence and a *contrario* of non-violence to bring about political and social transformation in the context of the extreme brutality and oppression being suffered by African-Americans. We should not be deceived that they both faced a deep-rooted dilemma, stemming from an old intellectual tradition of America of the slave period. Well before the ideas of Gandhi won over the African-American elite, and even before Henry David Thoreau laid the theoretical basis for civil disobedience, African slaves transported to America in the holds of slave ships gave consideration to the legitimacy and effectiveness of violence to amend their situation. Whereas, in Europe, Cesare Beccaria<sup>1</sup> was advancing the philosophical principles of *Habeas Corpus*, did not the slave have an equally inalienable right to recover the sovereignty of his own body, 'by whatever means necessary' as Malcolm X was to say?

The historical fact of slavery in America constitutes the primordial<sup>2</sup> and foundational violence done to American democracy. The importance of the non-violent movement in the United States and the historical significance of Martin Luther King cannot be understood unless a true measure is taken of the anti-slavery struggle there, without which there would have been no reflection on the effects of civil disobedience. While, within the religious domain, the Black Church played a major role in dissuading violence, and since Christianity was the foundation on which the non-violent convictions of the period were based, an alternative strand of Christian thought first challenged then refuted the capacity of non-violence to produce real social change. It is therefore appropriate to give some attention to the dialectic approach of violence within a society subjected to hyper-violence. This article particularly addresses the challenges to their consciences that confronted the militants of non-violence in their campaign for the abolition of slavery and notably those facing the central figure of that struggle, the former slave become the apostle of liberation, Frederick Douglass.

## **A crusade against evil**

American slaves certainly did not wait for the benevolence shown towards them of certain Whites to engage in various forms of daily non-insurrectional resistance (from sabotage to escape), but they also sought on occasion to free themselves from their chains by force and bloodshed. The shockwaves of the victorious slave revolution in Santo Domingo, which gave birth to the first Black republic of Haiti in 1804, reached as far as the southern states of the United States and provoked a number of seditious initiatives. In the summer of 1800, the Virginia slave Gabriel Prosser planned a widespread revolt against the local authorities, which, although the plans for it were leaked before they could be put into effect, nevertheless inspired certain other similar initiatives (Egerton 1993). But these revolts were crushed and the collective repression accompanied by drastic legislation made these attempts critical and doomed to failure. For their part, free Blacks in the northern states initiated early activities of political militancy against slavery in the South, as witnessed by the creation of the first Afro-American newspaper in the United States in 1827 by Samuel Cornish and John Russwurm, bearing the unequivocal title of *Freedom's Journal*. They called on Blacks to attain through education and political engagement their rightful place as free Americans which was their due, promised by God but also by the United States Constitution.

Although they were patient, they nevertheless placed their adversaries on notice: ‘The chain is long, but if they pull it too hard, it could well break’ (quoted in Hurtado 2009: 14).

But it is William Lloyd Garrison (1805–1879) who is considered as the first abolitionist of national prominence. A White Baptist, he drew together around his newspaper, *The Liberator*, launched in 1831, the militant abolitionists of the North-Eastern states (notably Massachusetts). Like the Quakers in their quest for religious perfection, Garrison and his friends saw in the recourse to violence a breach of the injunctions of Christ. Slavery was the supreme form of violence, a capital sin: but for these militants in no case could one combat that evil by resorting oneself to betraying the Gospels. The use of violence, even in self-defence, was thus fundamentally inimical to the majority line of the anti-slavery campaigners. However, in the very same year that *The Liberator* was established to carry this message, there occurred the most dramatic episode of the period for the Southern plantation owners: Nat Turner’s revolt. Assisted by 70 other slaves, Turner murdered his owners and more than 50 other Whites near Southampton, Virginia. Eventually captured and condemned to death, he confided his purposes to his lawyer, who published the ‘Confessions of Nat Turner’, in which the rebel declared he was following instructions from God which had inspired his acts. A terrifying declaration for Southerners, this proved also troubling for those supporting the liberation of the slaves: should these revolts be encouraged in order to destabilize the ‘Peculiar Institution’, whereby the martyrdom of unjustly punished slaves would assist the mobilization of minds, or was such unleashing of violence to be absolutely proscribed, whatever the nature of the oppression suffered by the slave? On the one hand, while the justification of slavery by reference to the Bible provided an argument for its supporters, the early conversion of Blacks to Christianity arose in reality out of a recognition of their rights under nature. Baptism brought the slave within the City of God and its equivalent on earth – one could not baptise a thing or an animal. That Nat Turner presented himself as a soldier of Christ reinforced that contradiction. Indeed, the slave baptized as Christian by his owners became implicitly recognized under law as a person and a subject under law, and hence as a man. In 1834, young Presbyterian seminarians in Lane, Ohio who were militant abolitionists organized a theological debate on the nature of a slave’s freedom and his capacity to act of his own volition. In effect, the legal and moral status of the slave, whether he was a man, an animal, or a possessed object, lay at the heart of American debates on the legitimacy of slavery. The seminarians concluded that ‘God has created the black man as a moral agent, the guardian of his own happiness, the master of his own powers, the responsible arbiter of his own choices’. Since their enslavement was the complete negation of this power of free choice, was it not a moral duty to use violence to break the chains of injustice?

The tensions within the abolitionist movement over the very precise question of the legitimacy of any slave uprising remained great right up until the outbreak of ultimate violence in the Civil War in 1861. Although the official line of the anti-slavery campaigners has been radically and absolutely opposed to violence right from the beginning, a fundamental fracture had in reality taken place as early as 1829, even before the establishment of the chief reformist organizations, when the abolitionist David Walker had published his ‘Appeal’ for the revolt of all slaves. Born a free Black in North Carolina but having settled in Boston, the Mecca of the anti-slavery militants, David Walker (1785–1830) had a part in the creation of the *Freedom’s Journal* where he published numerous articles, while moving in the inter-racial circles of the anti-slavery movement. His pamphlet posed a real challenge to the newly forming abolitionist movement in that, while he certainly advocated the way of ‘moral persuasion’, this was to be backed up by a recourse to insurrection, which in Walker’s view was the only way of demonstrating to the Whites the humanity of the Blacks who, through such revolt, would invalidate the argument that Blacks were ‘naturally’ servile. Walker’s text begins with a terrible preamble:

... we Coloured People of the United States are the most wretched, degraded and abject set of beings that ever lived since the world began down to the present day, and that the white Christians of America, who hold us in slavery [...] treat us more cruel and barbarous than any Heathen nation did any people whom it had subjected [...] but they will curse the day when they saw us. (Walker: 28 September 1829, online)

For Walker, the only master was God, and since the Whites would not admit the intrinsic liberty of coloured people, revolt was a final argument. It was not just for him a means for obtaining the formal abolition of slavery but equally an argument for convincing Whites of the fundamental equality between the races, whether it be physical or moral (Woodward-Burns, undated). Addressing the slaves of the South, he forcefully declared:

Believe this, that it is no more harm for you to kill a man, who is trying to kill you, than it is for you to take a drink of water when thirsty; in fact, the man who will stand still and let another murder him, is worse than an infidel. (Walker 1829: 30)

This 'extremist' orientation of Walker was deprecated by the Garrisonians who, while not forming the main body of the Black liberation movement (indeed, many divisions and splits took place between moderates, 'anarchists', pacifists and radicals – cf. Perry 1995), were its principal voice. Garrison, the movement's figurehead, responded to Walker in *The Liberator* with a counter-address to slaves which excluded any idea of acceptable violence. His poem 'Universal Emancipation', in the same issue, ends with the following words:

Not by the sword shall your deliverance be;  
 Not by the shedding of your masters' blood;  
 Not by rebellion – or foul treachery,  
 Upspringing suddenly, like swelling flood:  
 Revenge and rapine ne'er did bring forth good.  
 God's *time is best!* – nor will it long delay:  
 Even now your barren cause begins to bud,  
 And glorious shall the fruit be! – Watch and pray,  
 For, lo! the kindling dawn, that ushers in the day!  
 ('Universal Emancipation', *The Liberator*, 1 January 1831: 3)

Garrison, who in 1833 founded The American Anti-Slavery Society<sup>3</sup> to federate the various disparate abolitionist bodies then existing, gathered together the supporters of a strictly non-violent line five years later in the New England Non-Resistance Society, which rejected any form of violence, be it by the State or by private individuals. Opposed both to the death penalty as to the idea of legitimate defence, Garrison refused to acknowledge any legal validity to the country's institutions, whether secular or religious, because they were in his view complicit by nature in the continued existence of slavery. The only governance that he recognized was that of God. It is interesting to note that Garrison named his association (and its eponymous newspaper) the society of 'non-resistants' (rather than that of the 'non-violent'), for he believed any form of resistance against another is already a form of coercion (Chernus 2004: 36). Drawing inspiration from the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew, where Christ declared: 'Do not offer resistance to the wicked', his supporters tended towards a doctrine of anarchism by calling on their fellow citizens to reject involvement with all human institutions, from churches to governments. They consequently demanded to be exempt from all military service, but equally refused participation in politics. To be non-resistant meant submitting to the natural order of things as willed by God and to remain on the fringes of laws in a posture of pacifist civil disobedience. If the imposition

of government on men was in itself a use of force contrary to the Biblical commandments, the recourse to arms by individuals against a government, however illegitimate and criminal it might be, would constitute an even graver sin.<sup>4</sup> Their insubordination was expressed even more markedly when they disavowed *a mezza voce* even the patriotic heroes of the American Independence by radically disassociating themselves from them:

*Their principles led them to wage war against their oppressors, and to spill human blood like water, in order to be free. Ours forbid the doing of evil that good may come [...] (Garrison, The Liberator, 14 December 1833, in Demos 1964: 505)*

This ‘non-resistant’ position was in some respects untenable (and many activists distanced themselves from it) because it embodied a fundamental contradiction: how could one reconcile the monastic demand for withdrawal from the violent world of men, disassociating oneself from involvement in a society tainted with the sin of slavery in pursuit of the ideal of self-reliance promoted by Emerson and Thoreau, but at the same time claim to be the revolutionary agents of the divine Word whose goal was thoroughly to reform from within the society of men?

Incontestably, Garrison and his fellow campaigners, both Black and White, were part of a Christian tradition particular to the former English colonies which carried over into the political sphere a religious outlook inspired by the laments of the puritans of New England, who interpreted the scourges of the world as God’s vengeance against the sins of men, and who called for repentance to spare humanity and even greater wrath. A consequence of the Protestant ‘Second Great Awakening’ which swept the country in the 1820s, this indigenous prophetic tradition, sometimes referred to as the ‘American Jeremiad’ (Bercovitch 1978) was in reality grounded in a profound confidence that the American people were the Elect of God, recognized by Him as His own. In this sense, then, Garrison and the abolitionists were optimists.<sup>5</sup> Persuaded of America’s ability in the 1850s and 1860s to perceive the truth about the national error that needed to be corrected, they maintained a strict line of non-violence, making use only of what they termed ‘moral suasion’. Their actions consisted in providing information to their fellow citizens, in mobilizing them through press campaigns, public addresses, petitions, and occasionally boycotts. The most famous example of this approach remains the novel of Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, published in 1852, which, through its description of a Christ-like Black who stoically bears the cruelty of his masters without lifting a hand against them, was intended to edify its readers and convince them of the immorality of slavery. The faith they invested in this ‘moral suasion’, which was a heritage of Quaker theology<sup>6</sup> and of the Scottish Enlightenment, arose out of an absolute confidence in human reason and in the individual’s intuitive sense of justice, which discussion could assist to prevail. It was held that this intuition came from the element of the divine to be found in each person, and in the 1830s none doubted that the intuition of America, once properly informed, would guide the nation towards abolishing slavery. To bring this about, they appealed not only to the conscience of the country, but also to its heart: the objective to be attained was defined thus by the Black abolitionist McClune Smith as: ‘The hearts of the Whites must be changed, profoundly, entirely and eternally changed’ (Stauffer 2002: 1). Another notable figure of the movement, Gerrit Smith, affirmed: ‘Nor do we desire those who are skilled in the use of carnal weapons. For such weapons we have no use. Truth and Love are inscribed on our banners and “by these we conquer”’.<sup>7</sup>

The free Blacks of the Northern States, brought together in the National Negro Convention of 1831 (in which the remarkable Frederick Douglass took part), along with the main White abolitionist organization, the New England Anti-Slavery Society, made this fundamentally non-violent doctrine on ‘moral suasion’ the foundation principle of their struggle. Profoundly Christian in their approach, these militant idealists hoped that a swift reconciliation on a national scale would

be achieved once all Blacks were freed. Any recourse to violence, even in self-defence or to save one's own life was rejected. When another White abolitionist, Elijah Lovejoy, after being the victim on several occasions of violent actions by those against him who destroyed his Illinois printery, tried to defend himself with a hand-gun before being murdered in 1837, his friend Garrison publically condemned this final recourse, asserting: 'Lovejoy was a martyr, but strictly speaking, not a Christian martyr'.

### *The rhetorical utility of the potential for slave violence*

From the time of the arrival of the first slaves in the North American colonies in 1619, the fear of slave insurrections constituted the background of reflections on the legitimacy of the slave trade, not only among planters, who as a result placed even more justification in legal measures of coercion and in physical repression in order that fear might dissuade any inclination to revolt, but also among the opponents of slavery (see Hartmann 1997). It was thus to avoid the risk of an inter-racial bloodbath that various of these, associated together in the American Colonization Society, called in 1816 for the repatriation of slaves to Africa or for their resettlement (in Haiti or in Canada). For a time, Garrison was a supporter of this solution, as was Abraham Lincoln, who saw this as a means of soothing the anger of the enslaved people that they heard simmering. While significant revolts had taken place well before the middle of the nineteenth century,<sup>8</sup> the 1820s and 30s saw the coming to adulthood of a generation of slaves born on American soil, Christianized and in many cases of mixed blood, and thus even more susceptible to contemplating and carrying out collective insurrection (Rucker 2007). Garrison finally gave up on the colonial project in the face of the blatant inertia of the relevant institutions and of the Northern legislators who, as shown by the various laws passed and compromises on the status of the newly won territories, preferred to maintain the status quo. He renounced his initial gradualist position for one of impatient 'immediacy', observing that the threat of a bloody insurrection of the enchained slaves was growing (Stewart 2004: 73). It is estimated that, over two centuries, there were around 250 revolts and conspiracies involving at least ten slaves (Aptheker 1983). To hold back this rising tide, Garrison repeatedly appealed to the slaves to repress all desire to revolt and to show themselves 'patient, enduring and submissive while maintaining the hope that, through the blessings of the Almighty on the work of the abolitionists', they would be 'emancipated without having seen the slightest drop of blood spilt, whether their owners' or their own' (Jasinski 2007: 36). Such an attitude was paternalist, to be sure, but it was also concerned not to reinforce the stereotype of the aggressive and dangerous slave who had to be kept in irons, since the abolitionists were persuaded, in their faith as Christians, that the day of liberation would indeed come and one had to know how to await it.

But his anti-slavery argumentation can be seen to be more ambivalent than these latter remarks suggest. While condemning any recourse to arms, Garrison made a rhetorical usage of uprisings to justify his plea, hence giving de facto justification to making demonstrative use of the example supplied by the slave Nat Turner when he took up arms in 1831. *The Liberator* presented this incident as a 'sign', with Garrison resorting to the Biblical metaphor of the Apocalypse:

The first step of the earthquake, which is ultimately to shake down the fabric of oppression, leaving not one stone upon another, has been made. The first drops of blood, which are but the prelude to a deluge from the gathering clouds, have fallen. (*The Liberator*, 3 September 1831)

At once *paradeigma* (value of the example) and *tekmerion* (an indicator arising as much from reason as from divine prophecy), the unleashing of this violence provided an illustration in Garrison's rhetoric of the divine punishment foreseen for a criminal nation: 'The terrible judgement

of a wrathful God will come to complete the catastrophe of the American Republic' (quoted in Abzug 1970: 17). The guilty were none other than the slaveholding plantation owners: 'Every sentence they write, every word they speak, every resistance they make is a call upon their slaves to destroy them.' Purposefully echoing the eschatological fears of his fellow-citizens, he skilfully moulded his exercise of persuasion by presenting the racial war to come as a 'catastrophe' of Biblical proportions, the wages of imperfection of men undergoing the trial of violence in order to confront them with their sins and punish them for them. As a skilful dialectician, Garrison played the part of a prophet by according to violence the double significance of punishment (that could only be forestalled by an immediate emancipation of the slaves) and of a purgation, since Satan (meaning here, the institution of slavery) would thereafter be enchained for a thousand years. This ambivalence explains in part Garrison's awkwardness in the face of the slave uprisings. He chronicled them in his newspaper so that his horrified readers should be convinced of the necessity of action. Between the 'art of proof' and the 'art of persuasion' (Danblon 2010: 213), Garrison's rhetoric oscillated between demonstration based on reason and the expression of millenarian terror, pointing up the political utility of the slave revolt. Undeniably, their uprising was opportune for the editorials of *The Liberator*.

Garrison's adversaries and the advocates of slavery overall thus found it near impossible to accuse the abolitionists of tolerating or inciting slave revolts. In reality, up until the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, the great dilemma of the abolitionists of whether they should indeed call the slaves to revolt did not cease causing agitation in their ranks. Was insurrection just, even if fatally it would be violent?

## When a Presbyterian minister called for revolt

In 1843, at the National Negro Convention held in Buffalo, New York State, the Presbyterian minister Henry Highland Garnet made a remarkable and much noticed public speech entitled 'Address to the Slaves of the United States of America'. From the outset, his words were radical:

Brethren, arise, arise! Strike for your lives and liberties. Now is the day and the hour. Let every slave throughout the land do this, and the days of slavery are numbered. You cannot be more oppressed than you have been – you cannot suffer greater cruelties than you have already. Rather die freemen than live to be slaves. Remember that you are four millions!<sup>9</sup>

For Garnet it was time that the right, but even more, the moral duty, of the slaves to defend themselves should be recognized publically. Like Frederick Douglass a runaway slave himself, Garnet extolled the heroic acts of rebels who, like Nat Turner, had behaved as 'men'.<sup>10</sup> The most famous line of his speech was an invitation to follow their example: 'Let your motto be: resistance, resistance, resistance!'

A disciple of David Walker and of his Appeal about which he said: 'This little book has more disturbed the slave-holders of the South than any other book ever published by the American press', he resolutely called the slaves to dissidence, but in particular explained the reasons why the non-violent attitude professed by the White abolitionists of the North as by the Black Church of the South in reality symbolically abetted the servitude of the slaves. The Christ-like image of the Black, suffering passively and enduring those sufferings in the hope of a liberation in the life-to-come was for Garnet – who nevertheless was a man of faith – an exceptionally harmful commonplace. In the Scriptures expounded by American preachers, the world-below was a hell to be tolerated while awaiting the Kingdom of God. They freely quoted an extract from the letter of St Paul to the Ephesians: 'Slaves, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and

trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ [...] with good will doing service' (Eph. 6:5, 7). Garnet vigorously challenged the literal exegesis of this passage and demanded an updating of this image of servitude which nourished the racist stereotype of the plantation owners who were pleased to believe that Blacks were 'naturally' docile and deprived of the capacity for free choice. By calling out the slaves over this 'castratory identity' drawn from Christianity (Jasinski 2007: 28), he gave voice to the criticisms formulated a century later around the image of the main character of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the figure of the 'suffering servant' who never rebelled and the use of whose name would become synonymous with capitulation: the 'Uncle Toms' who sold themselves body and soul to the master. In reality, the stoicism shown by the slaves had two sides: if in part it responded to the injunctions to non-violence urged by the masters, the churches and abolitionist newspapers, it was also a form of passive resistance which, thanks notably to the resilient message of Afro-American Christianity, enabled them to survive and to transmit their cultures and traditions (Raboteau 1978). But for Garnet, father of Black nationalism, the gap was far too slender between passive endurance and humiliating complicity (Hutchinson 1972). 'In God's name, are you men?' he asked in his address. He ironically pointed out the dead-ends in the arguments of the 'non-resistants' by pointing out that these latter, by condemning the revolt of the slaves, were participating in the dehumanization of these and depriving them of their sacred right and duty, that of just resistance, in order that they, the abolitionists, might achieve the redemption of America:

Neither God, nor angels, nor just men, command you to suffer for a single moment. Therefore it is your solemn and imperative duty to use every means, both moral, intellectual, and physical that promises success. (Hutchinson 1972: 148)

To obey God does not therefore suppose remaining passive and non-violent, but to the contrary means fighting tyranny by all means possible: 'Liberty is a spirit sent from God and like its great Author is no respecter of persons' Garnet declared (in Shiffrin 1971: 45). While he himself recognized that because of the numerical superiority of the Whites, any armed uprising of the slaves, or even a widespread strike, would be doomed to fail, he nevertheless averred that no redemption was possible without shedding blood. Slaves should therefore not fear violence nor any Biblical prohibition. His message, however, remained ambiguous to the extent that he did not explicitly call for an armed uprising, but nevertheless accorded legitimacy to physical force if it aided in the liberation from alienation. As a clergyman, he reinserted 'resistance' into a Christian tradition that differed from that of the non-violent abolitionists: he reminded his audience of the moral imperative of the Christian to resist evil, but through an active resistance which did not shy away from bloodshed. The duty of the slave, precisely if he was to obey God, was to resist 'by all means possible'. In summary, there existed a God-given right to self-defence. The humanity of the slave, his status as a Christian and an American gave him a moral right to demand his freedom and, if it was refused him, to obtain it through physical action. Garnet's mottos were revolutionary: 'Give me freedom or give me death', 'We must act now or die'.

In later years he would explain how he had come to adopt such a radical position:

I am not a bloodthirsty man. I hold human life as sacred and I would even spare the life of a kidnapper as long as he did not block the road which led the slave to liberty. I long nourished the hope of seeing slavery abolished without bloodshed: but this hope has evaporated. (quoted in Hutchinson 1972: 186)

Much more distinctly than when David Walker had used the same language 20 years before, some abolitionists were beginning to reconsider the use of violence, even though this viewpoint still remained a minority one. Such a divergence with respect to the non-violent consensus of



the abolitionists provoked criticism and resistance on the part of the moderates. During the same National Negro Convention, another Black orator who was coming to prominence, Frederick Douglass, was the most eloquent proponent of the opposing view to Garnet's by declaring: 'I want to achieve liberty in a better way'. But later, Douglass was to move significantly closer to Garnet's positions.

### **Frederick Douglass, or the torment of a former apostle of non-violence**

Frederick Douglass, a close associate of William Lloyd Garrison, made dozens of public speeches calling for the emancipation of slaves in the years prior to the Civil War. He thrilled his audience by the rhetorical power of his presentations and the oratorical brilliance – exceptional for a self-taught former runaway slave – with which he delivered them. His autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, sold thousands of copies from the moment of its publication in 1845, which constituted an extraordinary success for the period. As an Afro-American intellectual of the first order, he was invited several times after 1860 to the White House by Abraham Lincoln, who was to be profoundly influenced by his irresistible call for emancipation (Stauffer 2008). But whereas, in his discussions with Lincoln, Douglass urged on the President an even greater intransigence with regard to the South, and vigorously supported the fratricidal war involving the nation, whose spilt blood was the price to be paid for the liberty of the slaves, he had been, a quarter of a century earlier, a firm partisan of non-violence. The evolution in his attitude is a remarkable illustration of the way the debate about non-violence underwent significant change in the ranks of the abolitionists.

Douglass was one of the most brilliant and erudite detractors of slavery. His arguments set forth that slaves had an inalienable right to liberty, guaranteed by Divine Will (were they not also God's creation?) but especially by the Declaration of Independence and even more so by the Constitution of the United States (in particular by its prefatory Bill of Rights). He thus significantly differed from Garrison who rejected the Constitution, a document that he saw as favouring slavery, and hence unacceptable and illegitimate. Douglass on the other hand, as Martin Luther King Jr was later to do, drew from this text the principal justification of slaves' rights. Taking inspiration from the theories of natural law of representatives of European philosophy (in particular, John Locke, Grotius, and Samuel von Pufendorf) which had inspired the Founding Fathers (Hullington 2007), Douglass declared that the enslaved Black man bore in his person his own individual right, starting with his right to property over himself. His degradation and reduction to the status of an animal was consequently, Douglass repeatedly stated, a crime against the American civil religion and the proclaimed ideals of the nation. But continuing to tolerate slavery, his contemporaries were denying the idea of America as a land of 'Manifest Destiny' which brought it to the forefront of history.

During his early years of activism, Frederick Douglass openly declared himself also to be a believer in non-violence, refusing the recourse to physical violence less for moral or religious reasons than for strategic ones. He did not believe that a mass insurrection of Black slaves would be effective in liberating them, fearing to the contrary that the bloody repression which would follow would put paid to any liberty project. Until the middle of the 1840s, he continued to repeat in his public appearances that armed revolt would be suicidal for the Black slaves, so numerically inferior were they to their oppressors. In contrast to Walker, who nevertheless had influenced him, he refused to call for an uprising, and remained faithful to the line propounded by Garrison.

Some historians have put forward the hypothesis that the most radical of the Black voices had been muted by the leading abolitionists who feared to see their movement lose its legitimacy in the

eyes of the White public. This was certainly the case for David Walker and Douglass was perhaps also caught up in this political dilemma (Hamilton 2004). He realized around the end of the 1840s that it was likely to require several more decades of public education and persuasion in America in order to achieve the long-awaited changes. In this context, while he refused to condemn those slaves who felt they had no other way out than rebellion, he expressed only *sotto voce* his support for such rebels in the circles he frequented and where the most radical in the style of Walker were not welcomed. This would explain why he resorted to fiction to imagine how an uprising might liberate the oppressed. His short story, *The Heroic Slave*, published in 1852, was inspired by the revolt of Madison Washington, a slave on board the *Creole*, a ship transporting slaves from Virginia to New Orleans in late 1841. Washington managed to stage a revolt and diverted the ship to Nassau where slaves obtained their liberty. This epic tale which praised the insurgents through the intermediary of fiction seems to have been the trigger that freed up Douglass's opinions. In the year in which his work was published, he expressed publically and explicitly the same view that his story was portraying: to Southerners who declared Nat Turner to be a 'fanatical black beast' and a 'murderer', Douglass replied that he was more properly the heir of the patriot heroes of the great American Revolution in which the slave-owners who celebrated Independence Day on the 4th July while depriving millions of their fellow Americans their freedom.<sup>11</sup>

A biographical episode marked a turning-point in his moral approach to violence (Goldstein 1976: 64). In 1833, while still a slave, he was involved in a violent physical altercation with a slaveholder, a certain Mr Covey, after suffering a series of brutal beatings. Suddenly finding the resolution to fight back 'from whence came the spirit I don't know', Douglass describes the blows he meted out as 'a resurrection', an epiphany moment when, although he was still a slave, he felt by this act of virility 'revived within me a sense of my own manhood', releasing him 'from the tomb of slavery to the heaven of freedom' (Douglass 1845: ch. X). Describing this incident in his autobiography, Douglass explains what happened to him in the course of this brutal battle:

My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact. I did not hesitate to let it be known of me, that the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing me. (Douglass 1845: ch. X)

Douglass describes this episode as though it were a scene in the theatrical sense of the term. The 'performance' that he re-enacts in his account allows him to demonstrate that the slave was truly a man since he was capable of both interpreting and expressing his revolt (Stauffer 2005: 117). In a later autobiographical work, he adds: 'I was nothing before; I WAS A MAN NOW' (Douglass 1855). The therapeutic process described by Douglass is not far removed from the analyses of Franz Fanon a century later who, after having conducted a clinical reading of the oppression of colonialism, put forward a panacea:

The colonised Black, he who is the object of racism and the object of the violence of the racist, must, in order to assume his true being, respond to that violence by violence. (Fanon 2004: 46)

Around 1846–47, not long after publishing his autobiography, Douglass met another abolitionist, John Brown, and through this contact grew used to the idea that there was an emancipatory virtue to be found in revolt, not only for the individual but also for the mass. Brown, a devout white Christian who had been won over to the cause of the Blacks, regularly published articles, like Douglass, in the radical New York abolitionist newspaper, *The Ram's Horn*, established by William A. Hodges. In the pages of this ephemeral newspaper (it ceased publication in June 1848

after only around one year), Hodges, Brown, and Douglass defended the strategic use of violence, as evidenced by a text re-published in *The Liberator* in August 1849. Opening with the strident call: ‘Slaves of the South, now is your time! Strike for your freedom now!’, the pamphlet went on:

You have nothing to lose, but everything to gain. God is with you for liberty. [...] Men will respect you in proportion to the physical effort you put forth in resisting tyranny and slavery.

We do not tell you to murder the slaveholders, but we do advise you to refuse longer to work without pay. Make up your minds to die rather than to bequeath a state of slavery to your posterity. [...] Select out your bravest men to go and tell the slaveholders your determination, and make up your minds as *Christians*, to die rather than submit. By such a course, you will throw responsibility on them of a recourse to violence. And in the case of a struggle, you will stand justified before the world in your noble struggle for freedom [...] (Hodges, in *The Liberator*, 1849)

In Douglass’s increasingly radical thought of the end of the 1840s, such an appeal to resistance, which carried with it the implicit possibility that violence and death would result from it, as was the case with Nat Turner’s insurrection, had now become perfectly admissible. From then on he held to the view that, since the slave-owner had usurped the right to own a slave, he exposed himself to condemnation by his slaves. Douglass was no doubt also profoundly influenced by the strident declamations of another abolitionist who, like himself, had parted company with Garrison, the lawyer Lysander Spooner, who in 1845 had published a text which had drawn prominent attention entitled *The Unconstitutionality of Slavery*. Spooner emphasized in it that the foundation civil texts of the nation did not justify slavery, quite to the contrary. A White libertarian abolitionist, Spooner drew from this observation two conclusions, which proved essential for the maturing thought of Douglass: that freedom is an inalienable right of which Blacks could not be deprived, and that not only had they the absolute right to escape and to engage in physical revolt and in violence, but also that they should be encouraged to do so. In 1858, Spooner followed the example of Walker and Garnet in publishing throughout the country his own appeal for a slave uprising entitled ‘Plan for the Abolition of Slavery’.<sup>12</sup> Without for his part issuing a similar call, Douglass was also now disillusioned with the federal state as a source for remedy: his confidence in the capability of the latter and of Northern progressives to influence the destiny of the South, in effect over imposing the end of slavery on it, was profoundly undermined by the passage of the ‘Fugitive Slave Act’ in 1850, which authorized any slaveholder to pursue his runaway slaves, even when these had taken refuge beyond the Mason-Dixon Line. The North, as a result, was no longer a safe haven for Blacks. It was henceforth clear to many abolitionists that the policy of non-violent action would have to be given up for the sake of physically obstructing the ‘slave hunters’. In Douglass’s mind, these latter represented such barriers to the coming of freedom that causing their death was morally acceptable; ‘the only way to do away with this fugitive slave law’ he wrote, ‘is to do away with at least a half-dozen of these kidnapers’ (Pease and Pease 1972: 928–929). A few weeks prior to the passing of this iniquitous law, Douglass had powerfully revealed how his opinions had evolved during the abolitionist convention in Cazenovia. He had compiled a ‘Letter to an American Slave’ which was read aloud before the United States Congress, a vain dissident call in the face of the slavery lobby. Addressing itself, like Walker, to the Black slaves of the South, the letter declared:

We do not have the means to supply you with arms but the truth impels us to say that some of us would refuse to send you them even if we could; some of us who are ‘non-resistants’, and who have renounced the use of any weapon, would say to you: ‘Love your enemies, do good toward those who hate you and bless those who despise you’. Some of us would indeed say that, but to be frank, they are only a handful among us. When the uprising of the Southern slaves takes place, and it will indeed take place if

emancipation is not speedily granted, the great majority of the free Blacks of the North will be at your side [...]. Even those who disapprove of the use of violence towards the slaveholder would not judge you more guilty than those whose violence is habitually justified. If the American Revolutionaries had the right to shed were it only one drop of blood, then the American slaves have every excuse for making blood run right down to the horses' bridles.<sup>13</sup>

Since the enchainment of the African-American was a denial of his human nature, then, if restored to the state of nature in which he alone could assure his own protection, he had the natural right to regain his humanity by putting his enemy to death. In accents that evoked in advance Malcolm X, Douglass in echo of Garnet rendered the non-violent slave responsible for his own alienation if he chose not to react to his humiliation. If on the other hand he showed his strength, then, Douglass added, he would also inspire the respect of the abolitionists and would play his strategic part in the struggle. Douglass's personal experience, but even more so the taking action by certain of his fellow abolitionists, Walker, Garnet, and in particular John Brown, led him to adopt the euphemistically labelled notion of 'acceptable violence' (Matzke 2005: 62).

### **The moral case of John Brown**

One of the major incidents which precipitated the Civil War after having caused profound divisions in the ranks of the partisans of non-violent action was the seditious raid of John Brown,<sup>14</sup> a convinced abolitionist who had resolutely chosen the path of armed violence. He took part in the 1865 'Bleeding Kansas' campaign in which he and his supporters killed several partisans of the extension of slavery into the newly acquired states and territories in the West. In particular, in 1859 with a small group of men, he seized the federal armoury at Harper's Ferry, Virginia. His aim was to get hold of government rifles to distribute to slaves so that they could revolt and effect a revolution for themselves. The operation met with bloody failure, and the alarmed country was profoundly divided by it.<sup>15</sup> The insane plan had nevertheless received the blessing of a number of abolitionist activists, won over by the subversive power of John Brown, a passionate crusader who wanted to lead a 'holy war' against the sin of slavery. Brown was by then a known activist and although a White, he had joined the radical path mapped out earlier by David Walker and Henry Highland Garnet, whose writings he had republished. His messianic drive and his numerous friendships with African-Americans had convinced others of his sincerity (DeCaro 2002). Lysander Spooner, who had also conceived a plan to stir the slaves to insurrection by sending them weapons, took part in Brown's conspiracy and even envisaged helping him to escape after his capture (Renehan 1997). He corresponded with a small number of influential supporters of his conspiracy called the 'Secret Six' who clandestinely provided material assistance to the insurrection plan. Among the six were two Unitarian Church ministers (McPhail Samples 1999). Brown's fervent passion had even convinced a few Quakers who accompanied him in the fateful assault. Brown had previously met a number of leading abolitionists, of whom some, such as Wendell Phillips, helped him to finance the logistics of the plot. He also had met Harriet Tubman, a former fugitive slave who had become the leading emblem for civil disobedience in the South. Tubman, through a system of secret routes and reception points called the 'Underground Railroad' assisted several hundred slaves to escape to the North and also actively supported Brown in his enterprise. Like Phillips, Tubman was at heart a believer in non-violence, but both were convinced by the messianic fervour of a man who claimed to be acting in the name of God to save America from herself. At his trial before being condemned to death by hanging in December 1859, the unrepentant Brown declared: 'I am more than ever convinced that the crimes of this guilt-laden country can be washed away only in blood.' Still very active in the abolitionist cause, Henry Highland Garnet said of him that he was 'the most noble white man in

America', while Harriet Tubman, who was very affected by his commitment, declared 'He had done more in dying than a hundred men could have done alive' (quoted in Sernett 2007: 81). The influence of the life and the execution of John Brown on the abolitionists of the time was considerable, and there were many previously committed to non-violence who reconsidered this commitment in the light of his hanging. Douglass, who met Brown on only one brief occasion, was in no way unaware of his intentions, but he refused to become personally involved in an undertaking which seemed to him destined to fail and strategically worthless. He remarked subsequently that '[Brown] was a thousand times more effective as a preacher than as a warrior' (Blight 2005), before putting into perspective the historical significance of his act and affirming that 'Brown [had] begun the war which put an end to slavery and inaugurated a free Republic'. This latter declaration is particularly interesting as it stands in contrast to another historical reading, that suggested by the apocryphal quotation attributed to Abraham Lincoln who, after meeting Harriet Beecher Stowe, was supposed to have declared himself flattered to meet 'the little woman' who, thanks to her novel, 'set off the great war of emancipation'. Behind the historiographical anecdote one detects the profile of a fundamental opposition between those who saw in non-violent 'moral suasion' the method which effectively managed to convince the federal government to do everything to abolish slavery, and those who, like Douglass, came round to the conclusion that without the terrorist raid by Brown and the armed operations against the runaway slave hunters, the country would have remained inert.

That was also the conviction that William Lloyd Garrison seemed to share, when he found himself being enjoined to disassociate himself from John Brown, whom the nation considered guilty of terrorist acts, murders, and sedition. Garrison did nothing of the sort, to the contrary defending the memory of his fellow-abolitionist by re-inserting him within the philosophy of non-resistance:

How many non resistants are there here tonight? (A single voice – 'I.') There is one! (Laughter.) Well, then, you who are otherwise are not the men to point the finger at John Brown and cry 'traitor!' [...] Nevertheless, I am a non-resistant, and I not only desire, but have laboured unremittingly to effect the peaceful abolition of slavery, by an appeal to the reason and conscience of the slaveholder. Yet as a peace man – an 'ultra' peace man I am prepared to say – 'Success to every slave insurrection at the South, and in every slave country'. And I do not see how I compromise or stain my peace reputation in making that declaration. Whenever there is a contest between the oppressed and the oppressor, – the weapons being equal between the parties, – God knows that my heart must be with the oppressed, and always against the oppressor. [...] I thank God when men who believe in the right and duty of wielding carnal weapons are so far advance that they will take these weapons out of the scale of despotism, and throw them into the scale of freedom. It is an indication of progress, and a positive moral growth; it is one way to get up to the sublime platform of non-resistance; and it is God's method of dealing retribution on the head of the tyrant. Rather than see men wearing their chains in a cowardly and servile spirit, I would, as an advocate of peace, much rather see them breaking the head of the tyrant with their chains. (*The Liberator*, 16 December 1859)

It is remarkable that Garrison could reconstrue the idea of 'non-resistance' by including Brown within it, for that showed up a major shift in his doctrine, nor was he the only person on that occasion to demonstrate such a modification in thought. The most notable example of this work of further reflection and repositioning is certainly the poet and philosopher Henry David Thoreau. A fortnight after the raid at Harper's Ferry, Thoreau gave a public lecture in which he paid homage to Brown,<sup>16</sup> presenting him as a true 'transcendentalist' capable of making a moral critique of the institutions of America, but also as a sage who struggled for the dignity of man in general. If the author of *Walden* in 1859 was able to take the defence of a man who killed for his cause and desired armed insurrection, it was because he saw in him a true practitioner of civil disobedience. At the beginning of his career, Thoreau considered that strict non-violent action, such as refusing to pay taxes, could undermine the bases of the system and bring forward the abolition of slavery. But,

like Douglass and Garrison, he too progressively shifted in his thinking after 1850 and particularly after the execution of John Brown, ending up by resolutely renouncing the idea of a strictly pacifist revolution (Kritzberg 1989).

Thoreau had met Brown and had equally become convinced thereby that armed resistance could be accepted as a final recourse. 'I have no desire either to kill or be killed, but I can imagine circumstances where I would not have any other choice', he wrote at the time. If *a priori* he rejected violence, Thoreau recognized the role that 'interferences' could play in the criminal system which exploited four million slaves. A euphemism for resorting to violence, 'interference' meant that the way the use of violence was to be judged was relative to universal morality, and not to human laws. In the end, he affirmed, one could not condemn Brown's action because it was violent, yet at the same time not denounce the supreme violence that was slavery. Since the American Nation was responsible for that tyranny, it was then the right of the citizen to create 'interferences' by taking possession of federal arms, as Brown did. A genuine disciple of civil disobedience had an obligation to resist the absolute evil of slavery, even if this meant through violence. The government should not have the monopoly over legitimate violence, and death, he wrote in his plea for Brown, was preferable to the subjection of the Blacks. In his speech, Thoreau ranged himself with the abolitionists in his praise of Brown as 'the most American of us all' (Turner 2009: 160).

## Conclusion

When the Civil War broke out with the first cannon shots of 1861, the abolitionist movement was once again profoundly divided. Nevertheless, most of the members of the American Anti-Slavery Society accepted commitment to the war cause (Curry and Goodheart 1982). They perceived in it a divine retribution which was finally coming to punish the guilty nation for an unforgivable crime. Its expiation therefore had to be in blood, on a scale of the sin which stained the United States of America from the time that the first slave set foot in Virginia. Garrison reluctantly accepted to support this fratricidal war, for it alone could put an end not only to the abomination of slavery but also to the iniquitous federal institutions which had made slavery possible. Far removed from his radical pacifism of the 1830s, Garrison now confirmed the moral development in his thinking that had begun when he refused to condemn John Brown. That shedding blood to put an end to the greatest of sins was acceptable was also the view of Frederick Douglass. He also had evolved towards the idea that war was necessary, since slavery fitted the ethical imperatives of the *ius ad bellum*, the legitimate right of a state to take up arms. In 1861, he drew a link between Brown's band of rebels and the soldiers now in uniform as being united in the same combat against evil:

John Brown's zeal in the cause of freedom was infinitely superior to mine. Mine was as the taper light; his was as the burning sun. I could live for the slave; John Brown could die for him. The American people and the Government at Washington may refuse to recognize it for a time but the inexorable logic of events will force it upon them and against slavery.<sup>17</sup>

Douglass therefore supported the intervention of federal troops in the South, but sought assurance from Abraham Lincoln, the wartime President, that the emancipation of the Blacks would be decreed even before the end of the conflict. True to his word, Lincoln not only decreed the emancipation of slaves in 1863, but these latter were invited to take up uniform and arms as soldiers in the service of the Union. Their violence was therefore not only legitimate, but required for the well-being of the nation. Having become fully recognized Americans in the space of a short period, the liberated slaves were now ranged symbolically alongside the heroic insurgents of the War of Independence against Great Britain.

This historic reversal confounded many pacifist abolitionists who, like Garrison, had sworn to condemn all violence, by definition tyrannical when it arose from the State, but equally indefensible on an individual basis. From Quakers to the militant conscientious objector Adin Ballou, many ‘perfectionist pacifists’ deplored this moral compromise (Curran 2003):

It is difficult [for me] – Ballou confessed – to understand how abolitionists of long standing and of great prominence can at this moment forget or ignore their former positions on the refusal to use violence in the advancement of their cause and to liberate the slave, to the point of being drawn in by the fatal whirlwind of blood and death. (quoted in Richman 1981: 333)

Here again, as before the Civil War, what the majority of the militant pacifists came to conclude was that there existed no crime greater than that of slavery, and that not to put an end to it by excluding in principle the resort to violence equally constituted a crime. To the right of slaves to rise in revolt was henceforth added another inextricable moral problem: could that war be just? The pre-war debates had prepared their minds to grapple with the impossible but inevitable choice between two evils of which it was necessary to choose the lesser. The great civil war which divided America but which liberated the slaves thus profiled a new moral dilemma for the advocates of non-violence in the twentieth century, one of whom was Martin Luther King Jr, who would struggle to disavow it entirely.

Translated from the French by Colin Anderson

## Notes

1. An Italian philosopher and jurist, Cesare Beccaria, in 1764 (nearly a century after the passing of the *Habeas Corpus Act* by the British Parliament) published an influential text on the amorality of the death penalty entitled *On Crimes and Punishments*. The term ‘abolitionists’ is thus given to those advocating the suppression of the death penalty, but it was also applied to those campaigning for an end to slavery; the two struggles are often linked, as Frederick Douglass showed.
2. The devastation of Native American peoples is in reality anterior to the oppression of Black slaves and is just as fundamental in the country’s history, but it has unfortunately not influenced American political debate to the same degree.
3. This organization brought together more than a thousand societies spread throughout the Northern States and nearly 250,000 members.
4. What is remarkable here is that Garrison positioned himself in complete opposition to the Constitution of the United States and its Second Amendment which, in 1791, posited the right of all citizens to take up arms against the tyrannical exercise of government.
5. Their optimism was blemished by a naïve failure to recognize how deeply slavery was rooted in all aspects of American life: in 1790, the country numbered 600,000 slaves, in 1830 two million, and double that number again at the outbreak of the Civil War.
6. In 1737, for example, the Quaker Benjamin Lay sent a letter to slave owners denouncing them as sinful, while there were also many Quaker petitions distributed throughout the country.
7. Speech of Gerrit Smith, delivered at the New York State Anti-Slavery Society conference, 22 October 1835 (<https://ia600206.us.archive.org/13/items/proceedingsny00peterich/proceedingsny00peterich.pdf>, p. 22)
8. Historians have recently shed light on the fearful rebellion in Florida in 1811 which led to the deaths of hundreds of people (Rasmussen 2013).
9. Garnet, August 1843: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h2937.html>
10. The question of manliness was implicit in the recognition of the slaves’ humanity: see Jasinski 2007.
11. ‘The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro’, a famous address of Douglass in Rochester, New York, 5 July 1852. Available online at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h2927t.html>
12. The text is available online at <http://www.lysanderspooner.org/s/Plan-for-the-Abolition-of-Slavery.pdf>

13. 'Letter to the American Slave From Those Who Have Fled From American Slavery', August 1850. National Humanities Center Resource Toolbox, *The Making of African American Identity*, vol. 1: 1500–1865; <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/community/text7/ultramerslaves1850.pdf>
14. The assessment of the nature of Brown's acts is still the object of fierce historiographical controversy, as shown by David Reynolds' hagiographical biography in 2005.
15. See the remarkable account of the reactions to the raid in Stauffer and Trodd (2013).
16. 'A Plea for Captain John Brown', [thoreau.eserver.org/plea.html](http://thoreau.eserver.org/plea.html)
17. [http://www.azquotes.com/author/4104-Frederick\\_Douglass/tag/slavery](http://www.azquotes.com/author/4104-Frederick_Douglass/tag/slavery)

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