

The Idea of progress and the practice of slavery in the second half of the 18th century

Maria do Rosário PIMENTEL

CHAM, FCSH, Universidade NOVA de Lisboa, Universidade dos Açores

rosariopcimentel@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper essays to confront the theory of progress with the practice of slavery and the discussion concerning its abolition. Due to the vastness and complexity of this theme, only the first French abolitionist movement, happening in the second half of the 18th century, will be considered. By then the European cultural elite assumed several principles as undisputable. Namely:

1 - that all human beings are born equal;

2 - that the principle of individual freedom was a right given by Nature to allow every individual to fulfil his destiny;

3 - that rationality was the basic principle for all free human beings to be able to pursue her or his happiness;

4 - that the concept of humanity included the notion of its unity and diversity;

5 - that the progress of the human mind had its origins in the inalienable rights given to humans by Nature;

6 - the general principle of progress was based on the right to freedom.

Considering all this, one is led to conclude that the practice of slavery and its traffic must be studied as social habits that abased human existence and were opposed to the new rationalist conceptions concerning the individual was taken for granted already by the end of the 18th century.

Keywords: Progress, slavery, freedom, Enlightenment, French Revolution