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Editorial

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Editorial

Myriam Cottias and Céline Flory

EDITOR'S NOTE

The journal *Esclavages & Post-esclavages/Slaveries & Post-Slaveries* supports the current movement of social science journals which are opposed to the forthcoming French law on research (*Loi de programmation pluriannuelle de la recherche – LPPR*) and wholeheartedly associates itself with this movement's actions. The proposed reform is the pursual of a tendency initiated by an earlier law on university organisation (*Loi relative aux libertés et responsabilités des universités – LRU*) aiming at a transformation of public services by reducing State investment and encouraging performance at all costs and generalised competition. The danger lies in the deterioration of working conditions for all. The health crisis we are going through at the present moment has shown us—as if further proof were needed—the importance of the State's commitment to public services.

- 1 This second issue of the journal *Esclavages & Post-esclavages/Slaveries & Post-Slaveries* is published in exceptionally violent and dangerous times. The near-planetary lockdown has disrupted not only our ways of life but also our academic and scientific methods. In the face of the current emergency this situation provokes questions about the real significance of the objects of our research and our usual research investments: how do they face up to this reality? This questioning is doubtless shared by others, but social science scholars working on racialised slavery and post-slavery in particular can recognise, in this crisis, some familiar echoes that relativise “this closing in on the present and on a heavy and desperate presentism”.¹ Their research, as they understand it, is inscribed in a cloud of meanings that they are familiar with and which allows them to establish links between the past and the immediate present, maintaining the pressure of history on the present. A sort of ‘anti-end’ of history is confirmed. What do we mean by this?
- 2 On the one hand, the intrinsic violence of social relationships resulting from economic globalisation and from the connection of different part of the world is increasingly

flagrant. National borders in care practices are coming to the fore. Geo-political inequalities are being exacerbated.² On the other hand, disparities in status, gender and situation are being reinforced. Racial categories, which derive in part from the history of slavery which has produced representations embedded in the long history of racism and alterity, still explain the brutalities suffered by those thought to come from slavery.³ A restricted conception of citizenship has led overtly to racialized practices of police control. The poorest have experienced particular violence since their vulnerability to the epidemiological risks has proved to be proportionally greater than that of other social groups. And, last of all, the fragile nature of life itself has become an unquestionable fact, opening up onto a space of uncertainty about the future.

- 3 These are some of the feelings that are experienced (always) by writers and artists working on slavery, and by the researchers working on the subject (sometimes). “My mouth shall be the mouth of misfortunes which have no mouth, my voice, the freedom of those freedoms which are succumbing in the dungeon of despair,” wrote Aimé Césaire in 1939 in the *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*.⁴
- 4 Artists have long been reshaping the echoes of the dialogue they set up with their public. It is not only the injustices of the slavery system that they transform, but often the slave-subject actor of his or her own history. This subject retransforms the conditions of their own life, their own survival, under conditions of extreme duress.
- 5 For a long time, historical research made no attempt to transcribe this point of view. The agentivity of the enslaved person—his or her competence as a subject—has been elaborated in English-language, Portuguese and Spanish historiographies, but more rarely in French ones where, in the words of Jean-Pierre Le Glaunec, “the ‘resisting’ slaves never had anything better than walk-on parts.” They reacted, for example, by fleeing, by marronnage, to the bad treatment they suffered, but were not considered as being capable of developing a project of rejection of their status and their conditions.⁵
- 6 The term used to designate the person enslaved (and not ‘reduced to slavery’), has changed in many historiographies, although the moment of this change has not yet been identified precisely. In each of these historiographies, the semantic shift has always aimed at expressing the disconnection between the civil status of an individual and that individual’s identity. Although enslaved people were denied this civil status and although a racist ideology confines them to a status of inferiority, they are still human beings, even within a system of extreme violence. The history of radical domination has shown that human beings always manage to find spaces, however small, to claim their humanity. Resistance and revolts—whether tiny or radical—, abortions and poisonings, testify moreover to the need to pay tribute to the strength of the human being.
- 7 This is the reason why many scholars, including those of the CIRESC and several of the authors in this issue, have proposed to restrict the use of the term ‘slave’ to the expression of an iniquitous civil status, and to prefer the term ‘enslaved’ to designate the person put into slavery. The transformation of the noun ‘slave’ by the adjectival suffix ‘-slaved’ indicates a distancing from what is often considered to be an original, undying essence. But being enslaved is a legal status, not an identity. This shift in vocabulary clearly states that representations must be changed too. As the authors of this thematic dossier explain, words are an essential resource for emancipation.
- 8 Linguistic turns always flourish at moments of political rupture. Practically everywhere in the same way, it was under the pressure of citizens’ claims that the demand for a

change of term occurred. In Portuguese, *escravizado(a)*, widely used among Brazilian historians, was already employed as early as the nineteenth century by Brazilian abolitionists. In Anglophone historiography, and particularly in the United States, the term *enslaved* gradually came to be preferred in the last third of the twentieth century, thanks to the work of African-American militants. In Italian, the term is *schiaivizzato*. In Spanish, it is the word *esclavizados*, just as elsewhere “because it is a category that responds to a social and political demand that means that people are not slaves by nature, but that they were violently enslaved for political and economic goals.”⁶ We believe that these changes in terminology are a way of opening up other directions for research.

NOTES

1. François Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité. Présentisme et expérience du temps*, Paris, Le Seuil, 2003, pp. 126 (we translate the French).
 2. Although, as this text is being written, it is interesting to note that Africa seems to be putting up better resistance to the pandemic, on account of the youth of its population, the antimalarial treatment of its city-dwellers and its dispersed habitat. The continent is seeking its own remedies in research centres such as the Observatoire national des sciences, des technologies et de l'innovation contre le Covid-19 (Ocovid19) in Senegal.
 3. In China, people of African origin have been accused of transmitting Covid-19, just as in France, people of Asian origin have been victims of acts of racism.
 4. *Return to my native land*, Harmondsworth, Penguins Books, 1969, p. 50, John Berger & Anna Bostock (trad.) [French ed.: *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, Paris, Présence africaine, 1956].
 5. Jean-Pierre Le Glaunec, “Résister à l'esclavage dans l'Atlantique français : aperçu historiographique, hypothèses et pistes de recherche”, *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française*, No. 71/1-2, 2017, pp. 13-33.
 6. Extract from the introduction to the special issue of *Alteridades*, “Desde el norte hacia el sur: esclavizados fugitivos en la frontera texano-mexicana”, coordinated by María Camila Díaz Casas, Vol. 28, No. 56, 2018, pp. 23-34.
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