

Piggybacking on the Colonial Powers

Switzerland's Slavery Past

Talk by historian Hans Fässler (St.Gallen) delivered at the one-day meeting on "Ensuring Recognition, Justice and Development" at the 'Palais des Nations' in Geneva on 9 December 2019. Due to time constraints, I had to shorten my talk considerably, but I am publishing the full version here.

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Mister Moderator, Chairman Ahmed Reid, Sir Hilary Beckles, your excellencies, dear colleagues and comrades, ladies and gentlemen!

I first want to answer a question I have been asked in Port-au-Prince, Dakar, Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni, and Antigua. How come a little historian from Switzerland, that little country 370 miles from the nearest Atlantic seaport, ends up in projects of slavery-reparations?

The shortest answer I can give you is: Toussaint Louverture. I remember his name from a sonnet by Wordsworth, which I had to read at Zurich university, where I was a student back in the 1970s. I was not interested in Toussaint then, but I adored the Romantics.

How come? The longest answer is to tell you about the last 20 years of my life. The medium length answer is this: In 2000, I was invited by the Canton of St.Gallen, created by Napoleon in 1803, to produce a one-man theatrical revue for our bicentenary. During my research, in the archives of the French army at Château de Vincennes in Paris, I came across some 600 soldiers, most of them Swiss auxiliaries, some from my home town, who in 1803 were forced to join the French to fight the Black Revolution under Toussaint Louverture in Saint-Domingue. This led me into further research into Swiss participation in slavery and the slave trade.

I included that material into my theatre piece. When it premiered in April 2003, there was among the audience a certain Jeannot Hilaire, at that time Head of the Permanent Mission of Haiti to the UN in Geneva. In November 2003, I was invited by the then Haitian foreign minister Joseph Philipp Antonio to participate in a conference on "Restitution and Development" in Port-au-Prince. The material for my theatrical revue turned into a book in 2005, and that book called "Reise in Schwarz-Weiss" (Travels in Black and White) turned into a lifelong passion for exposing the colonial past of my country.

Part 2 How much? Switzerland a Colonial Player

Why should Switzerland – tiny, neutral, innocent, snow-white, landlocked Switzerland – be regarded as a colonial player, just like Britain, France and Holland? I want to give you first an extended definition of what I mean by Swiss slavery relations. For each of the following twelve categories, I want to provide a Swiss example:

- 1) ownership of plantations with slaves (as was the case with a coffee plantation in Brazil, sold by the Flach family from Schaffhausen as late as 1874)
- 2) administration of plantations with slaves (as was the case with plantation *De Vreede* in Guyana, administered by Christoffel Mittelholzer from Appenzell in 1760)
- 3) administration of colonial territories (as was the case with Isaac Debrot from Neuchâtel, commander of Bonaire 1817–1827)
- 4) slave trade proper (as was the case with Johann Jakob Hoffmann from Basel on Curaçao)
- 5) investments in triangular expeditions (as was the case with Peter Thelluson from Geneva, who acquired a share in the slaver "Liberty", which transported 200 enslaved Africans to Barbados)
- 6) insurance business (as was the case with Isaak Faesch from Basel, who insured both regular trade and smuggling ventures in the Dutch West Indies)
- 7) investments in colonial projects (as was the case with the Zurich bank "Leu" (today Credit Suisse), which granted a loan to the Scottish Brown brothers, with a Saint Croix plantation as collateral)
- 8) trade and speculation with slave-produced goods (as was the case with the Cuentz brothers from St.Gallen, speculating on indigo in Saint-Domingue)
- 9) trade with goods for the triangular trade (as was the case with *indiennes* textiles produced by *Bourcard & Cie.* from Basel)
- 10) participation in military undertakings to establish and secure colonies relevant to slavery (as was the case with Charles-Louis de Mellet from Vevey, who was in the service of the Dutch in Demerara and Essequibo 1782–1802)

11) participation in military operations to secure slavery (as was the case with the Swiss mercenaries who helped the Dutch put down the Akwamu rebellion on Saint John in 1733)

12) journalistic and ideological activities to spread anti-black racism (as was the case with Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle, who in his racist *Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question* drew from the writings of Carl Ludwig von Haller from Berne).

So much for how you can participate in slavery and the colonial project in principle, and how Switzerland did indeed participate in reality, as a free-rider or a fare-dodger of the European colonial powers.

The densest network of slavery relations with Switzerland existed in Guyana, Haiti, Suriname, and Brazil. But Swiss slavery connections can also be found as far as Jamaica, Barbados, Grenada, Montserrat, Dominica, Trinidad and Tobago, Cuba, the Dutch, French and Danish West Indies, Venezuela, the United States, and the Cape Colony.

Why Guyana, Haiti, and Suriname? Because military, commercial and kinship relations were closest between the sovereign cantons of Switzerland and the colonial powers of France and Holland, because of long-term mercenary treaties, because of France being a neighbour, and because of denominational ties.

The number of slave plantations I have found so far to have been totally or partly in Swiss hands, is around 20 for Guyana, 20 for Haiti, and 70 for Suriname. Swiss trading houses were active in all these areas, with Swiss merchants settling or living there for a certain period. Key products for the industrialisation of Switzerland were imported from those areas: cotton and indigo for the textile sector, cocoa and sugar for the budding chocolate production. Investment in triangular expeditions was particularly high in the case of Saint-Domingue – 15 vessels have been singled out.

The Swiss role sometimes was that of an auxiliary. Military interventions with Swiss participation were of importance in Berbice (the 1763 slave rebellion), in Suriname (the Dutch armada of 1773 under the Swiss Colonel Fourgeoud in the Boni Maroon Wars) and Saint-Domingue (Swiss troops stationed permanently; suppression of the Mackandal Rebellion of 1758; Meyer von Schauensee from Lucerne as Chief of Staff of the French invasion troops in 1802).

Economic and military relations are not the only ones relevant for keeping up the profitable business of slavery. In a larger sense, one can argue that the Swiss have contributed to the underlying European anti-black racism, which made slavery and colonial domination possible. Mention must be made of: 1) Johann Caspar Lavater from Zurich, with his contributions to physiognomy a key figure in the development of "racial science"; 2) Carl Ludwig von Haller, professor for constitutional law from Berne, who argued in 1818 that slavery was neither morally wrong nor a crime, but a reasonable system of reciprocal rights and obligations; and 3) Louis Agassiz from Fribourg, who used photos of US-slaves made in 1850 to prove his theory of the inferiority of the "black race" and who was the most influential "scientific" racist of the 19th century.

I need not really tell you, do I, here in Geneva, that Switzerland is one of the richest countries in the world? To remind you that Switzerland is an economic and financial power today would be carrying coal to Newcastle, or sand to the beaches of Antigua! The serious question, however, at this point is this: How much of that wealth is owed to Switzerland's colonial past?

Firstly, a considerable number of the dominant Swiss family enterprises of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries have acquired part of their wealth in the system of the *Black Atlantic*. And some of these Swiss families have kept their social and economic standing till today.

When I give you a short sketch now, you should bear in mind – or you will know already – that in the period under consideration, the boundaries between families, merchant-bankers, bill-of-exchange traders and banks were still very fluid. I confine myself to the cities of Berne, Basel, Neuchâtel and Geneva.

Emanuel Rodolph de Haller from Berne was a prominent figure in the network of Protestant Swiss bankers, who provided capital for the French, British and Dutch East and West India companies, managed trading firms of their own, and grew unbelievably rich in the process. In Basel, we know of the colonial entanglements of the Faesch, Burckardt and Merian families: plantation owners, administrators and investors in triangular expeditions. In Neuchâtel, Pierre-Alexandre DuPeyrou, plantation owner in Suriname, and Jacques-Louis Pourtalès, banker, merchant, and plantation owner on Grenada, became great benefactors of the city. And the Thelluson and Tourton families from Geneva created their own little Caribbean empires through banking, trading, plantation ownership, and colonial administration.

Secondly: the colonial origins of banks. It was the renowned German historian Michael Zeuske, who said on slavery and the slave trade, "It was the peculiarity of Europe that on an institutional level, they turned it into banks." This can also be demonstrated for Switzerland: at least four predecessor banks of today's UBS and Credit Suisse have a slavery past.

Thirdly: the significance of cotton for the late 18th and the 19th centuries. It was the key sector for Switzerland's take-off into self-sustained growth, and there were times when Switzerland, in absolute terms, imported more slave-produced cotton than England.

In Switzerland, Alfred Escher from Zurich is a case in point. The politician and pioneer of industry, whose 200th birthday has been celebrated this year, has long been considered the founding father of modern Switzerland. He was instrumental in creating the *North-Eastern Railway Company*, the *Federal Institute of Technology*, the *Kreditanstalt* (today's Credit Suisse), the insurance company *Swiss Life* and the *Gotthard Railway* (tunnel). It was only in 2017 that we were able to prove what had been rumoured since the 19th century: that some of his wealth came from slavery. His father had owned the coffee plantation *Buen Retiro* to the south-west of Havana, Cuba, whose administration he passed into the hands of his two brothers. Moreover, as has been argued by Zeuske, one of those brothers, Federico, begat a child with his enslaved washer-woman Serafina. What a surprise, then, for the good people of Zurich in 2019: that their champion of politics and industry should have had a little Afro-Cuban cousin born out of wedlock and into slavery!

Part 3 So what? Switzerland, CARICOM and SCORES

Since the end of the 1990s, Swiss historians have established beyond doubt that Switzerland as a society and a cultural, economic, and ideological space was involved in all the activities relevant to the *Black Atlantic*. In other words: *Helvetia* freeriding and piggybacking on the colonial powers. I have tried, together with other researchers, to estimate the percentage of the Swiss share in that system. We now think that an estimated 2%-3% is realistic, a share that is, of course, much lower than that of Portugal or Great Britain, but – calculated per capita – almost twice as high as that of France.

Your excellencies, dear colleagues, comrades, and friends! When my students at the school where I taught for 26 years ask me, "What do you do now, Mr Fässler, now

that you are retired?", I answer, "I have a little dream that one day a letter will be sent from the Caribbean to Switzerland. It is a letter for which I have been waiting almost twenty years." After taking part in the symposium organised by the CRC, the CARICOM Reparations Commission, in Antigua this last October, I am optimistic that Switzerland will finally be added to the list of countries targeted for reparations. And from there, I want to dream on the dream: The letter from CARICOM to the Swiss government arrives in 2020, and by the end of the Decade for People of African Descent in 2024, a joint commission of eminent persons and historians from Switzerland and from the Caribbean has been formed to study how the demand for Swiss reparations can be met in a fair and cooperative way.

To support this process, I have kept the promise I made in Antigua and have put together SCORES, the "Swiss Committee on Slavery Reparations". Over 60 eminent persons from all walks of life (politicians, judges, academics, researchers, authors, artists) have committed themselves to the little dream of the letter mentioned before, and likewise to the big dream of ensuring recognition, justice, reparation, and development for those men, women, and children of African descent who for centuries suffered in chains and bondage. And for those who still do.

Thank you.