

**Statement by the Scientific Committee of  
the Foundation for the Memory of Slavery  
on the importance of research on colonial slavery and its afterlives  
30<sup>th</sup> November 2020**

As scholars in the Social Sciences and Humanities in France and elsewhere, we form the Scientific Committee of the Foundation for the Memory of Slavery. The range of our disciplinary specialisms, the diversity of our fields of research and the number of institutions to which we belong all reflect the complexity of the phenomenon of colonial slavery, its global dimensions, its relationships with various forms of unfree labour in time and space, and its place in the long history of European colonization.

We assert that the world in which we live is the particular outcome of this history, which lasted more than four centuries; that traces of this history are still visible, in Africa and the Indian Ocean, in America and the Caribbean, and in Europe; that we cannot understand the great challenges with which our societies are confronted – relating to their diversity and their divisions, their inventiveness and their contradictions, the complex interplay at their heart between the particular and the universal... – without analyzing the links with this past and the legacies it has bequeathed us.

These links are not straightforward. They must be historicized, contextualized, put into perspective. They force us to question notions of race and racism, domination and emancipation, identity and essentialization, equality and discrimination... They allow us to understand how the universal ideal of human rights is entangled with the reality of economic, political and social interests; what battles it has had to go through in order to establish itself; and the limitations it still faces today.

It is the task of the Social Sciences and Humanities to shed light on all these questions. It is the honour and strength of research institutions to do this work while guaranteeing all researchers absolute respect of their academic freedom. This is the reason why this principle is enshrined in the constitution in France, a commitment there can be no question of altering. More than ever, we need to reflect and debate, i.e., to confront our ideas in universities and specialist research centres. There is nothing alarming about this intellectual exercise. On the contrary - can we imagine, for a moment, that the universities of the country of Aimé Césaire, Maryse Condé, Frantz Fanon, Léon-Gontran Damas, André and Simone Schwarz-Bart should be absent from global reflection on colonial and postcolonial questions?

Memories of slavery and colonization do not only concern certain communities, or certain territories. They belong to our common memory. They are an integral part, and not an insignificant one, of the long journey that has seen France build itself on the ruins of the Ancien Régime into a democracy, a nation, a Republic, spreading its influence on all continents. Stating this constitutes an effort that is as salutary as it is necessary for national cohesion.

However, it must be noted that today, despite the numerous efforts of researchers, many major facts in the history of slavery and colonization remain largely unknown. As the Foundation for the Memory of Slavery has shown in a recent report, a significant number of pupils in France may never hear about, to give one example, the Haitian Revolution during their school career, except with the help of a particular teacher. When they seek to expand their understanding of this complex history by using the internet if not social media, they often only have access to garbled or distorted sources which contribute to the spread of historical misinterpretations. Too often, we see gaps in the common knowledge of this history, the importance and urgency of whose dissemination and popularization we affirm.

A strong democracy is not afraid of debate. On the contrary, this is something that it seeks to cultivate. A democracy is not afraid to look at the wounds of the past: it grows stronger in doing so. It does not reject pluralism – of cultures, opinions, beliefs... –: it is this framework in which pluralism can be expressed in a harmonious way. Such a project can only be built on knowledge, reason, dialogue.

This is why, more than ever in France, we need nationally and internationally recognized research on the history of slavery and its afterlives, produced in dialogue with the world, conducted independently, and capable of informing and analyzing government policies. This is why, more than ever, we need teachers. This is why we are committed to affirming the importance – for the construction of a strong democracy, true to its promises of freedom, equality and fraternity – of education, of the transmission of knowledge, of the development of critical thinking.

There are many today who – in a challenge to all forms of racism, discrimination and exploitation – are working to make this history better known, to allow us to understand its meanings more clearly, to help us learn the lessons of this past. As members of the Scientific Committee of the Foundation for the Memory of Slavery, we stand with them in support of this essential republican task.

**[The Scientific Committee,](#)**  
**Foundation for the Memory of Slavery**

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