POLITICAL ECONOMY AND ANTISLAVERY IN MID 18TH-CENTURY BRITAIN: MALACHY POSTLETHWAYT'S REMARKS ON SLAVE TRADE

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Introduction

The Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade was founded in 1787 to disseminate the antislavery cause. The *Society*'s campaigns rapidly got public support, which turned Slave Trade Abolition into one of the main political agendas in the following decades. Thirty years later, on 25 March 1807, King George III sanctioned the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act.

The first historical account of British abolitionism was published in 1808 by Thomas Clarkson. His *History of the rise, progress, and accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade* (1808) tell us that cumulative efforts of humanitarians, guided by God, finally put an end to the grievous slave trade. Despite the "principal actors" in this process being Englishmen actually engaged in the *Society*'s cause, Clarkson (1808.vol.1:32) stated that "it has to be acknowledged that their efforts would never be so effectual, if their minds had not been prepared by others, who had moved before them". Indeed, the ten first chapters of his History were dedicated to present those forerunners "who favoured the cause of injured Africans" from 1516 to 1787 (Clarkson1808.vol.1:32). However, most of these forerunners were writing on the 18th century, when anti-slavery literature really increased.

The historiography on British abolitionism has questioned Clarkson's *History* and its followers in many ways (Brown.2006:1-32; Blackburn.1988:33-66; Dresher.2012). But one of these criticisms is particularly important to this working paper: when listing the so called "forerunners", Clarkson considered the mere anti-slavery inclination as abolitionism. Instead, as Blackburn (1988:33-66) and Brown (2006; 2011) have shown, before the Anglo-American conflict there was an anti-slavery debate, but without abolitionism[2]. According to them, the

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2 For a comprehensive account of the debates around the subject of slavery in Western World, see David Brion Davis (2001).

criticism of colonial slavery often served political purposes other than the emancipation of enslaved Africans in the mid 18th-century British public debate.

Pamphlets and tracts discussing colonial slavery at the time usually addressed issues of immediate political relevance, were commonly inserted in dense networks of political lobbying and were designed to change the opinion of influential subsets of British public. That was the case of Malachy Postlethwayt's writings on slave trade, which emerged within the public controversy regarding the management of slave trade during the 1740s and 1750s.[3]

This paper expect to highlight how Postlethwayt's remarks on slave trade illustrate a broader feature of the early antislavery literature in Britain: pamphleteers often mobilized the criticism of colonial slavery to claim for particular policies regarding the administration of the British Empire. Moreover, the writings of Malachy Postlethwayt that we will discuss below evidence how antislavery opinion was neither equivalent to anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism, nor an exclusive claim of the so called liberal political economy – as some historians of economic thought suggested.

To fulfill its purpose, the paper will be organized in for sections besides the introduction. In the first section, we briefly describe some aspects of the British slave trade in order to better discuss the place of anti-slavery in mid-18th century. Then, we summarize the political controversy regarding the Royal African Company and address the pro-slavery tract written by Postlethwayt in the wake of that political dispute in the second second. In the third one, we discuss Postlethwayt's shift to the antislavery discourse in his translation of Savary's *Universal Dictionary of Trade and Commerce,* and the implications of such shift in his recommendations regarding British imperial police. We present some tentative conclusions in the fourth and last section.

Evaluating slave trade

The *Slave Voyages* project estimates that 1.580.658 enslaved Africans embarked in British ships in the second half of the 18th century. Appendix1 shows that, from 1750 to 1807, Great Britain became the lead European Nation on transatlantic slave trade. The contemporaries

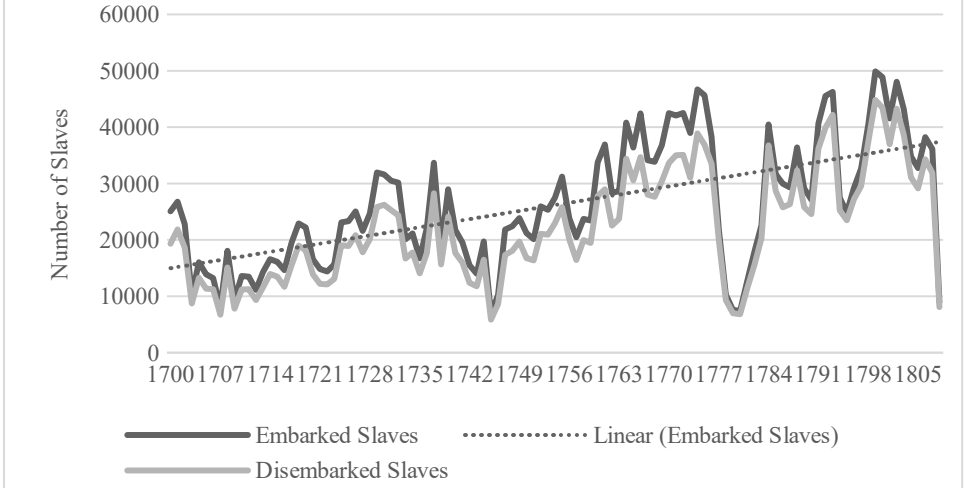
3 For biographical information about Malachy Postlethwayt, see Robert Bennet (2011). In his words: "Postlethwayt is viewed as one of the leading economists before Adam Smith, and has been recognized as influential on Prime Ministers." (Bennet.2011:1)

were aware of British preeminence in the slave trade. Anthony Benezet (1767:39), a famous North American abolitionist, estimates through available data that "there is, at least, One Hundred Thousand Negroes purchased and brought on board in our ships yearly from the coast of Africa".

Slave trade through British ships really increased between 1700-1807, except during the American Revolutionary War (1776-1783), as illustrated in Figure 1. Then, it is worth emphasizing the central role of slavery in British colonial enterprises when abolitionist efforts emerged. As Brown (2004:112) asserts, few decades before the launching of the *Society*'s organized campaigns, envisioning "an Empire without slavery was simply unthinkable" to those "concerned with Britain's standing among European rivals". And, he continues, "even those inclined to denounce slavery publicly often conceded that human bondage made Atlantic commerce and overseas settlement possible".

Analyzing the 17th century economic literature, Swingen (2014:54) argues that African enslavement solved a problem that bothered many writers: the exportation of English people to colonies. Draining England's population, the colonization lessened the mother-country's wealth and prosperity. With the solution posed by African bondage, these concerns had no more room at the turn of the 18th century: "Rather than debating the value of the West Indies colonies, by the 1690s and early 1700s commentators instead debated how the slave trade to those colonies should be managed and regulated." (Swingen.2014:61).

Figure 1. British Slave Trade (1700-1808)



In short, Swingen's (2014:61-62) account highlights that, in the late 1700's, most of the economic literature was convinced that slave trade success and mother-country prosperity were intertwined. To what extent did this perception change in the 18th century? Greene (2013:203) answers categorically that it did not change: "Except for Adam Smith, every major writer on Britain's foreign commerce continued to emphasize the value of the African trade in slaves". Instead, he describes the rise of anti-slavery as a victory of the "languages of humanity and justice" over the "language of commerce" in public debate: the anti-slavery cause dismissed economic considerations. However, as we will see, the condemnation of slavery was sometimes followed by different proposals regarding the administration of the British Colonial Empire.

The Seven Years War brought into British administration an unprecedented amount of new territories and subjects:

> "By contemporary estimates, in 1763, the 25-year-old George III could now claim authority over an additional 75,000 French Canadians, approximately 30,000 planters, slaves, and Caribs in the Ceded Islands, perhaps one hundred thousand Native Americans, a smattering of Spanish colonists in the Floridas, and, it was believed, anywhere between 10 and 20 million people in Bengal." (BROWN.2004:117)

This context explains why concerns about British administration overseas increased; and this became even more evident in the wake of the Anglo-American conflict. Therefore, the antislavery cause between the 1760's and 1780's was quite connected with different considerations about imperial policy.

Brown (2011) argues that only in the Anglo-American world organized antislavery campaigns emerged before the French Revolution, which could be explained through some peculiarities of the social and cultural organization of the British Empire. Among the particular features listed by him are: the broader possibility to participate in political decisions; the open channel in press to publications regarding colonial societies; but specially the debate on the right meaning of liberty and proper concept of slavery that arose in the wake of the American Revolutionary War. In short, he highlights that the antislavery cause gained strength when it was urgent to think about the very organization of the British Colonial Empire.

In a previous text, Brown (2004:112-114) had already argued that those concerned with the abolition of African enslavement had to work on alternative concepts of Empire. Accepting the moral condemnation of slavery was relatively easy; the real challenge posed to antislavery writers "lay in rethinking the relationship between Empire and coerced labour, disassociating slavery from prevailing assumptions about the purposes of Empire, and developing practical, attainable, compelling alternatives" (Brown.2004:113).

Moreover, Brown's (2004;115) account tells us that the first designs for gradual abolition of slavery were written in the 1770's, even if "several writers had proposed amelioration of slavery and many denounced the institution on principle". Before them there was an antislavery cause, but without proposals to emancipate all African slaves throughout the Empire.

However, despite antislavery manifestations within the slave trade debate not being entirely abolitionist before the 1770's, they were already intertwined with considerations regarding imperial administration. We discuss this in the following sections.

2. The "British Merchant" remarks on the African Trade

The late 17th and early 18th centuries experienced one of the first debates on slave trade. In the wake of the Glorious Revolutions (1688-1689) emerged an intense public debate over slave trade organization. Amply recognized as an important branch of English foreign commerce, should slave trade remain monopolized by the African Royal Company or should it become free and open to all British subjects? Swingen (2014.61) tells us that free trade policy prevailed: "After the departure of James II, the Royal African Company's governor and chief advocate, the company's charter and monopoly were essentially null and void, and the slave trade was for all practical purposes open" since then.

It is worth emphasizing that free trade advocates in early 18th century England were standing for the liberty to commercialize enslaved Africans. Therefore, the common trend among historians of economic thought of immediately equating the defense of free trade with anti-colonialism or abolitionism in the 18th century is often misleading[4]. The diversity of positions

4 Alain Clément (2014) advocates that, from 1750 to 1815, the British "liberal economic discourse" was essentially anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist. But the scenario described by Clément (2014) left behind some subtle, but important, issues. For instance, his analyses of the *Wealth of Nations* set aside that Adam Smith

regarding slave-trade in British public debate cannot be grasped through the dichotomy between mercantilism *vs* liberalism[5]. Malachy Postlethwayt's remarks on slave trade not only illustrate that anti-slavery thought in 18th-century transcended the dichotomy posed above, but also evidence how the anti-slavery vs pro-slavery arguments were deeply intertwined with considerations regarding colonial administration and imperial police.

In 1744, Postlethwayt "was elected a member of the Court of Assistants (the governing board)" of the Royal African Company (Bennet.2011:5). But the Company was having a hard time then[6]. Therefore, he was possibly engaged in preparing the African Company's case to Parliament (Bennet.2011:5).

Signing as "A British Merchant", in 1745 Postlethwayt anonymously republished a former tract to show how the English Royal African Company, "the sole Guardian of our Guinea Trade", needed public support to continue operating. Entitled *African Trade, the great pillar and support of the British plantation trade in America* (1745), the pamphlet asked the Imperial administration to stand for the African Company, since it would "dwindle away to almost nothing" without the proper encouragements (Postlethwayt.1749:4).

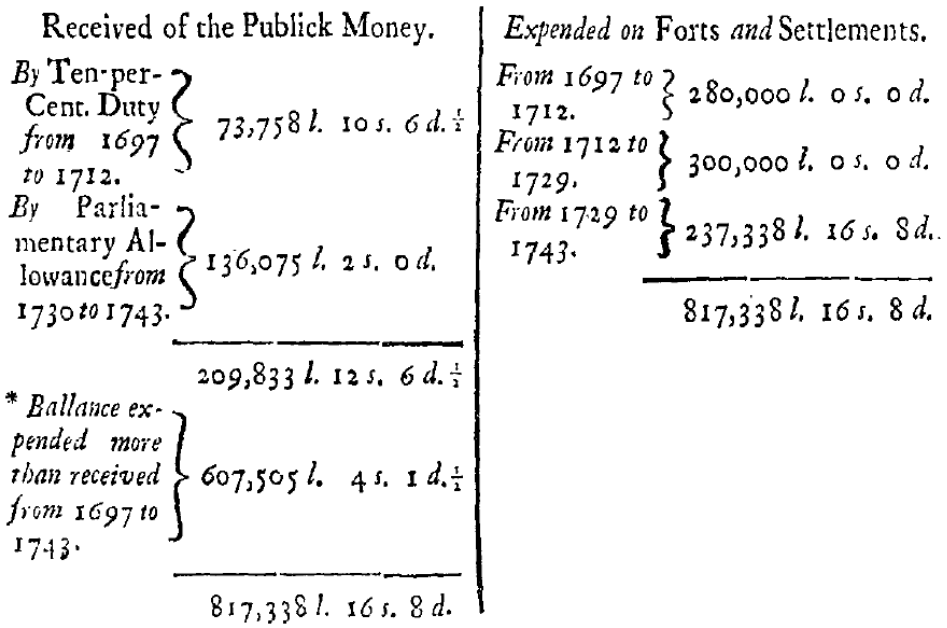
In a letter to the House of Commons published in 1744, and signed by the Deputy Governor, the African Company tried to show how much they were struggling to maintain English Forts and Castles on the Guinea Coast without the proper financial support from imperial administration. The letter contained the financial statement of the African Company since 1697 (Figure 2), when an Act of Parliament established that slave trade should be open to all British subjects (1744:23).

Figure 2. Financial Statement of the Royal African Company (1697-1743)

actually designed a project to British Empire in Book V. Therefore, criticizing the late 18th century organization of the British Empire does not make liberal political economists anti-imperialists. William Palen (2015), when discussing the relation between free-trade ideology and transatlantic abolitionism, wisely alerts that there was not an "ideological monopoly" in the huge Anglo-American debate regarding abolitionism.

5 It is worth emphasizing that Adam Smith's description of mercantilism was a sort of caricature, and might not be read as an accurate account of the 17th and 18th century economic thought; on this subject see Judges (1939) and Coleman (1980).

6 "This was a difficult time for the African Company, which was being pursued by creditors and under strong political challenge. Indeed it lost the battle and was reconstituted by a new Act in 1750" (Bennet.2011:5).



Received of the Publick Money.		*Expended on* Forts *and* Settlements.	
By Ten-per-Cent. Duty *from* 1697 *to* 1712.	73,758 *l.* 10 *s.* 6 *d.* ½	*From* 1697 *to* 1712.	280,000 *l.* 0 *s.* 0 *d.*
By Parliamentary Allowance *from* 1730 *to* 1743.	136,075 *l.* 2 *s.* 0 *d.*	*From* 1712 *to* 1729.	300,000 *l.* 0 *s.* 0 *d.*
	209,833 *l.* 12 *s.* 6 *d.* ½	*From* 1729 *to* 1743.	237,338 *l.* 16 *s.* 8 *d.*
* *Ballance expended more than received from* 1697 *to* 1743.	607,505 *l.* 4 *s.* 1 *d.* ½		817,338 *l.* 16 *s.* 8 *d.*
	817,338 *l.* 16 *s.* 8 *d.*		

Deputy Governor of the African Company. *The importance of supporting the Royal African Company of England impartially considered*, 1744, page 39.

Postlethwayt's claim to Public Support, in his 1745 pamphlet, was related to the broader context of the Royal African Company's financial problems, faced since the loss of the slave trade monopoly. His argumentative strategy was to convince the reader that the British Empire would lose its power if the Company's settlement in the African Coast was menaced.

According to Postlethwayt (1745:10-12), the French great prosperity on the sugar trade, and its increasing naval power, were a consequence of large public investments on the slave trade. French governors found "by experience" that Plantation trade could thrive only in those colonies constantly supplied with cheap slave labor. For this reason, they conceded exclusive privileges to the French African Company.

On the other hand, the English Royal Company was really struggling to secure its properties on the African Coast – like forts, factories, and castles – against French and Dutch encroachments. Postlethwayt (1745:5) categorically states that France superseded Britain in both sugar and slave trade because the English government had been long neglecting its African Company. But what surprised him more was the delusional expectation "that our Plantation Commerce, not only first founded on that [slave] trade, but still daily upheld

thereby, should stand alone without its fundamental prop and support!" (Postlethwayt.1745:4).

Without cheap and abundant slave labor neither sugar nor any other plantation in the British colonies could thrive. Moreover, Postlethwayt (1745:6) addressed another advantage derived from the slave trade: English manufactures were being exchanged for enslaved Africans with a considerable profit. Therefore, if the Royal African Company did not receive proper support from Imperial administration, it would not be able to secure the British share on the slave trade, and, as a consequence, the power and prosperity of the whole Empire would be under foreign menace:

> The more likewise our Plantations abound in Negroes, will not more Land become cultivated, and both better and greater variety of Plantation Commodities be produced? As those Trades are subservient to the Well Being and prosperity of each other; so the more either flourishes or declines, the other must be necessarily affected: and the general trade and navigation of their Mother Country, will be proportionably benefited or injured. May we not say (…) that the general NAVIGATION of Great Britain owes all its Encrease and Splendor to the Commerce of its American and African Colonies; and that it cannot be maintained and enlarged otherwise than from the constant prosperity of both those Branches, whose Interests are mutual and inseparable?" (Postlethwayt.1745:6)

The discouragements to the African Company's operation made the acquisition of enslaved Africans more expensive in the British Colonies than in the French ones. As a consequence, there was a relative scarcity of slave labor to work on plantations which made "the common necessaries of life dearer than in the French Colonies, the interest of money higher, and the maintenance of white servants, as well as blacks, far more expensive" (Postlethwayt.1745:12). Thinking about this grievous scenario, Postlethwayt (1745:32) presented some solutions to the House of Commons: the Company's expenses above the amount received from government should be reimbursed and the slave trade should remain open to all British subjects, free from taxation or any other commercial hindrances.

But the abundance and cheapness of slave labor, besides increasing colonial production, also ensured that the colonies would remain subservient to the British Kingdom, supporting "European interest". If Great Britain lost its access to the African Coast and were excluded from the slave trade, as Postlewayt (1745:13-14) was alerting, it would be necessary to drain

English population to replace enslaved Africans in colonial production. Even worse, he continues, when Englishmen begin to work on plantations, they would certainly introduce manufacturing activities in the colonies and "shake off their dependency on the Crown of England". Instead, slavery ensures that the only activity in British Plantations should be planting, "which will render our colonies more beneficial to these Kingdoms than the Mines of Peru and Mexico are to the Spaniards" (Postlethwayt.1745:14).

From the analyses of the 1745 pamphlet, as well as from the broader debate around the Royal African Company, we can extract two important conclusions. First, Postlethwayt's narrative was deeply connected with the late 17th and early 18th century debate on the role of the Royal African Company in regulating the slave trade. He reinforced some 17th century arguments that justified African enslavement as the only way to ensure American colonization, asserting that Africans were naturally suitable to work on tropical weather, and expressing his concern about the decrease of English population if their work was requested to replace the slave one. Second, both slave trade and slavery were fundamental pieces to the functioning of the imperial machine: without them Great Britain would not be able to sustain its wealth and naval power over other European Rivals. Therefore, Postlethwayt's narrative in 1745 was far from being anti-slavery, but his discourse significantly change in the following years.

Antislavery as a project towards Africa colonization?

Thomas Clarkson (1808.vol.I:59-60) referred to Malachy Postlethwayt in the *History of the abolition of the African slave-trade* as one of the forerunners of the abolitionist cause:

> "Malachi Postlethwaite, in his *Universal Dictionary of Trade and Commerce*, proposes a number of queries on the subject of the Slave-trade. (…) The public proposal of these and other queries by a man of so great commercial knowledge as Postlethwaite, and by one who was himself a member of the African Committee, was of great service in exposing the impolicy as well as immorality of the Slave-trade." (Clarkson.1808.vol.I:59-60)

Indeed, Postlethwayt approached the slave trade from a far more critical perspective in his *Universal Dictionary of Trade and Commerce* (1751-1755) – which was recognized by contemporaries as one of the main works on "Trade" in English Language, and known as the

most complete effort on compilating the literature dealing with Trade (Van den Berg.2017: 1168-1169).

He explained the efforts to translate and improve the *Dictionary* a few years before its publication, writing *A Dissertation on the plan, use and importance of the Universal Dictionary of Trade and Commerce* (1749). This text already stated Postlethwayt's intention to inform, and eventually change, imperial policy:

> " 'Tis a thorough knowledge of trade that give us just ideas of the ebbs and flow of the national treasure, and consequently of the national power. But without an acquaintance with FACTS, whereupon to ground the judgement, it can at best only be conjectural and erroneous. (…) For want therefore of a more minute acquaintance with Facts, it has been observed, that too frequently the great Representative of this kingdom itself, has been misled, either in the making of new, or the rectifying of old laws for the advancement of commerce." (Postlethwayt.1749:1)

Therefore, as Clarkson (1808.vol.I:60) argued, Postlethwayt manifest anti-slavery inclinations in his famous *Dictionary* cannot be ignored. To explain this notable change is beyond our purpose in this working paper, we can only suggest that Postlethwayt's narrative was not the only one to move towards anti-slavery considerations[7]. These considerations are concentrated in three particularly entries: "Africa", "English African Company", "Guinea". As we will see, a project to encourage British colonization on African territories underlined Postlethwayt's criticism of the slave trade.

Postlethwayt (1751-1755.vol.I:24-29;723-730;923-928) advocates that Great Britain should extend its commercial relations in both coastal and inland Africa, a territory that remained quite unexplored to European Nations. This commerce would be proved really profitable, because it must introduce British polite manners, costumes, and even Christianity, among Africans. Besides, tropical cultures like sugar could be produced in the Guinea Coast cheaper than in the West Indies (Postlethwayt.1751-1755.vol.I:24-25;925).

7 For an account on the British anti-slavery debate before 1760, see Brown (2006. Chapter 1); antislavery and abolitionist in Scotland, see Ian Whyte (2006); Scottish Enlightenment antislavery ideas and the actual politics of abolition, see Doris (2011). Finally, a 1746 pamphlet signed by "A Jamaican Planter" (and attributed to Edward Trelawny) illustrates how the slave trade was approached differently in the sugar colonies, *An Essay concerning slavery, and the danger Jamaica is expos'd to from the too great number of slaves, and the little care that is taken to manage them, and a proposal to prevent the further importation of negroes into that island*.

However, it would never be possible while Europeans main interest remained in the slave trade, because "it will ever spirit up wars and hostilities among the Negro princes and chiefs, for the sake of making captives of each other for sale". Therefore, the permanent warfare state introduced by the slave trade "will ever obstruct the civilizing of these people, and extending of the trade into the bowels of Africa, which, by the contrary means, might be easily practicable" (Postlethwayt.1751-1755.vol.I:25).

Postlethwayt (1751-1755.vol.I:727) described the slave trade as an "unjust, inhumane, and unchristian-like traffic", and, what is even more surprising, he questioned "whether the British dominions in general have not an extent of territory sufficient to increase and multiply their inhabitants (…) sufficiently to supply their colonies and plantations with white instead of black?" Therefore, in the *Dictionary* he abandoned the well-known justifications to African enslavement, arguing that "Europeans would make as good servants for the American planters as blacks do" (Postlethwayt.1751-1755.vol.I:25). He also ensures that, if the planters' expenses were the same for employing European or African laborers, doubtless "they would all find their account in living absolutely aside the slave-trade, and cultivating a fair, friendly humane and civilized commerce with the Africans" (Postlethwayt.1751-1755.vol.I:25).

But, even admitting that his suggestions might someday "rouse some noble and benevolent Christian spirit to think of changing the [w]hole system of the African trade", Postlethwayt (1751-1755.vol.I:25) did not see it happening soon. Facing the huge profitability of the slave trade, British authorities could not easily give it away. He proceeded then listing the great advantage of this particular branch of foreign trade to Great Britain. The slave trade was "all profit", costing only "some things of our own manufactures, (…) for which we have, in return, gold, teeth, wax and Negroes". Besides supplying British plantations with a constant flow of slaves, the African trade also affords the employment of a "prodigious" number of English people "both by sea and by land" (Postlethwayt.1751-1755.vol.I:25).

Except for the antislavery arguments embodied in Postlethwayt's proposal to extend British Colonization in Africa, his narrative regarding the impressive gains obtained through slave trade did not really change since 1745.

Final considerations

As discussed above, Malachy Postlethwayt's remarks on slave trade illustrate two important features of early antislavery debates in Britain. First, his writings evidence that antislavery opinion was not always accompanied by an abolitionist activism. Second, the antislavery inclination cannot be understand as a synonym of anti-colonialism or anti-imperialism in the mid-18th century public debate.

Postlethwayt's writings discussed above evidence how the criticism of colonial slavery could be used to defend certain economic projects to the British Empire. Indeed, he mobilized pro and antislavery arguments to defend different political agendas. In the 1745 pamphlet, Postlethwayt was trying to convince his audience that Britain would loose its share on slave trade – and, consequently, its naval power and wealth – without the Royal African Company. In the *Dictionary,* facing the dissolution of the Company, he change his narrative towards antislavery. We suggest that his rhetorical strategy was, then, showing that an even more profitable enterprise could be available if Britain's rulers abolish the slave trade: the further colonization of African territories.

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Appendix 1:

Number of Embarked Slaves according to the Ship's Flag

	Spain Uruguay	Portugal Brazil	Great Britain	Netherlands	U.S.A.	France	Denmark Baltic
1651-1700	0	22.415	25.069	2.768	38	2.046	1.242
1701-1750	0	1.011.143	964.639	156.911	37.281	380.034	10.626
1751-1800	10.654	1.201.860	1.580.658	173.103	152.023	758.978	56.708
1801-1850	5.143	291.986	283.631	1.601	101.870	10.942	16.316
Totals	15.797	2.527.404	2.853.997	334.383	291.212	1.152.000	84.892

Source: Slave Voyages