

SLAVERY AND THE BIRTH OF WORKING-CLASS RACISM
IN ENGLAND, 1814-1833

RYAN HANLEY

Accepted version

Published as

Ryan Hanley, 'Slavery and the Birth of Working-Class Racism in England, 1814-1833',
Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 26 (2016), pp. 103-124.

Published version available from:

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/transactions-of-the-royal-historical-society/article/slavery-and-the-birth-of-working-class-racism-in-england-18141833the-alexander-prize-essay/3EE614F0996A6C28F811E272195A42C2>

Abstract

This article examines racist discourse in radical print culture from the end of the Napoleonic Wars to the passing of the Abolition of Slavery Act in Britain. Acknowledging the heterogeneity of working-class ideology during the period, it demonstrates that some radical writers actively sought to dehumanise enslaved and free black people as a means of promoting the interests of the white working-class in England. It argues that by promoting a particular understanding of English racial superiority, radical intellectuals such as John Cartwright, William Cobbett, and Richard Carlile were able to criticise the diversion of humanitarian resources and attention away from exploited industrial workers and towards enslaved black people in the British West Indies or unconverted free Africans. Moreover, by presenting a supposedly inferior racial antitype, they sought to minimise the social boundaries that were used to disenfranchise English working men and reinforce their own, seemingly precarious, claims to parliamentary reform and meaningful political representation.

In Britain, the early nineteenth century saw the emergence of both a distinctive working-class political identity and new ideas about human difference. The two were not completely discrete phenomena. During this period, the abolition of slavery and the suppression of the transatlantic slave trade entered popular discourse as manifestations of Britain's inherent national moral supremacy.¹ Nevertheless, the textures and referents of this patriotism—

¹ See Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven, CT: 1992), 327-71; Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (Cambridge: 2009), 267-93; Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776-1848* (London: 1988), 419-72.

specifically who and what it was that made Britain so great—were contested. While the industrial working classes in Britain were intellectually as heterogeneous as any social group, a particular strand of radical discourse became dedicated to spreading ideas of a different type of natural English superiority among the nation's disenfranchised workers. This discourse drew ideas about race and nation together with attacks on well-to-do parliamentary abolitionists, and in some cases led to a thoroughgoing proslavery position by the early 1830s. For these radicals, enslaved black people in the West Indies neither deserved the attention of British philanthropists, nor were they intellectually or morally equipped to appreciate it properly. In their eyes, the money and attention being poured into the abolitionist movement would have been better spent on the equally exploited, but inherently more deserving, white British workers.

Racial prejudice, in the form of the assumed superiority of white Europeans over black Africans, was highly orthodox in early nineteenth-century Britain. For the purposes of this article, therefore, a particular distinction should be drawn between racist discourse—that which actively encouraged or manifested discrimination against, and attempted to subordinate to whites, black people both free and enslaved—and that which, in common with almost all European discourse on race during the period, merely assumed white superiority.² Of course, these two types of racial discourse were often interdependent, and both fed off other political preoccupations and discourses. In the context of early nineteenth-century popular politics in Britain, racist discourse emerged primarily in relation to questions of patriotism and nationalism on the one hand, and the ongoing debates over West Indian slavery on the other. During the so-called 'Peterloo years' of the mid to late-1810s, English radicals criticised abolitionists for ignoring the political rights of Englishmen and focusing

² Comparative historians of racism emphasise the necessity of active discrimination, as against purely theoretical hierarchizing, in defining racist discourse and behaviour. See Francisco Bethencourt, *Racisms: From the Crusades to the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: 2013), 1; George M. Fredrickson, *Racism: a Short History* (Princeton: 2015), 5-6.

attention instead on a distant and less deserving ethnic Other.³ Over the course of the 1820s, as demands for an extended franchise became more urgent, the black slave was increasingly represented to emergent working-class readerships as being essentially different from, and inferior to them. These comparisons ultimately comprised a form of racism that was eventually to inform plebeian opposition to abolition in the 1830s and 1840s.

Between 1814 and 1833, theoretical debates over human difference took on a unique aspect in Britain. The climatic theories characteristic of eighteenth century natural philosophy, which held that differences in climate, diet, culture and degree of ‘civilization’ were the primary actuators of physical variations like skin colour and hair texture, proved more enduring in Britain than elsewhere on the continent.⁴ In general, this ‘monogenetic’ approach—so called because it insisted that all human beings shared a single genesis in the Garden of Eden—accommodated pre-existing assumptions about the cultural, intellectual and moral superiority of white over non-white peoples. Indeed, by the turn of the nineteenth century, efforts were underway to consolidate these notional hierarchies within the ancient framework of the ‘Great Chain of Being’.⁵ This theory held that all living creatures were ranked in terms of complexity, forming a chain of imperceptibly small gradations descending from God, through angels, men, ‘brute creation’, and down to vegetable life. In this model, given a particular racial dimension in Britain by Charles White in his 1799 *Account of the Regular Gradation in Man*, Africans did share a lineage with Europeans that could be traced back to Adam in the Garden of Eden, but had been so degraded by their lack of civilization

³ For patriotism and English exceptionalism in the radical movements, see Colley, *Britons*, 341-357.

⁴ For human difference in eighteenth-century British culture, see for example, Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven CT: 2013), 83-156; Anthony Barker, *The African Link: British Attitudes to the Negro in the 17th and 18th Centuries* (London: 1978), 157-193; Bethencourt, *Racisms*, 247-270; Ivan Hannaford, *Race: The History of an Idea in the West*, (Baltimore MD: 1996), 205-215; Felicity Nussbaum, *The Limits of the Human: Fictions of Anomaly, Race, and Gender in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: 2003), 135-256; Roxann Wheeler, *The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture* (Pennsylvania PA: 2000), 1-49; George Boulukos, *The Grateful Slave: The Emergence of Race in Eighteenth-Century British and American Culture* (Cambridge: 2008).

⁵ Nancy Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain, 1800-1960* (London: 1982), 1-19.

that they occupied a lower link in the Great Chain, between white humans and apes. White was particularly concerned to emphasise the superiority of the European specifically over the African, who for him approached ‘nearer to the brute creation than any other of the human species.’⁶ Individual variations of the specific positions occupied by the various races of mankind abounded, but invariably, white Europeans were placed at the top, nearest the angels.

Perhaps because of an ingrained Protestant conservatism, British theorists were hesitant to embrace new polygenetic explanations for human difference when they emerged in continental Europe during the first three decades of the nineteenth century.⁷ Polygenesis, in suggesting that races actually constituted distinct and separately-developed types of human being, posed a potentially dangerous challenge to the literal interpretation of the book of Genesis.⁸ For similar reasons, during the first two decades of the nineteenth century in particular, British natural historians reacted against ‘Great Chain’ proponents like White and took great care to emphasise an essential divide between man and animal—though the perceived hierarchies between the various races of mankind remained more or less intact within this model.⁹ The default position for British racial theorists during this period held that Africans were undoubtedly morally and intellectually inferior, and some thought their degeneration was irrevocable. But what separated white from non-white peoples was largely thought to be due to long-term circumstances rather than as a consequence of separately-developed biological makeup. Africans were undoubtedly human beings, if unequal to

⁶ Charles White, *An Account of the Regular Gradations in Man* (London: 1799), 42; 41-138.

⁷ Early polygenesis is often associated with Georges Cuvier, a translation of whose *Lectures in Comparative Anatomy* appeared in Britain in 1802, though he was in fact a monogenist. His mentee and, later, bitter rival Louis-Antoine Desmoulins was, however, a leading polygenist. See George Cuvier, *Lectures in Comparative Anatomy*, trans. W. Ross (London: 1802); Louis-Antoine Desmoulins, *Histoire naturelle des races humaines du nord-est de l'Europe* (Paris: 1826).

⁸ For anxieties over the scriptural ramifications of polygenism, see Colin Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600-2000* (Cambridge: 2006), 121-167.

⁹ George W. Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: 1987), 43-44.

Europeans. To enslave them was therefore morally indefensible and beneath the ethical dignity of the European race.¹⁰

However, as the first half of the nineteenth century wound on, an orthodox ethnic chauvinism crystallised in popular culture which was to influence the next generation of racial theorists. While full-blown polygenism made only slow progress in Britain during the 1820s, preconceived intellectual characteristics that had traditionally been attributed to different ethnic groups started, gradually, to be seen as organic, hereditary, and unchangeable. This was related to an increasing nationalistic tendency in much British popular culture, including in some of the radical press. As Nancy Stepan has demonstrated, '[i]n most respects science followed rather than led public opinion on race. The cosmopolitanism of the eighteenth century [...] was being replaced in the early nineteenth century by a more parochial and nationalistic outlook which increased the temptation to think in exclusive terms and to despise non-white peoples.'¹¹

Victory in the Napoleonic Wars had secured Britain's global imperial ascendancy, but like the Union of 1800-1801 this had served to diversify rather than homogenise what 'British' actually meant at the personal level. This prevented the notion of an essentialist or biological 'national character' from spreading too quickly. Among conservatives, as Peter Mandler has suggested, a sense of Britain's pre-eminence in political and moral development emerged as a unifying patriotic identifier instead.¹² This emphasis on 'civilization' was attractive to conservative interests because it enabled the expansion of British cultural

¹⁰ For example, the very first sentence of White's *Gradations of Man* was a reassurance that the author 'hopes that nothing advanced will be construed so as to give the smallest countenance to the pernicious practice of enslaving mankind, which he wishes to see abolished throughout the world.' Even William Lawrence, among the most strident advocates of African racial inferiority, advanced his theories 'without the fear that you will find in them either apology or excuse for Negro slavery.' White, *Gradations of Man*, iii; William Lawrence, *Lectures on Physiology, Zoology, and the Natural History of Man* (London: 1819), 364.

¹¹ Stepan, *Race in Science*, 4-5.

¹² Peter Mandler, *The English National Character: The History of an Idea from Edmund Burke to Tony Blair* (London: 2006), 29-38; see also Krishnan Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity* (Cambridge: 2003), 187-196; Gerald Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism: A Cultural History, 1740-1830* (New York: 1997), 123-156.

hegemony without necessarily requiring greater access to political participation, either through the extension of the franchise at home or by granting greater autonomy to colonial assemblies. Meanwhile, after 1823 the abolitionist movement began making steady progress in the amelioration of conditions for the enslaved, including measures for the abolition of Sunday working and preventing excessive corporal punishment.¹³ What offended some metropolitan radicals about these developments was that they effectively equated British plebeian political rights and (so the reasoning went) working conditions to those of the slaves in the West Indies. The question facing radicals in the 1820s then, was this: why did they deserve political advocacy more than slaves? Over the course of the decade some radicals, anticipating mid-century nationalist rhetoric, chose to adapt conservative civilizational language and an exclusive definition of British patriotism to promote a new type of political nation: one drawn along the lines of ancestral heritage and racial unity.¹⁴

To what extent did these important perspectival shifts affect specifically working-class attitudes towards slavery and race? From the outset, it should be emphasised that no consistent, universal position on abolition emerged across the entire British industrial workforce during the early nineteenth century. Indeed, scholars have tried in vain to settle the question of what radicals thought should be done about slavery. James Walvin, Iain McCalman and Michael Turner, for example, have all suggested that the early affinity shared by abolitionism and reform in the 1780s and '90s inspired 'a new generation of radical leaders with ultra- and antislavery sympathies' well into the new century.¹⁵ In contrast,

¹³ For a full discussion of amelioration developments, see Caroline Quarrier Spence, 'Ameliorating Empire: Slavery and Protection in the British Colonies, 1783-1865', PhD Thesis, Harvard University, 2014, 193-243. For the broader abolition context see Blackburn, *Overthrow*, 419-72.

¹⁴ For working-class nationalism in this period see Linda Colley, 'Whose Nation? Class and National Consciousness in Britain, 1750-1830', *Past and Present*, 113 (1986), 97-117. For xenophobia in nineteenth-century British popular culture, see Marlene Tromp, Maria Bachman, and Heidi Kaufman (eds.), *Fear, Loathing and Victorian Xenophobia* (Columbus, OH: 2013), 1-27.

¹⁵ Quotation from Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840* (Cambridge: 1988), 196-7; Michael J. Turner, "'Setting the Captive Free": Thomas Perronet Thompson, British Radicalism and the West Indies, 1820s-1860s', *Slavery & Abolition*, 26:1 (2005), 115-132;

Patricia Hollis and Marcus Wood have highlighted instances of consistent hostility towards the enslaved populations of the Caribbean in English radical discourse, from the 1780s to the Chartist period.¹⁶ More recently, social historians of abolitionism have come down somewhere in the middle, acknowledging the fractured, fractious and discontinuous progress of both the antislavery and domestic reform movements.¹⁷ In a broad sense, support for abolitionism among reformers, and indeed social connections between the two movements, seems to have been more easily identifiable before the turn of the century than after—though, as McCalman and others have demonstrated, there were a few exceptions.¹⁸ By the 1840s, certainly, the default radical position appears to have shifted from one where abolitionists were natural allies in the struggle for a more egalitarian domestic politics, to one where they represented the very ‘old corruption’ that radicalism existed to challenge.

The question of race in the early nineteenth-century English reform movement has received far less scholarly attention, but such that exists is similarly polarised. Satnam Virdee, for example, situates ‘the emergence of a growing antagonism between the English and minority worker’ very carefully in the 1830s and ‘40s, and argues that during the preceding ‘heroic age of the proletariat,’ radicals remained ‘relatively free of contamination by the ideology of white supremacy.’¹⁹ Wood, on the other hand, maintains that ‘the slave population were cut off from a claim to the political rights of radicalism, and the mechanism by which this severance was achieved is a crude racism, by which Blacks are not seen as part

James Walvin, ‘The Impact of Slavery on British Radical Politics: 1787-1838’, *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 292 (1977), 343-355.

¹⁶ Patricia Hollis, ‘Anti-Slavery and British Working-Class Radicalism in the Years of Reform’, in Christine Bolt and Seymour Drescher (eds.), *Anti-Slavery, Religion, and Reform: Essays in Memory of Roger Anstey* (Folkestone: 1980), 294-315; Marcus Wood, ‘William Cobbett, John Thelwall, Radicalism, Racism and Slavery: A Study in Burkean Parodies’, *Romanticism on the Net*, 15 (1999), 1-26. Available from: <http://www.erudit.org/revue/ron/1999/v/n15/005873ar.html> (accessed 18/01/2016).

¹⁷ See, for example, Drescher, *Abolition*, 245-67.

¹⁸ Robert Wedderburn is often used as an example of radical sympathy with antislavery activism. See Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: The Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (London: 2000), 287-327; Iain McCalman, ‘Anti-slavery and Ultra-radicalism in early nineteenth-century England: The Case of Robert Wedderburn’, *Slavery & Abolition*, 7:2 (1986), 99-117.

¹⁹ Satnam Virdee, *Racism, Class and the Racialized Outsider* (Basingstoke: 2014), 25-26.

of the class struggle, because they are not seen as human.’²⁰ A particular difficulty in this debate is presented by the piecemeal and sometimes idealizing nature of studies into the popular reform movements. The charismatic ultra-radical and former slave Robert Wedderburn, for example, was a central figure in mobilising plebeian abolitionist and anti-racist sentiment during the late 1810s and early ‘20s, but he has only assumed his fair share of visibility in scholarly literature relatively recently.²¹ On the other hand, classic studies of working-class history, including the foundational work of E. P. Thompson, have always been criticized for their lack of attention to the ‘flag-saluting, foreigner-hating, peer-respecting side of the plebeian mind’.²² More recent work by Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker has similarly been accused of taking too ideological an approach in its insistence on the importance of an antiracist ‘transatlantic proletariat’.²³ Radical biography, in particular, can be just as susceptible to hagiography as ‘establishment’ histories. This perhaps helps to explain why, for example, William Cobbett’s virulent and entrenched anti-black racism is only occasionally acknowledged and rarely subjected to detailed scrutiny.²⁴ Ultimately, attempts to fix upon a single overarching narrative of the relationship between radicalism and race before 1830 remain, for good reason, contested and problematic.

What follows, then, should not be taken as an attempt to represent the opinions of the whole of the exploited industrial workforce of early nineteenth-century Britain. The ‘working-class racism’ at stake in this article is not necessarily reflective of a monolithic plebeian or artisan world-view, but rather of some of the attempts to formulate one. This

²⁰ Wood, ‘Burkean Parodies’, 12.

²¹ Wedderburn is virtually absent from the history of English radicalism prior to McCalman’s pioneering work in the late 1980s.

²² The quotation is from Geoffrey Best, ‘Review: *The Making of the English Working Class*’, *Historical Journal* 8 (1965), 278, cited in E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: 1968).

²³ For criticism of Rediker and Linebaugh, and their response, see David Brion Davis, Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh, “‘The Many-Headed Hydra’: An Exchange”, *The New York Review of Books*, 20 Sep. 2001.

²⁴ As well as Wood, ‘Burkean Parodies’, see Arthur Scherr, “‘Sambos’ and ‘Black Cut-Throats’: Peter Porcupine on Slavery and Race in the 1790s”, *American Periodicals*, 13 (2003), 3-30. For Cobbett’s equally entrenched anti-Semitism, see Karl W. Schweizer and John W. Osborne, *Cobbett in His Times* (Leicester: 1990), 70-77.

article explores how certain metropolitan radical elites adopted, adapted and promoted new forms of racially hierarchical ideology to a readership whose collective identity and common objectives were still assuming their mature form. Through this type of investigation, it becomes possible to chart the emergence and consolidation of a specifically *working-class* racism in radical print culture—even if those producing it may not have been themselves socially or educationally representative of their own readership. In other words, this study is not of the racism *of* the emergent English working class, but rather of the racist discourse produced *for* the emergent English working class. This discourse opposed the interests of black people, both free and enslaved, to those of the white English industrial labourer. Through the deployment of specifically racial signifiers of national belonging, it attempted to stabilise an emerging working-class socioeconomic identity and legitimise its claims to meaningful political representation. In order to justify the working-class stake in the national interest, radicals needed to identify a negative against which their proposed, expanded political nation could be defined. For many, the despotism of the deposed Bonaparte regime provided an answer.²⁵ For some radicals, racial hierarchy provided another.

1814-1819

The artisan, liberal radicalism of the early 1790s resurged stronger and with a new plebeian dimension in the years after the end of the Napoleonic Wars. In E. P. Thompson's words, 'it is as if the English nation entered a crucible in the 1790s and emerged after the Wars in a new form [...] Almost every radical phenomenon of the 1790s can be found reproduced tenfold after 1815'.²⁶ Post-war economic depression, outsized national debt, widespread underemployment, and wage cuts occasioned by the sudden mass demobilisation of military

²⁵ See, for example, Colley, *Britons*, 306-325.

²⁶ Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, 209.

personnel, generated widespread unrest among urban working-class populations. This environment provided an opportunity for members of the 'old guard' of 1790s radicalism to reach a new popular audience. Thomas Spence, for example, had stayed true to the cause throughout the Wars, and before his death in September 1814 he had drawn a new generation of radical leaders, including black men like Robert Wedderburn and William Davidson, into his organisation.²⁷ Indeed, the black presence in the 'Spencean Philanthropists' during the late 1810s and early '20s has, for some scholars, suggested that the egalitarian principles of the reform movement as a whole extended to antiracism.²⁸ This is certainly true of Wedderburn and Davidson themselves, whose speeches and writings from this period powerfully combine contemporaneous British radical discourse with praise for the revolution in St. Domingue and personal testimony of the horrors of West-Indian slavery.²⁹ For these black radical-intellectual pioneers, the old rhetorical device of equating the lack of political representation with slavery took on an unanswerably powerful personal dimension. Wedderburn's attacks on slavery, in particular, were bound up with his identification of the racist underpinnings of the institution. Indeed, for these radicals, abolition and domestic political reform were inextricably linked ends to be achieved by the same means.

Antislavery sentiment was indeed widespread throughout most of the British radical movement during this period, just as it was among the plebeian and artisan demographics from whom it drew the core of its support. This, too, was related to the end of the war with France. A treaty signed at the Congress of Vienna in September 1814 had included a clause which would allow the French to continue trading in slaves freely for another five years

²⁷ McCalman, *Radical Underworld*, 7-180; Malcolm Chase, *'The People's Farm': English Radical Agrarianism 1775-1840* (Oxford: 1988), 45-120.

²⁸ McCalman, 'Anti-slavery and Ultra-radicalism', 99-117.

²⁹ See, for example, Robert Wedderburn, *The Horrors of Slavery and Other Writings*, ed. Iain McCalman (Princeton, NJ: 1992); Anon., *An Authentic History of the Cato-Street Conspiracy with the Trials at Large of the Conspirators* (London: [c. 1820]), 318-325.

without interference from the Royal Navy.³⁰ Even though the operation was in its relative infancy, the Navy's suppression of the transatlantic slave trade had by this time already infiltrated the popular consciousness as a much-lauded example of Britons' shared love of liberty.³¹ Sensing the national mood, Samuel Romilly, the former Solicitor General and a parliamentary advocate for moderate reform, made a speech attacking Lord Castlereagh, the British negotiator at Vienna, for allowing the French to continue in the trade.³² Meanwhile, the popular press was vociferous in condemning the provision, especially as it was widely perceived at the time to hand an economic advantage to the old enemy across the Channel. While all couched their opposition to the provision in moral terms, many also explicitly cited the 'effects which the introduction of large numbers of slaves into the French colonies, while they are excluded from our own, may have on the prosperity of the latter.'³³ Popular support for the abolition of the slave trade thus came to be matched, in some measure, with British patriotism, Francophobia, and a hard-headed concern for the protection of colonial economic interests.

Some 'old guard' radicals drew on this popular dissatisfaction in an attempt to garner support for parliamentary reform. At a public meeting of reformers held in London in June 1816, Major John Cartwright criticised Castlereagh and the Prime Minister, Lord Liverpool, 'for giving a renewed sanction to the selling of *African* slaves', claiming that the opposition voiced in parliament by Romilly and others two years previously was only possible through the support of 'the people'.³⁴ However, Cartwright's support for the abolition and

³⁰ Paul Michael Kielstra, *The Politics of Slave Trade Suppression in Britain and France, 1814-48* (London: 2000), 22-55.

³¹ For the early history of Royal Navy slave trade suppression, see Kielstra, *Politics*, 25-33; Mary Wills, 'The Royal Navy and the suppression of the Atlantic slave trade, c. 1807-1867: anti-slavery, empire and identity', PhD thesis, University of Hull, 2012.

³² See, for example, Samuel Romilly [pseud. Liber], *Observations on the Late Treaty of Peace with France; as far as it Relates to the Slave Trade* (London: 1814).

³³ Anon., *Remarks on that Article in the Late Treaty of Peace, which Permits a French Slave Trade for Five Years* (London: 1814), 8.

³⁴ *Cobbett's Political Register*, 15 Jun. 1816, 754.

suppression of the slave trade was only sincere for as long as it helped make his point about the exploitation of English workers. In reality, his true wish was that abolitionists would stop playing ‘the part of *African patriots*’, and ‘aid us [reformers] with their powerful eloquence, in our efforts for putting an end to the selling of the people of England!’³⁵ There was no doubt that the distinction he hoped to draw in order to declare the Englishman’s superior right to parliamentary advocacy was racial. He imagined using abolitionist campaigning tools for the benefit of the more deserving English labourer:

The whole solution of their sympathy you have in Mr. Wedgewood’s medallion of an imploring *Negro* in chains, inscribed ‘Am I not a man and a brother?’—But to parliamentary Patriots of *England*, is not an *Englishman* somewhat more than an *African Negro*?—Let such patriots then imagine the medallion of an indignant Englishman, not in the crouching attitude of a kneeling supplicant, but erect, and thus apostrophising: ‘Are we not joint heirs of the same inheritance, and is not that inheritance in the hands of robbers?’³⁶

Cartwright’s comparison between the crouched, ‘imploring Negro’ and the upright, ‘indignant Englishman’ reveals much about how the limits of popular empathy had shifted since Wedgewood’s famous cameo had first been mass produced in 1787. Quite aside from the bald assertion of English superiority, Cartwright’s adjustment of the sympathetic subject’s posture—from the kneeling supplication of the ‘Negro’ to the upright indignation of the ‘Englishman’—articulated the comparative statuses of their respective claims to humanitarian attention. The African’s claim to common humanity, ‘Am I not a man and a

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

brother?', was overwritten by Englishmen's demand to be recognised as 'joint heirs' of an essentialised political 'inheritance'. This English inheritance was exclusive of any number of national, religious and ethnic groups (not to mention all women), but the specific one against which Cartwright had chosen to define it was the black slaves in the West Indies.

As Marcus Wood has pointed out, Cartwright was not the only radical who 'defined the Caribbean slave as the personification of the opposite of British Liberty.'³⁷ Perhaps the best-known advocate for British working peoples' rights during the early nineteenth century, William Cobbett, was also one of the most outspoken and committed racists of the period. Cobbett had begun his journalistic career as a staunch anti-Jacobin writer, attacking the French revolutionaries and vociferously supporting the transatlantic war against France. The virulent and racially-inflected nature of his 1804 attack on the slave-led Haitian Revolution might most generously be read in this context.³⁸ Arthur Scherr has certainly read both Cobbett's attack on the Haitian revolutionaries and his proslavery stance in the 1790s as evidence of his broader 'ultraconservatism'.³⁹ Nevertheless, by 1817 Cobbett had largely moved away from his initial anti-radical position and began supporting the cause of moderate reform.⁴⁰ His entrenched anti-black racism, however, (much like his well-documented anti-Semitism and hatred of the Scottish) had not softened.⁴¹

In the aftermath of 'Bussa's Rebellion', a relatively large-scale slave uprising in Barbados in April 1816, Cobbett published an open letter addressed to the abolitionist William Wilberforce, which accused him of fomenting the insurrection. 'It was notorious', he claimed,

³⁷ Wood, 'Burkean Parodies', 1.

³⁸ Wood, at least, is certainly not so minded: his characterisation of Cobbett as the 'the most ingeniously post-Burkean negrophobe' of the period is unequivocal. Ibid., 4.

³⁹ Scherr, 'Peter Porcupine on Slavery', 3-30.

⁴⁰ See, for example, James Grande, 'William Cobbett: Dimensions of Patriotism', in James Grande and John Stevenson (eds.), *William Cobbett, Romanticism and the Enlightenment* (London: 2015), 45-61; James Grande, John Stevenson and Richard Thomas (eds.), *The Opinions of William Cobbett* (Surrey, 2014), 55-77.

⁴¹ John Stevenson, 'William Cobbett: Patriot or Briton?', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6 (1996), 123-136.

that the Negroes were in a state of profound ignorance; it was notorious that they had no such thing as moral sentiment; it was notorious that, though susceptible of the vindictive feelings with which you and your tribe endeavoured to fill their breasts, they were incapable of justly valuing the benefits which they derived from the care and protection of their masters.⁴²

Cobbett was promoting a particular belief about what the Barbadian slaves were and were not intellectually capable of. His description suggested that enslaved people could *feel* vindictive towards planters in an instinctive or primal way. Reflecting their emotional, acerebral nature, these feelings of anger and resentment proceeded from the ‘breast’, rather than the mind. The more sophisticated evaluative task of ‘justly valuing the benefits’ of slavery, and the cultivation of a mature form of morality, were seen as simply beyond the enslaved. Ironically, Cobbett’s prioritisation of the slaves’ ‘profound ignorance’ implied a belief that these limitations were, at least partially, the result of the degrading effects of slavery itself. His diatribe against Wilberforce epitomised the racialized, circular logic at the heart of anti-abolitionist reasoning: because the ‘negroes’ were enslaved, they were unfit for freedom; because they were unfit for freedom, they must remain enslaved.

However, an important differentiating factor between this and other forms of proslavery and racial thought was the explicit depiction of degraded black humanity as a comparator against which white, specifically working-class, intellectual or moral superiority could be claimed. Like Cartwright, Cobbett encouraged British workers, politically disenfranchised by an unreformed parliament, economically exploited by expanding industrialisation, and socially atomised by ongoing urbanisation, to shore up their precarious

⁴² Cobbett’s *Political Register*, 11 Sep. 1817, 546.

claim to national belonging by defining themselves negatively against racial outsiders. His racism was profoundly inflected by an antipathy towards the parliamentary antislavery movement, and the arch-conservative evangelical Wilberforce in particular. Arguments over the proper distribution of humanitarian attention thus quickly became framed in reference to the supposedly limited intellectual and moral capacity of black slaves. While this did not necessarily preclude a grudging form of *sympathy* for the enslaved, it did prefigure a more uncompromising form of racial chauvinism that was to become more common in the 1820s. Descriptions the enslaved compared them to animals, and suggested that their suffering was less acute than that of the more intellectually and morally sensitive white English working class. Again, Cobbett embodied this type of discourse in his letters to Wilberforce:

[T]his argument was used, it was the *mind*, you said; it was the *consciousness of his being a slave*; this was the dreadful evil. Now, Sir, I wish by no means to underrate this suffering even in the mind of the grossly ignorant negro, who rises even in mental capacity, generally speaking, not many degrees above that of numerous inferior animals. Even in this sort of being I am not disposed to underrate the suffering arising from the consciousness of being a slave. But while your feelings are so acute upon this subject, you appear to be as dead as a stone to the feelings of the intelligent and ingenious people of England, which are all alive, in every relationship of life: whose friendship is so ardent, whose gratitude is so lasting, whose resentment is so open and so quick; and who, which is more than all the rest, have been accustomed from their very infancy to hear boasts of English freedom and security.⁴³

⁴³ Cobbett's *Political Register*, 11 Sep. 1817, 547.

Again, Cobbett was interacting with a host of established and emerging conceptions about the differences between black and white people. He did not make the claim, as in later nineteenth-century pseudoscientific racial thought, that the key sites of difference between the two biological, but rather but moral and intellectual. The distinction became one of national character. Specifically, he implied that the ‘intelligent and ingenious people of England’ were capable of reasoned, socialised responses (friendship, lasting gratitude and open and quick resentment) to Wilberforce’s actions, accentuated by—indeed, proceeding from—their acculturation to the celebrated ‘national’ virtues of ‘freedom and security’. In typical Cobbettian fashion, English patriotism here denoted moral capacity. The grudging concession that ‘grossly ignorant negro’ had the intellect and moral sophistication to feel anguish as a result of their enslavement was undercut by the implication that their animalistic lack of ‘mental capacity’ protected them in some measure from fully appreciating the horror of their own exploitation.

Cobbett may not have been explicitly engaging with racial theory in this passage, but his broad assumptions about black people’s lacking ‘moral sentiment’ and being less sensitive to mental anguish than whites chimed with the most overtly ‘racist’ of contemporaneous British racial theory. In a series of lectures delivered between 1817 and 1819, anthropologist William Lawrence cited travel accounts as evidence of an African predisposition towards irrationality.⁴⁴ He claimed that Africans ‘exhibit generally a great acuteness of the external senses’, but also ‘display gross selfishness, indifference to the pains and pleasures of others [...] and an almost entire want of what we comprehend altogether under the expression of elevated sentiments, manly virtues, and moral feeling.’ Europeans, on the other hand, were distinguished by their ‘pre-eminence’ in ‘moral feelings and mental

⁴⁴ It should be noted that Lawrence was an outlier in British anthropological science at this point, though this was less to do with his assumptions of African intellectual inferiority than his ‘insistence that life could not be discussed independently of animal body nor mind independently of brain’. Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, 43.

endowments'.⁴⁵ These observations were, in part, extrapolated from the type of specific, encoded examples Cartwright and Cobbett had sought to provide. The kneeling, supplicant African and the upright, apostrophising Englishman; the ingratitude and vindictiveness of the rebellious Barbadian slave and the intellectual resentment of the exploited British worker: none of these referred to any particular individual. Rather, they were expressly intended as symbolic of the putatively more legitimate claims for empathy for white English workers over black slaves—a relation that was still commonly understood to have emerged as a result of differential levels of 'civilization' and consequent disparities in 'moral sense' or 'mental capacity'. Their political function was to ensure that popular agitation was directed towards domestic political reform, explicitly to the cost of humanitarian intervention on behalf of black people, including slaves. In that sense, these passages can be understood as early and influential contributions to the development of racial prejudice in British popular politics.

1819-1830

After the infamous Peterloo massacre of 16 August 1819, in which over a dozen pro-reform protesters were killed and over 400 injured by the Manchester yeomanry, the Home Secretary Lord Sidmouth introduced a new raft of repressive anti-democratic measures known as the Six Acts.⁴⁶ These measures included restrictions on meetings of over fifty people, compulsory registration for publishers, increased taxation on all periodicals, and more capacious definitions of seditious and blasphemous utterances and publications. Reformers, especially ultra-radicals, initially railed against the new laws. They were all to pay the price for doing so. In 1820, Davidson, the young black Spencean, was involved in a plot to assassinate the Prime Minister Lord Liverpool and his cabinet: the so-called 'Cato Street

⁴⁵ Lawrence, *Lectures on Physiology*, 476.

⁴⁶ The exact events and consequences of 16 August 1819 are still the subject of scholarly and popular debate. For some recent research, see Robert Poole (ed.), *Return to Peterloo* (Lancaster: 2014).

Conspiracy'. Davidson was hanged and then beheaded on 1 May for his part in the plot, along with four others.⁴⁷ His associate Wedderburn spent two years in Newgate after being prosecuted under the new seditious blasphemy laws. Richard Carlile, a leading radical publisher who had stood beside Hunt at the hustings at Peterloo, spent most of the period 1819-1825 in prison on various charges of sedition and blasphemy.⁴⁸

Wilberforce, among the most conservative (religiously and politically) of the elder Tories, took a special interest in the prosecution of seditious blasphemers. He visited Wedderburn in gaol to try to convince him, with some limited success, to concentrate his considerable oratorical and literary talents on the antislavery campaign instead of domestic radicalism.⁴⁹ The aging evangelical also visited Carlile in his cell at around the same time, though he was rebuffed, one imagines, in no uncertain terms. Wilberforce may have felt offended; he soon saw to it personally that Carlile's wife, Jane, who had taken over publishing her husband's periodicals while he was in gaol, was also arrested and imprisoned for two years for printing seditious libel.⁵⁰ Through his involvement in the Society for the Suppression of Vice, Wilberforce also took a leading role in enforcing the heightened level of tax on periodical publications—a measure designed to hobble the radical press.⁵¹ Wilberforce was at this time still a leading parliamentary abolitionist, and in any case his name had been synonymous with the British campaign against slavery since the success of slave trade abolition in 1807. His personal intercessions against the radical movement during the 1820s, as much as his High Church evangelicalism and his patronising position on improving the morality of the 'lower orders', could hardly have endeared him or his cause to men like

⁴⁷ Anon., *Authentic History of the Cato-Street Conspiracy*, 368-92.

⁴⁸ See McCalman, *Radical Underworld*, 181-91.

⁴⁹ McCalman, 'Introduction', in Wedderburn, *Horrors*, 1.

⁵⁰ See Wilberforce House, Hull, Wilberforce Letters, 16/15 'William Wilberforce to Olivia Sparrow, 20 July 1820'.

⁵¹ Gregory Claeys, 'Early Socialism as Intellectual History', *History of European Ideas*, 40:7 (2014), 893-904. For a general discussion of the Society for the Suppression of Vice, its activities, and its detractors, see M. J. D. Roberts, 'Making Victorian Morals? The Society for the Suppression of Vice and its Critics, 1802-1886', *Historical Studies*, 21:83 (1984), 157-173.

Carlile. Indeed, British radicals were never to forgive him; after Peterloo, they increasingly saw their aims and ambitions as incompatible with the parliamentary abolitionist movement.

Sidmouth's repressive measures, effectively and at times vindictively enforced by Wilberforce and others in the Liverpool cabinet, necessitated a change of approach for the reform movement. Once dismissed as a quiescent period for proletarian activism, sandwiched between the more turbulent Peterloo years and the reform acts of the 1830s, the 1820s is now recognised as the decade in which a coherent working-class intellectual milieu crystallised in Britain. This so-called 'march of the mind' was characterised by a shift away from the rough-and-ready, tavern-based plebeian debating culture of the Peterloo years and towards the pursuit of 'respectability,' sober intellectual self-improvement, religious scepticism, and the early adoption of new modes of scientific and philosophical thought such as phrenology and freethinking religious scepticism.⁵² This environment lent itself to a kind of humanitarian liberalism that generated a parallel, self-consciously extra-parliamentary antislavery movement among some radicals, most notably Wedderburn.⁵³ For similar reasons, many English radicals in the 1820s (including Cartwright) were relatively sympathetic to the idea of Catholic Emancipation.⁵⁴ Thus Irish Catholic reformers such as Daniel O'Connell were, in the spirit of solidarity, seen by many as allies in the broader campaign for political reform—though in O'Connell's case his close association with parliamentary abolitionists generated some friction.⁵⁵ While anti-Irish sentiment was certainly present in English plebeian culture

⁵² David Magee, 'Popular Periodicals, Common Readers and the "Grand March of Intellect" in London, 1819-34', DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2008; McCalman, *Radical Underworld*, 181-203.

⁵³ See Wedderburn, *The Horrors of Slavery and Other Writings*, ed. McCalman, 1-61; 153-54.

⁵⁴ Robert Hole, *Pulpits, Politics and Public Order in England, 1760-1832* (Cambridge: 1989), 230-32. Cobbett also supported Catholic emancipation, but 'he promptly reversed his attitude in 1825 when the Catholic leaders accepted a policy which was opposed to the strict principles of parliamentary reform'. G. I. T. Machin, *The Catholic Question in English Politics, 1820-1830* (Oxford: 1964), 8.

⁵⁵ See, for example, Wedderburn's attacks on O'Connell in *An Address to Lord Brougham and Vaux*, cited in Ryan Hanley, 'A Radical Change of Heart: Robert Wedderburn's Last Word on Slavery', *Slavery & Abolition*, 37:2 (2016), 438. For O'Connell and English parliamentary abolitionists during this period, see Christine Kinealy, *Daniel O'Connell and the Anti-Slavery Movement: 'The Saddest People the Sun Sees'* (London: 2011), 13-27.

during the 1820s, the influx of immigration precipitated by the Great Famine was still over a decade away, and as such the explicitly racial ‘Othering’ of the Irish in England had not yet reached the essentialising nadir of the mid-Victorian period.⁵⁶ Anti-black racist rhetoric, however, was already represented in a small but tenacious sector of radical print culture. The ‘march of the mind’ thus saw some radicals adopt more overt approaches to racial hierarchy, including attempts to popularise the relatively novel notion of permanent racial categories and hereditary African inferiority.

Once again, Cobbett was at the forefront of British popular racism. Evading prosecution in Britain for seditious libel, he had travelled in America between 1817 and 1819, and considered the free black population there ‘a disorderly, improvident set of beings.’⁵⁷ He and his son, John Morgan Cobbett, were dismayed when they arrived at their estate on Long Island in June 1818. ‘There is one thing here that I cannot bear at all’, the younger Cobbett wrote to his mother a few days after their arrival, ‘that is that all the servants, male and female are Black, Oh, the Sacre Blacks.’⁵⁸ William Cobbett was equally mistrustful of the servants—he suspected them of stealing linen and employed a white maidservant to secure the valuables under lock and key.⁵⁹ By the time he returned to Britain late in 1819, his view of black Americans was intractable. ‘[T]hey are the *thieves of the country*,’ he foamed, ‘they form nine-tenths of the paupers and criminals [...] not a word that they say can be believed; [...] with regard to them, *falseness* is the rule and *truth* the exception’.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ For anti-Irish racial stereotyping in the 1840s, see, for example, Charlotte Boyce, ‘Food, Famine, and the Abjection of Irish Identity in Early Victorian Representation’, in Tromp, Bachman and Kaufman (eds.), *Fear, Loathing and Victorian Xenophobia*, 153-180.

⁵⁷ William Cobbett, *A Year’s Residence in the United States of America*, 3 vols. (London: Sherwood, Neely and Jones, 1819), vol. 2, p. 378.

⁵⁸ Nuffield College Library, Oxford, Cobbett Papers, Box 32/XXX/44, ‘John Morgan Cobbett to Nancy Cobbett, 6 June 1818’, 1.

⁵⁹ Nuffield College Library, Oxford, Cobbett Papers, Box 32/XXX/48, ‘William Cobbett to Nancy Cobbett, 19 June 1818’, 2.

⁶⁰ *Cobbett’s Weekly Political Register*, 4 August 1821, 148.

Cobbett was not satisfied with attacking the character of free black Americans: he wanted to prove that they were fundamentally different beings to white men. In an extended harangue addressed to the Liverpool Quaker abolitionist James Cropper, and published in his *Weekly Political Register* in August 1821, he set out his position explicitly:

That the Negroes are a race of beings *inferior* to white men I do not take upon me to assert; for black is as good a *colour* as white; and the Baboon may, for any thing I know or care, be *higher* in the scale of nature than man. Certainly the Negroes are of a *different sort* from the Whites. An almost complete absence of the reasoning faculties, a sort of dog-like grin, and a *ya-ya-ya* laugh, when spoken to, may be, for any thing that I know, marks of *superiority* [...] I am, therefore, not presumptuous enough to take upon me to assert, that the Blacks are not the *superior* beings; but I deny all *equality*. They are a *different* race; and for Whites to mix with them is not a bit less odious than the mixing with those creatures which, unjustly apparently, we call beasts.⁶¹

In terms of the prevalent understandings of racial difference, this was a synthetic stance. The confusion, for example, over whether ‘Negroes’ more closely resembled apes or dogs was reminiscent of Charles White’s outdated *Account of the Regular Gradation in Man*, which contained a comparative chart of the skulls of different races of men and animals (see Figure 1). In White’s taxonomy, derived from the earlier work of Petrus Camper, intellectual faculties were expressed in the angle of the face—the more acute the angle, the less intellectually developed the specimen.⁶² For humans, the anatomical model of perfection, the

⁶¹ Ibid., 147

⁶² Camper’s ideas were published in England in 1794 as *The Works of the Late Professor Camper, on the Connexion Between the Science of Anatomy and the Arts of Drawing, Painting, Statuary &c.* (London: 1794).

‘Grecian Antique’, had a facial angle of 100 degrees, while at the bottom end of the scale, the ‘Negro’ had a facial angle of only seventy degrees. The only other mammals given for comparison in this illustration were apes and dogs, whose facial angles ranged from 58 degrees (‘Orang Outang’) to the pointed snout of the greyhound.

[Figure 1 to go here, rotated to portrait position, full-page if possible. Caption: ‘From Charles White, *Account of the Regular Gradation of Man* (London: 1799)’]

Cobbett’s pretended rejection of the increasingly popular notion of a fixed racial hierarchy was transparently disingenuous. His suggestion that an ‘almost complete absence of the reasoning faculties’ corresponded to ‘a sort of dog-like grin’ suggests at least a passing familiarity with Camper or White’s illustration—perhaps through the more recent writings of James Cowles Pritchard, who found the model ‘to agree with facts’.⁶³ Elsewhere in the same article, he hinted towards a (rather bigoted and unsophisticated) interest in comparative anatomy, suggesting that East Indians were less fit for slavery than Africans because they had ‘hair upon their heads instead of wool; had human faces, and the smell of other men.’⁶⁴ What he added to pre-existing ideas of human difference was a personal dislike of black people, and the desire to organise social relations, at least as far as humanitarianism and sexual pairings, in a racialised order.

If Cobbett’s engagement with racial theories in the early 1820s was at times allusive, other leading radicals were to draw upon them more explicitly as the decade wound on.

Richard Carlile, whose family had suffered so much from Wilberforce’s personal interventions on behalf of the Tory administration, is a case in point. Carlile had little time

⁶³ James Cowles Pritchard, *Researches into the Physical History of Man* (London: 1813), 48; for Pritchard’s racial theory, see Hannah Franziska Augstein, *James Cowles Prichard’s Anthropology: Remaking the Science of Man in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Amsterdam: 1999), 129-56.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 160.

for Cobbett himself, but much of his own racism was similarly bound up in a dislike of abolitionists and a prioritisation of the plight of the English working classes. This stemmed as much from his staunch support for religious freethinking, deism, and eventually, for atheism, as it did from his personal antipathy towards Wilberforce and his fellow ‘Saints’.⁶⁵ Both polygenetic racial theory and ‘Great Chain’ arguments had long been considered blasphemous in Britain, and Carlile’s views on human difference seem to have been inflected by his personal dislike of evangelical Christianity. Indeed, it was in reportage about Christian missionaries going to Africa that Carlile’s racial discrimination took on its most violently bigoted articulation. ‘Is not the saving of a white soul at home, as good as that of a black soul abroad?’ he asked, ‘And why not send missionaries to the monkeys of South America? Who is to say to what grade of animals the soul extends? Or where the human species ends, and that of the monkey begins? Some beings, called human, are lower in character than a portion of the beings, called monkeys.’⁶⁶

Like Cobbett and Cartwright before him, the heart of Carlile’s racial discourse was a series of ironic comparisons intended to dehumanise the African object of humanitarian intervention and thus elevate the exploited English worker by means of comparison. His ironic, quasi-scientific overtones were intended to achieve two specific purposes. Firstly, by explicitly dehumanising those whom, elsewhere in the same article, he called the ‘red, brown and black savage animals abroad’, he ridiculed the very notion of missionary work.⁶⁷ Who, after all, could take Christian humanitarianism seriously when the intended beneficiaries were not even really human? Secondly, he demanded the redirection of resources towards the ‘dirty white-brown’ workers of Britain.⁶⁸ Indeed, he signed off this report with what would

⁶⁵ See, for example, Carlile’s attack on the ‘religion and black humanity of Mr. Wilberforce’ as being ‘entirely of a foreign nature’ in his introduction to the ‘Memoir’ of Robert Blincoe, a child worker in a Lancashire cotton mill. *The Lion*, 1:5 (1 Feb. 1828), 145.

⁶⁶ *The Lion*, 1:19 (9 May 1828), 577.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 578.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

become the mantra of selfish working-class conservatism: ‘if this distribution and teaching of the Bible be a charity, like other charities, it should begin at home.’⁶⁹ For Carlile, the situation of the English working class was too desperate for resources to be wasted on those he considered sub-human, and unable to enjoy them. In this respect, part of his reforming ideology was predicated on the notion of an explicitly racial hierarchy.

In common with British comparative anatomists—and indeed the vast majority of British people—most radicals nevertheless remained opposed to slavery in the abstract until at least the end of the decade. For Cobbett, the anti-radical and industrialising tendencies of the parliamentary West Indies interest made them as natural enemies as the abolitionists. Consequently, even his most racist diatribes were tempered with assurances that

I detest the slave traffic; not so much, however (for I will be no hypocrite) on account of the slaves themselves, if they be *well fed and well treated*, as on *our own account*; knowing well as I do, that whatever the vile miscreants wring from the carcasses of slaves abroad, they use for the purpose of making us slaves at home.⁷⁰

Carlile was rather more half-hearted, but did include some backhanded approval of the abolitionist Thomas Clarkson in his published work. In an aside to an 1829 story about Robert Southey, the Poet Laureate, ranking radical reformer Robert Owen alongside Clarkson as ‘one of the moral regenerators of the age’, he bemoaned that ‘greater men, as moral regenerators, might have been associated with him,’ who were ‘as ardent as Clarkson was in the other case, in seeking the emancipation of all the slaves to feudal despotism and vicious

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Cobbett’s *Weekly Political Register*, 4 Aug. 1821, 170.

habits at home.’⁷¹ As with their attacks on parliamentary abolitionists, these grudging antislavery concessions were framed, with almost monomaniacal obsessiveness, in reference to the working-class experience ‘at home’. In contrast to the dynamic, egalitarian, antislavery ultra-radicalism of the late 1810s, the self-improving and self-consciously respectable radicals of the late 1820s could only barely bring themselves to voice any opposition to slavery. When they did, they were careful to do so without troubling the racial boundaries of empathy they had worked so hard to delineate.

British radical sympathy for the emancipation movement was put under considerable strain after 1830. When the slave emancipation act was finally passed in 1833, the British government agreed to compensate the slave-owners, to the amount of around £20,000,000, for the loss of their human ‘property’. This money was to come out of tax revenue.⁷² While moral support for slave emancipation remained widespread, this provision could hardly have been better calculated to set working-class reformers against the parliamentary abolitionists. Writing in *The Poor Man’s Guardian* in June 1833, the influential Chartist Bronterre O’Brien summed up some of the objections: ‘We have said enough to show that we are no enemies to colonial emancipation; all we require is that when negroes are emancipated, it *shall not be* at the expense of those who are greater slaves than themselves.’⁷³ For his part, Carlile quickly took to printing proslavery tracts written by former slave-owners.⁷⁴ Cobbett was met with

⁷¹ *The Lion*, 4:26 (25 Dec 1829), 807.

⁷² Full records of the compensation payments and claimants are available online at *Legacies of British Slave-ownership* (Online) Available from: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/> (Accessed 22/03/2016). See also Hall et. al., *Legacies*; Nicholas Draper, *The Price of Emancipation: Slave-ownership, Compensation and British Society at the End of Slavery* (Cambridge: 2013).

⁷³ *The Poor Man’s Guardian*, 15 Jun. 1833.

⁷⁴ For example, he published Henry Simmons, *Third Letter to the Right Hon. Earl Grey, First Lord of The Treasury &c. on the Question of Negro Emancipation* (London: 1834).

applause when, during a public lecture in 1830, he expressed his ‘indignation’ at hearing MPs ‘whine over the sorrows of the fat and greasy negro in Jamaica [...] while our own countrymen are found in such a condition under their very eyes.’⁷⁵ Even Wedderburn, the ultra-radicals’ most outspoken opponent of slavery during the 1810s and ‘20s, turned about-face and wrote an anti-abolitionist pamphlet, *An Address to Lord Brougham*, in 1831.⁷⁶ Neither did the jubilation of the slaves when they were finally emancipated in 1838 soften British working-class attitudes. By the early 1840s, as Patricia Hollis puts it, ‘breaking up an anti-slavery meeting had become a statement of class consciousness by working-class radicals.’⁷⁷

The collapse of support for antislavery activism among much of Britain’s working-class population at the very moment of emancipation may, in some measure, be accounted for by the racism of leading radicals in the 1810s and ‘20s. Cartwright, Cobbett, Carlile—these were not marginal figures in early nineteenth-century British radicalism. They and their ideas were deeply significant in the formation of British working-class identity. Expounding an ever-narrower nationalism, they questioned the very humanity of enslaved and free Africans in the same pages that their plans for a politically and socially reformed Britain took shape. The idea of an apparently fundamentally different and inferior racial antitype made the mere social distinctions used to disenfranchise and exploit English workers seem far less significant by comparison. In this way, the English working class came to understand itself as the white working class, almost from its very inception. As Virdee suggests, white supremacist ideology may not have been universal, or even widespread among England’s working people until the 1840s.⁷⁸ But some radicals made a specific effort to make it so. The

⁷⁵ William Cobbett, *A Third Lecture on the French Revolution* (London: 1830), 11.

⁷⁶ Hanley, ‘A Radical Change of Heart’, 423-45.

⁷⁷ Hollis, ‘Anti-Slavery and British Working-Class Radicalism’, 295.

⁷⁸ Virdee, *Racism*, 38.

Chartists' antipathy towards abolitionism had roots in the radical movements of the 1810s and '20s. Racism in Britain was never wholly confined to the wealthy and powerful.