

Contextual Essay: Issues surrounding slavery and public memory

The study of slavery has gained pace and prestige over recent years and historiography is quickly rectifying traditional misconceptions about slaves and the communities in which they resided. Despite progress in the academic study of slavery, public memory still holds outdated views and interpretations of the events are very much dependent on ethnic community. The enslaved are often viewed as being victims, whose weak and deficient characters led to a natural life of servitude and the abolitionists have been traditionally viewed as liberators without whom the slave communities would have passively accepted their role in life. The problem of drawing a line between historical truth and public memory was recognised even in Antiquity, with Greek philosophers acknowledging the difficulties in altering inaccurate public memory¹. These issues are made more problematic when dealing with a topic which still generates sensitivity and anguish in many countries and many communities. The way in which the events of the slave trade are remembered is still very much dependant on which ethnic community the individual belongs to and it is for this reason that I believe that pupils should be encouraged to explore changes in the memory of slavery since the abolition and the differences between cultural memory and historical truth. As "memory is the product of remembrance" this essay will explore memorialisation and its ability to reflect and influence perception of the slave trade.

As Ana Lucia Araujo has commented "memory is political and determined by social, cultural and religious frames" and this is clearly apparent in the issues surrounding slavery². Due to the nature of the slave trade, there is a uniquely different memory in each of the countries touched by the trade. The most unique country is the USA where the descendants of both slaves and slave holders have developed very different interpretations of the past. This means that the multiple memories which have developed are often conflicting and are hard to reconcile in the public sphere. This is evident in the recent events of South Caroline where debate erupted in 1887 and still continues over the erection of a contentious monument to John C. Calhoun, a white supporter of slavery. Although the monument reflects an aspect of the history of the white community in the area, its erection has been seen as a racist act by the black communities. Therefore any commemoration in the public domain needs to be carefully considered and discussed in order to prevent any distress or offence. Yet historians continually encourage Americans to face this difficult period of their history. James Oliver Horton and Lois Horton have tackled this difficult area in the work entitled "Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory" which encourages engagement with difficult truths³. In particular they challenge the idea that slavery was an institution which was foisted onto unwilling European settlers in the Americas, instead white communities should be willing to face up to the reality that slavery was willingly accepted and became "so airtight that it allowed its victims little opportunity to function as full human beings"⁴. This interpretation has gathered pace in some areas of the USA but is resisted in areas of the South where the legacy of slavery is most prevalent and most sensitive.

¹ Ana Lucio Araujo (2010) Public Memory of Slavery: Victims and Perpetrators in the South Atlantic, p.5.

² Ibid, p.6.

³ James Oliver Horton and Lois Horton (2009) Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory, p.1

⁴ Ibid, p.5.

Public memory in the USA is clearly hard to reconcile and commemoration of the abolition is not an easy process. Monuments still exist in the USA which display the “memory” of previous generations. An example is the Stephens Foster Statue which is on display in Pennsylvania. The statue depicts a slave known as “Old Black Joe” and composer Stephen Collins Foster. The monument was designed in 1900 to commemorate “Uncle Ned” one of the first anti-slavery songs but has generated much debate and controversy. The positioning of the well dressed white composer over the bare-footed black slave has led to calls that the statue is racist and as a result it has been repeatedly vandalised. This statue is evidence of a memorial which was appropriate at the time of its creation. The memorial reflects the attitudes of the time and displays the public memory of a previous generation who although may have supported the abolition of slavery, still held notions of the inferiority of non-white Americans. Therefore more recent attempts to memorialise the abolition must take heed of the example of “Old Black Joe” and understand that public memory continually alters and may not always be appropriate and monuments should strive to reflect historical truth.

Facing up to difficult truths not unique only to the USA, other countries involved in the slave trade have begun the process of reconciling multiple public memories. The French Caribbean have begun the process of publically accepting their role in the slave trade and memorialising its abolition. In 1998 President Jacques Chirac publically honoured the abolition of slavery in 1848 and encouraged commemoration not only in France but in the French dominions. Despite this move being appreciated debate began as to what should be commemorated, the abolition in 1848 or the initial anti-slavery law from 1794 which was revoked by Napoleon? The actions of the abolitionists or the daily resistance of the slaves themselves? What quickly became clear is that, similarly to the USA, “the descendants of slaves entertain a radically different relationship to the past than do the French”⁵. Also the ability of “remembering together” presupposes a joint community with a shared public memory of the past⁶. Catherine A. Reinhardt has suggested that the “colonisers” insistence on setting the remembrance agenda in the French Caribbean has placed focus on the white abolitionists and this has led to the people of the French Caribbean experiencing the past passively⁷. As a reaction Martinique have stated that they will not celebrate the abolition of slavery, instead they will commemorate the “anti-slavery insurrection” and the daily resistance of the slaves themselves in an attempt to provide a public space for the memory of the black community⁸. This led to a liberty flame commemorating fugitive slaves being processed around the country celebrating slave resistance. This event was commended for its popular appeal and for allowing active remembrance.

Remembrance in Africa faces a different set of issues. African nations do not have to deal with conflicting ethnic public memories; instead they must try to create ways of commemorating events which had an immensely negative social impact on their development. Araujo has suggested that memorials and remembrance in Africa are vitally important as they are “part of a living and dynamic process marked by the reinterpretation and creative reinvention of the past”⁹.

⁵ Catherine A Reinhardt (2006) *Claims to Memory: beyond slavery and emancipation in the French Caribbean*, p.2.

⁶ *Ibid*, p.2.

⁷ *Ibid*, p.6

⁸ *Ibid*, p.7.

⁹ Ana Lucio Araujo (2010) *Public Memory of Slavery: Victims and Perpetrators in the South Atlantic*, p.11.

Memorialisation has therefore become a way of healing the wounds of the slave trade in a part of the world which still feels the effects of the trade most acutely. In fact memorialisation has become a way in which African nations can become a part of the “global community” in which “museums and monuments occupy a central place”¹⁰. Some countries in Africa have demanded financial reparations as a way of attempting to rectify the problems caused by the slave trade, in Benin however, leaders have “emphasised memorial reparations through developing public policies predominantly based on cultural assertion”¹¹. This reflects the importance of memorialisation is helping to remember the past in order to move forward in the future.

The United Kingdom has also had to face difficult truths and accept its central role in the slave industry. Unlike the USA, Britain does not have to reconcile conflicting public memories and instead is faced with a distinct absence of memory. Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace has stated that slavery has been virtually absent in public memory in Britain because the British public are not confronted by the legacy of the trade directly in the country¹². However in the 1990s both Bristol and Liverpool began to face up to their part in the slave trade. Bristol was first to create the Bristol Slave Trade Action Group to encourage the public to face up to Britain’s responsibility in the process of slavery. In 1987, the Liverpool Maritime Museum was been criticised for failing to inspire a “deep civil commitment”¹³ which led to a re-evaluation of the ways in which the slave trade was taught and presented to the public. Both Bristol and Liverpool have both realised the power of effective commemoration and have both recognised that “commemoration sites work best when they position people to make meaningful connections between their everyday lives and past traumas. This is especially the case when the trauma is not their own”¹⁴. This has led to Liverpool creating more engaging public exhibits at their museums while Bristol has created a Slave Trade Trail in which the public can actively connect with the experiences of the slaves. These are the first steps in encouraging an appropriate public memory of the slave trade in Britain.

In conclusion, history teaches us that the effective commemoration of events can help build bridges between communities and help nations collectively move towards a positive future. Discussion of the slave trade reveals entrenched attitudes in the public memory and memorialisation is a way in which communities can begin to understand the horrors of the slave trade and empathise with those who had to endure its hardships. In an age when issues of race and tolerance are more important and current than ever, the commemoration of the slave trade offers an opportunity to begin to correct misconceptions and exhibit new interpretations. As Kowaleski-Wallace has correctly stated “participants in commemorative events understand most when they are able to see that another person’s humanity rests in more than his or her status as a victim”¹⁵.

¹⁰ Ana Lucio Araujo (2010) *Public Memory of Slavery: Victims and Perpetrators in the South Atlantic*, p.12.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p.12.

¹² Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace (2006) *The British Slave Trade and Public Memory*, p.25.

¹³ *Ibid*, p.26.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p.27.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p.27.

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