



HISTORY OF ECONOMIC RATIONALITY

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Philippe Steiner, professor, l'Université Paris-Sorbonne

ECONOMIC CALCULATION & MORALITY IN THE FRENCH DEBATE ON SLAVERY (1771-1802)

In 1771, the physiocrat Du Pont de Nemours published a number of calculations on the comparative cost of free and slave labor published in the *Ephémérides du citoyen*. A significant number of economists, abolitionists and colons reacted to his proposition and offered some sort of calculation either to oppose or to join his conclusions. Many Abolitionist writers endorsed Du Pont's view, notably in the pre-revolutionary period when the *Société des amis des noirs* was created and launched a first critique of the slave trade and the colonial policy. Opposition came first from Du Pont's friends — Turgot and Condorcet — who rejected slavery, but considered that slave labor provides a greater return on investment than free labor; secondly, opposition came from the colonial lobby eager to maintain slavery not only for their own benefit but as well for the benefit of the nation. Finally, opposition to Du Pont came from J.-B. Say, the future great French economist, who radicalized Condorcet's view, claiming that slave labor was more productive than free labor. Morality and economic calculation were thus much more difficult to combine than Du Pont believed.



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