

# **From Abolitionism to Freedom of Movement?**

## **History and visions of antiracist struggles**

### **I. Introduction**

The Schengen area is not only a border police fence of Europe but also the place in Europe where the post colonial heritage takes shape. With the migrants does not only migrate labour but also their striving for freedom – whether it may be because Europe destroys our countries or because we destroy the borders of this Europe.

This quest for freedom was the engine of abolitionism and the anti-apartheid fights in the older and in the younger past. Fights for freedom that conquered the racism of the slave holders as well as the last bastion of racist segregation in Africa. Truly, we stand on the shoulders of a giant. Today, it is this post colonial heritage of Europe that we want to connect to, in order to stop the killing at the borders of Europe and to abolish the misery of illegality. To compete with this heritage means to strive for a community between us and those who are the witnesses of this heritage. It is the post colonial testimony of the many thousands who enter Europe through its miserable back door. The upcoming community has a face, an accent, a skin, a post colonial history: it is the community of those who come to Europe, of those who arrived a long time ago.

It is the community of those who fight – at the borders of Europe and in the suburbs. We want to face this challenge – by any means necessary.

### **II. South African Apartheid and the fight for the freedom of movement**

When Nelson Mandela founded the armed branch of the ANC “Umkonto we Sizwe” and declared the end of the dialogue with the South African Apartheid, yet few guessed the coming power of a Black anti-racism, which should not only overcome the racial segregation, but also, as Achille Mbembe put it, present to the world a new freedom: an actual freedom of racist construction, a freedom from race. This new freedom developed in South Africa during the fights for the freedom of movement, since the racial segregation did not only mark the inequality between Black and White. Racist segregation is more than

than racist discrimination. In order to protect the racist ethos of the whites, which means their lack of human bond with the suffering of the Blacks, the privileges of the whites alone were not enough. Apartheid was a bizarre border. It allocated the many black bodies a visible border of their labour mobility. The abolition of apartheid teaches us to see the small path, which connects the anti-racism of the present with the powerful history of abolitionism: the anti-racism in practice, the anti-racism for the freedom of movement.

### **III. Economy of Racism: From the society of slave holders to global apartheid**

“Slavery is a system under which humans are treated as the property of others, in order to use their labour.” In societies of slave holders the main production processes depend on the labour of slaves. Sugar cane, tobacco, rice and cotton – in the Southern States, the number of slaves grew as the plantation economy grew, up to more than four million in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The entire colonisation of the Americas from the 16<sup>th</sup> until the 19<sup>th</sup> century came along with the enslavement of millions of Africans, who were used as cheap labour in all parts of the sparsely populated double continent. This did not only affect the the colonies that later became the USA, but also, to an even greater extent, Brazil and the Caribbean. During the more than three hundred years of the slave trade, 35.000 slave ships crossed the Atlantic. Just on the so called “Middle Passage” between Africa and North America, 11 million captives were displaced.

A central element of the apartheid in South Africa was to access cheap labour from the so called Homelands or from the separated townships for very low paid jobs in mines and households. Apartheid in South Africa was above all a concept that, for instance by the use of passport law, made the black population structurally exploitable.

If we speak of a system of global apartheid nowadays, we pose the question if there is something similar to what we just described, on a global scale: the zoning by the border regime, the concept of “selective inclusion”, meaning the systematic selection, the filter function of the constructed hierarchies with little, a bit more or no rights for migrants, refugees or illegalized persons.

Our proposal is to think about capitalism from its fringes. It means acknowledging the fact that attempts to tame labour mobility by migration regimes, always were shipwrecked by fights for the

liberation of labour mobility. To further illustrate this perspective on the borders we will first take a look back into the past.

## **IV. Abolitionism**

“Some person should be concerned to see these calamities to their end.” In June 1785, this thought did not let go of the 25 year old Thomas Clarkson. At Cambridge University, Clarkson had taken part in a Latin essay competition about the topic: “Is it lawful to enslave the unconsenting?” He wrote about the slave trade and was appalled by what he learned: It is the trade with humans, their enslavement and the works of their compulsory labour, which are the origin of the wealth and luxury of the British Empire as well as the other important European seafaring and trading nations.

Two years after Clarkson had this awareness and had made the decision that he himself should be the person to act, he founded together with the lawyer Granville Sharp and with a group of Quakers the *Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade*. They started a widespread information campaign. The readings of Olaudah Equiano, a former slave who toured through England with his autobiography were associated to this campaign. Furthermore, local groups were founded to collect signatures for petitions, witnesses by British sailors and ship's doctors about the situation on board of the slave ships were collected and a countrywide boycott of sugar was organised in which every citizen had chance to part in. Finally, in 1807, the enacting of the *Slave Trade Act* could be reached, thus, by law, the slave trade was abolished.

The work of the *Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade* was important to bring the topic on the political agenda of the Empire, however, most of the members of this society were male members of the British upper class. This class also belonged to the main profiteers of the slave trade and of slavery and by well-heeled lobbying the class guaranteed that every legislative proposal was stopped latest in the House of the Lords. Concerning slavery, the subsequent upper class' organisation's name already tells that their claims did not go far enough, it read: *Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery Throughout the British Dominions*.

To understand the fight for the abolition of slavery also as a fight for emancipation and to place this in the context of the demand for women's and general suffrage – all this was for some of the opponents of slavery an unthinkable offence against their conservative values.

The feminist and abolitionist Elizabeth Heyrick spoke for many women and men of the abolitionist movement (of the younger generation of abolitionists) when she demanded the “Immediate, not Gradual Abolition” in her pamphlet that carried the same title. With this demand, in the 1820s, more than seventy societies against slavery were founded by women.

Elizabeth Heyrick openly declared her solidarity with the revolting slaves in Barbados, Grenada, Trinidad, Jamaica, St. Dominique (today's Haiti) and other European Colonies at this time. Heyrick boldly portrayed slave rising as “self-defence form the most degrading, intolerable oppression.” In the European colonies, the slaves took weapons in their own hands to fight for their freedom. Leonard Parkinson, Toussaint d'Overture and many other led the rebellion and created Haiti as the first independent state.

Due to these joint fights in many different places of the Empire, after many centuries of slavery, London was forced to pass the *Slavery Abolition Act*, on the 26<sup>th</sup> of July in 1833. Thereby all slaves of the British Colonial Empire were declared free from the first of August in 1934.

Whilst in the revolutionary Caribbean the slaves repealed the plantation system, in the USA a militant abolitionist network emerged. Run away slaves and white abolitionists created the so called Underground Railroad, an unexampled refugee-network from the plantations in the Southern States to the freedom in Canada.

## V. Underground Railroad

In her novel *Beloved*, Toni Morrison describes the flight of a woman from the Southern States:

He beat Paul A. Not hard and not long, but it was the first time anyone had, because Mr. Garner disallowed it. Next time I saw him he had company in the prettiest trees you ever saw. Sixo started watching the sky.

He was the only one who crept at night and Halle said that's how he learned about the train.

“That way.” Halle was pointing over the stable. “Where he took my ma'am. Sixo say freedom is that way. A whole train is going and if we can get there, don't need to be no buy out.”

“Train? What's that?” I asked him.

They stopped talking in front of me then. Even Halle. But they whispered among themselves and Sixo watched the sky. Not the high part, the low part where it touched the trees. You could tell his mind was gone from Sweet Home. (Morrison 1987/ 2004: 228).

This train, also known as the Underground Railroad, consisted of a network of secret routes, safe houses, countless escape agents and an impressively dense communication network (and this before telephones were available) - it was more an informal militant network than an actual organisation. Between 1810 and 1850 about 100.000 slaves used the Underground Railroad for their escape. It was active more than half a century: founded in 1780 it existed until 1862.

The escape routes were highly diverse. One of the most incredible, and therefore often told, stories was the journey of a run away slave called "Brown", who is remembered as "Box Brown" since he escaped to freedom by arranging to have himself mailed to Philadelphia abolitionist in a wooden box. In one of the pictures in the background he is depicted deboarding the box.

Often the date and place of the escape was communicated to the escaping slaves by sung messages that were packed in gospels. Sometimes, free Blacks would disguise themselves as slaves in order to enter the plantation of a slave holder and then help other slaves to escape. In transit, they found safe places on the different stations of the Underground Railroad. These places were, for example, old train stations, barns and houses by members of the Underground Railroad. Maps that record the routes, drawn by free blacks and often Quakers who were self-confident to act righteously, give a rudimental idea of the density of the network of supporters.

After the refugees were beyond the grasp of their former masters respectively the slave hunters, by the help of donations, they got new clothes, so that they did not attract attention in trains and ships on their further journey.

One of the most widely known and most successful "conductors" of the Underground Railroad was Harriet Tubman. Conductor was the name of the escape agents who lead the escaping slaves to the North, often at night. The North Star served as an orientation during the nightly passages. At the age of 29 Harriet Tubman escaped herself from slavery, and returned many times to help others on their flight. She used the codename "Moses" and was one of the few who took the risk to be discovered by helping the other slaves of her former master. She was born between 1815 and 1825 and died on the 10<sup>th</sup> of March 1913. Harriet Tubman died poor, but in the company of many friends. After her death she became one of the best known personalities of American History. Next to her role as "Moses", the conductor of the Underground Railroad, who never lost a single passenger, she fought in the Civil War and became an important figure of the early women's movement.

## VI. w2eu

Why this journey in the past? It is the strategic and finally successful conspiracy for the abolition of slavery. It is the movement along the edge of paternalism and direct support. It is the interplay of movement and revolt that touches us. And last but not least, it is the resoluteness of a structure of support such as the Underground Railroad, which does not let go of us, since we first started to dig in the past. By looking back, we search for the visions in the history of anti-racist fights. It is exciting that other contemporary activists are driven by these in a similar way:

Thus, in September we stood in front of a bulletin board at the noborder camp in Brussels and discovered in the guidelines for the press work the proposal to counter the press question, if noborder was nothing more than an utopian idea, with the experiences of abolitionism. At the beginning of the abolitionist movement the abolition of slavery was dismissed as a totally utopian idea of some maniacs – and only a few generations later the first steps towards the abolition of slavery had already been taken and the slave trade was already history.

For the World Social Forum in Dakar/Senegal a “Global Charter of Migrants” is planned – just on the island Gorée, 2km at the sea from the main harbour of Dakar. It is a strategy congress initiated by self-organized migrant groups. Gorée is a symbol in West Africa for the slave trade, from there many slave ships left until the abolition of the slave trade in 1848. The abolitionists used a model of these ships for – maybe the first - poster campaign. Surely, Gorée was not the main trade centre of the slave trade in West Africa – but it remains a symbolically charged place – on the shore of Senegal, where today Frontex patrols in order to stop migrants.

During the search for material for the web guide “Welcome to Europe”, which is a guidebook for migrants on their way to Europe, we found a Spanish orientation guide for people without papers. Our Spanish friends introduce the brochure with the following words:

*“More than a century ago, hundreds, thousands black men and women set off. They undertook an unsafe journey, to the North to Canada, which should bring them far away from the plantation economy and its slavery system – a journey towards freedom. Hundreds of black and white women and men organised support for these journeys, they founded what became known as the Underground Railroad. Today, there is no country of freedom – as it was Canada back then.*”

*Nevertheless, thousands of women and men set off for a possibly even unsafer journey towards the North. Some leave repression and exploitation behind, some simply search a dream or a better life. Dozens of women and men want to support them on this journey, a journey to which all of us have a right. This guide is one possibility to offer support.”*

This journey to which all have a right – and the demand to stop the killing at the borders of Europe and to abolish the misery of illegality – this might sound as utopian as the abolition of slavery back then. Can we end Schengen as we ended slavery? Is it necessary to primarily oppose the legalism of the criminalisation? “Migration is not a crime”, because no one is illegal? Together with the migrants does not only migrate labour but also their quest for freedom. Therefore, we have started this journey in the history of fights. It is this quest for freedom that brought us to search of the visions of past fights. Thomas Clarkson's awareness, that the only logical conclusion from the horrors is to end them, is so plausible and simple – and on second sight, it was nothing completely new at his time, although he might have been the first full time activist. With this striving for freedom, we want to search collectively.