THE ACCOMPANYING essay from a London newspaper of 1770 has apparently never been reprinted. It reflects American sensitiveness to one of the obvious anomalies of Revolutionary liberalism: the inconsistency with which the colonists were charged in claiming liberties for themselves while denying liberty to their slaves. In form and in literary quality it stands apart from much of the current American propaganda. And it will appear that there are convincing reasons for ascribing its authorship to Benjamin Franklin.

The ascription was first suggested by the present writer in an article on Franklin's anonymous and pseudonymous writings during the period of his London agencies;¹ but the supporting evidence could not then be presented in detail. It will be observed that the letter transmitting the essay to the printer of the *Public Advertiser* was signed "N. N." This was a favorite signature with Franklin; he used it in no less than six other newspaper communications, two of these in the same year, 1770. To be sure "N. N." was a very common badge of anonymity, classical in derivation and employed by writers in many languages. But it is a striking fact that in a fairly extensive

¹ "Certain Writings of Benjamin Franklin on the British Empire and the American Colonies," in *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, XXVIII (1934), part I, 1-27.
search through the English newspaper discussions of the American question in these years, the only essays which have been found to bear this signature are those which on other grounds can be safely attributed to Franklin. About three weeks before the appearance of the essay on slavery Franklin used the same signature to communicate a number of documents to the *London Chronicle* (February 8, 1770); and he employed it again in the autumn when he addressed to the *London Chronicle* (November 8, 1770) "a particular account of the rise and present state of the misunderstanding with the American colonies."

The pseudonym, then, points strongly toward Franklin. So, too, does the appearance of the essay in the *Public Advertiser*. Around 1770 that newspaper became for a time the vehicle for much of Franklin's propaganda. It was there that a letter signed "Another London Manufacturer," now established as Franklin's, had appeared in the preceding year. It was the *Public Advertiser* which printed, January 2, 1770, another long-lost Franklin item, his "New Fables, humbly inscribed to the S—y of St—e for the American Department." Furthermore, the same journal was currently printing a series of ten anonymous essays on American affairs under the caption of "The Colonist's Advocate." Beginning in the issue of January 4, 1770, they continued through February 19; No. VI appeared the day before the essay here reprinted. From internal evidence it is certain that "The Colonist's Advocate" was Franklin himself. The successive articles were a mosaic of materials and expressions from many of his writings in manuscript as well as in print.

The prima facie case for Franklin's authorship of the colloquy on slavery is raised to the level of demonstration when one weighs the parallels with other acknowledged Franklin pieces—parallels both in idea and in phraseology—to which attention is directed in the footnotes below. These are clearly of a sort to preclude either coincidence or plagiarism, since they appear in comparisons of this

---

2 Franklin acknowledged this item in a letter to Samuel Cooper, June 8, 1770, in A. H. Smyth (ed.), *Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, V. 262. For references to other essays signed "N. N." see my "Certain Writings," 2-3, 18-19, and Smyth (ed.), *Writings*, V. 127-29, 162-65.
3 "Certain Writings," 24, note 53.
5 "Certain Writings," 21-2, and note 51.
essay with Franklin's writings both before and after 1770, and with his unpublished manuscripts as well as his printed works.

Such concrete evidences are, of course, more persuasive than general impressions of style, though it is thought that readers will discover in the style and the structure of the piece resemblances to Franklin's work, and to some of his best work at that. The form recalls, probably consciously, that of the well-known "Dialogue between X, Y, & Z" on the Pennsylvania militia act of 1755. Later, in France, Franklin composed "A Dialogue between Britain, France, Spain, Holland, Saxony, and America." The type of argumentation is thoroughly characteristic: the plea of avoidance, and the shifting of the ground of the argument. The elaborate casuistry of the agreed definition of slavery anticipates the method of one of the items in the notorious newspaper "faked" by Franklin in 1782. Moreover, the existence of so many parallels, aside from their specific value as evidence of authorship, reflects Franklin's well-established methods in composition: his economy of materials, his habit of reviewing—and revising—his old notes and printed pieces on so many occasions when he sat down to write.

Described by "N. N." as a real conversation, "having myself been present when it passed," the colloquy on slavery was very likely the elaborated account of one of Franklin's own coffee-house discussions.

Verner W. Crane

To the Printer of the Public Advertiser.²

Broad-Street Buildings, Jan. 26, 1770.

SIR,

MANY Reflections being of late thrown out against the Americans, and particularly against our worthy Lord-Mayor, on Account of their keeping Slaves in their Country, I send you the following Conversation on that Subject, which, for Substance, and much of the Expression, is, I assure you, a real one; having myself been present when it passed. If you think it suitable for your Paper, you will, by publishing it, oblige

Your Friend,

N. N.

²Smyth (ed.), Writings, III. 307-20, VII. 82-86.
³Public Advertiser (London), January 30, 1770. From the copy in the Yale University Library.
A Conversation between an ENGLISHMAN, a SCOTCHMAN, and an AMERICAN, on the Subject of SLAVERY.

Englishman. YOU Americans make a great Clamour upon every little imaginary Infringement of what you take to be your Liberties; and yet there are no People upon Earth such Enemies to Liberty, such absolute Tyrants, where you have the Opportunity as you yourselves are.

American. How does that appear?

Eng. Read Granville Sharpe's Book upon Slavery: There it appears with a Witness. ⁸

Amer. I have read it.

Eng. And pray what do you think of it? ⁹

Amer. To speak my Opinion candidly, I think it in the Main a good Book. I applaud the Author's Zeal for Liberty in general. I am pleased with his Humanity. But his general Reflections on all Americans;¹⁰ as having no real Regard for Liberty; as having so little Dislike of Despotism and Tyranny, that they do not scruple to exercise

⁸ A Representation of the Injustice... of Tolerating Slavery (1769). It was not until around 1773 that Franklin met the abolitionist Sharp. See Franklin to Anthony Benezet, February 10, 1773, in Smyth (ed.), Writings, VI. 9: “I have commenced an Acquaintance with Mr. Granville Sharpe, and we shall act in Concert in the Affair of Slavery.”

⁹ Fifteen years before, Franklin had written a dialogue in defense of the Pennsylvania militia act. It contains a closely similar introductory passage:

Y. We have been talking of the militia act; have you seen it?

X. Yes; I have read it in the papers.

Z. And what do you think of it?

Smyth (ed.), Writings, III. 307. The italics here and elsewhere in the footnotes are inserted in the quotations from Franklin to direct attention to verbal parallels. The echo in 1770 of the text of 1755 would be merely curious did we not know that Franklin's writings are full of similar echoes of himself. He had a retentive memory, but in this case it seems plausible that when he decided to write another political dialogue he reread his earlier essay in the same genre. For evidence that fifteen years after 1770 he similarly reread the conversation on slavery when he came to compose a well-known letter on privateering, see below, the last footnote.

¹⁰ Franklin's letters and political essays contain repeated protests against “general reflections” on the Americans, the theme of this and the following speech of the American colloquist. See, among others, Smyth (ed.), Writings, V. 65, 106; VI. 217-18; X. 239; Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, XXVI. 82, note; Franklin MSS, American Philosophical Society, L(ii). 13: “Wrong to punish a whole Community for the Fault of a few.” Franklin to the Printer of the Evening Herald (1787), in Smyth (ed.), Writings, IX. 627-28: “. . . there has always been fewer Slaves in the New England Governments than in any other British Colonies. National Reflections are seldom just, and a whole People should not be decry'd for the Crimes of a few Individuals.”
them with unbounded Rigour over their miserable Slaves, and the like, I cannot approve of; nor of the Conclusion he draws, that therefore our Claim to the Enjoyment of Liberty for ourselves, is unjust. I think, that in all this, he is too severe upon the Americans, and passes over with too partial an Eye the Faults of his own Country. This seems to me not quite fair: and it is particularly injurious to us at this Time, to endeavour to render us odious, and to encourage those who would oppress us, by representing us as unworthy of the Liberty we are now contending for.11

Eng. What Share has that Author's Country (England, I mean) in the Enormities he complains of? And why should not his Reflections on the Americans be general?

Amer. They ought not to be general, because the Foundation for them is not general. New England, the most populous of all the English Possessions in America, has very few Slaves; and those are chiefly in the capital Towns, not employed in the hardest Labour, but as Footmen or House-maids. The same may be said of the next populous Provinces, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. Even in Virginia, Maryland, and the Carolinas, where they are employed in Field-work, what Slaves there are belong chiefly to the old rich Inhabitants, near the navigable Waters, who are few compared with the numerous Families of Back-Settlers,12 that have scarce any Slaves among them. In Truth, there is not, take North-America through, perhaps, one Family in a Hundred that has a Slave in it. Many Thousands there abhor the Slave Trade as much as Mr. Sharpe can do, conscientiously avoid being concerned with it, and do every Thing in their Power to abolish it. Supposing it then with that Gentleman, a Crime to keep a Slave, can it be right to stigmatize us all with that Crime? If one Man of a Hundred in England were dishonest,

11 In the draft of an unpublished pamphlet (1766), Franklin MSS, American Philosophical Society, L(ii). 30a, Franklin had written to denounce “... numberless ministerial Pamphlets & Papers printed here, arguing away all their Rights by the most sophistical Reasons, representing them in the most odious Lights, & treating them & their Pretensions to Liberty with the utmost Contempt. ...” Again, in the draft of a newspaper article probably composed later in 1770, after the news of the Boston “massacre,” he wrote an even closer parallel to this passage: “If Calumny is so bad a thing when level'd at a single Man ... , what must it be when pour'd upon a whole People, and intended to set them in a Light that must render them odious to their Sovereign?” Franklin MSS, American Philosophical Society, XL1 (i). 61. And see Jared Sparks (ed.), Works of Benjamin Franklin, V. 83.

12 Listed as an Americanism in the Dictionary of American English.
would it be right from thence to characterize the Nation, and say the English are Rogues and Thieves? But farther, of those who do keep Slaves, all are not Tyrants and Oppressors. Many treat their Slaves with great Humanity, and provide full as well for them in Sickness and in Health, as your poor labouring People in England are provided for.¹⁸ Your working Poor are not indeed absolutely Slaves; but there seems something a little like Slavery, where the Laws oblige them to work for their Masters so many Hours at such a Rate, and leave them no Liberty to demand or bargain for more, but imprison them in a Workhouse if they refuse to work on such Terms;¹⁴ and even imprison a humane Master if he thinks fit to pay them better; at the same Time confining the poor ingenious Artificer to this Island, and forbidding him to go abroad, though offered better Wages in foreign Countries. As to the Share England has in these Enormities of America, remember, Sir; that she began the Slave Trade; that her Merchants of London, Bristol, Liverpool, and Glasgow, send their Ships to Africa for the Purpose of purchasing Slaves. If any unjust Methods are used to procure them; if Wars are fomented to obtain Prisoners; if free People are enticed on board, and then confined and brought away; if petty Princes are bribed to sell their Subjects, who indeed are already a Kind of Slaves, is America to have all the Blame of this Wickedness? You bring the Slaves to us, and tempt us to purchase them. I do not justify our falling into Temptation. To be sure, if you have stolen Men to sell to us, and we buy them, you may urge against us the old and true saying, that the Receiver is as bad

¹⁸ The author of The True Constitutional Means for putting an End to the Disputes between Great-Britain and the American Colonies (1769) had written (p. 26): „... how greatly would the burdens of the inhabitants of this island be lightened, were there no parish-poor nor common beggars to be found in Great-Britain." In the margin of Franklin’s copy (New York Public Library) appears his comment: „Are not the poor Negro Slaves who are past their Labour, sick or lame, as great a Burthen to the Colonists?" ¹⁹ Franklin frequently cited the Act of 8 Henry VI, cap. 8, as in the marginalia in his copy (Library of Congress) of [Allen Ramsay], Thoughts on the Origin and Nature of Government (1769), 42-3; and in the marginalia on Foster’s Report, printed in Sparks (ed.), Works, II. 335: “Former parliaments acted the same injustice towards the laboring people, who had not forty shillings a year in lands; after depriving them wickedly of their right to vote in elections, they limited their wages, and compelled them to work at such limited rates, on penalty of being sent to houses of correction.” See also his paper of 1785 “On the Elective Franchises” in Smyth (ed.), Writings, IX. 340-43, where he notes the fixing by justices both of wages “and their hours of work.”
This Maxim was probably made for those who needed the Information, as being perhaps ignorant that *receiving* was in it's Nature as bad as *stealing*: But the Reverse of the Position was never thought necessary to be formed into a Maxim, nobody ever doubted that *the Thief is as bad as the Receiver*. This you have not only done and continue to do, but several Laws heretofore made in our Colonies, to discourage the Importation of Slaves, by laying a heavy Duty, payable by the Importer, have been disapproved and repealed by your Government here, as being prejudicial, forsooth, to the Interest of the African Company.\(^6\)

Eng. I have never heard before of any such Laws made in America. But the severe Laws you have made, on Pretence of their being necessary for the Government of your Slaves (and even of your white Servants) as they stand quoted by Mr. Sharpe, give us no good Opinion of your general Humanity, or of your Respect for Liberty. These are not the Acts of a few private Persons; they are made by your Representatives in your Assemblies, and are therefore the Act of the whole.

Amer. They are so; and possibly some of them made in Colonies where the Slaves greatly out-number the Whites, as in Barbadoes now, and in Virginia formerly, may be more severe than is necessary; being dictated perhaps by Fear and too strong an Opinion, that nothing but extream Severity could keep the Slaves in Obedience, and secure the Lives of their Masters. In other Colonies, where their Numbers are so small as to give no Apprehensions of that Kind, the Laws are milder, and the Slaves in every Respect, except in the Article of Liberty, are under the Protection of those Laws: A white Man is as liable to suffer Death for killing a Slave, though his own, as for any other Homicide. But it should be considered, with regard to

---

\(^{15}\) The same proverb was quoted in identical terms in Franklin's essay “On Smuggling” contributed to the *London Chronicle*, November 24, 1767, reprinted in Smyth (ed.), *Writings*, V. 64: “Our Proverb says truly, that *the Receiver is as bad as the Thief*.\(^{16}\) A typical Franklin conceit is the inversion of the maxim in the 1770 essay.

\(^{16}\) In a letter to Dean Woodward of April 10, 1773, Franklin wrote concerning a petition of the Virginia Assembly for leave “to make a Law for preventing the Importation” of slaves: “This Request, however, will probably not be granted, as their former Laws of that kind have always been repealed, and as the Interest of a few Merchants here has more weight with Government, than that of Thousands at a Distance.” Smyth (ed.), *Writings*, VI. 39.
these severe Laws, that in Proportion to the greater Ignorance or Wickedness of the People to be governed, Laws must be more severe: Experience every where teaches this. Perhaps you may imagine the Negroes to be a mild tempered, tractable Kind of People. Some of them indeed are so. But the Majority are of a plotting Disposition, dark, sullen, malicious, revengeful and cruel in the highest Degree. Your Merchants and Mariners, who bring them from Guinea, often find this to their Cost in the Insurrections of the Slaves on board the Ships upon the Coast, who kill all when they get the upper Hand. Those Insurrections are not suppressed or prevented but by what your People think a very necessary Severity, the shooting or hanging Numbers sometimes on the Voyage. Indeed many of them, being mischievous Villains in their own Country, are sold off by their Princes in the Way of Punishment by Exile and Slavery, as you here ship off your Convicts: And since your Government will not suffer a Colony by any Law of it's own to keep Slaves out of the Country, can you blame the making such Laws as are thought necessary to govern them while they are in it.

Eng. But your Laws for the Government of your white Servants are almost as severe as those for the Negroes.

Amer. In some Colonies they are so, those particularly to which you send your Convicts. Honest hired Servants are treated as mildly in America every where as in England: But the Villains you transport and sell to us must be ruled with a Rod of Iron. We have made Laws in several Colonies to prevent their Importation: These have been immediately repealed here, as being contrary to an Act of Parliament. We do not thank you for forcing them upon us. We look upon it as an unexampled Barbarity in your Government to empty your Gaols into our Settlements; and we resent it as the highest of Insults.\(^\text{17}\) If mild Laws could govern such People, why don't you keep and govern them by your own mild Laws at home? If you think we treat them with unreasonable Severity, why are you so cruel as to send them to us? And pray let it be remembered, that these very Laws, the cruel

\(^{17}\) On few themes did Franklin write so often, or so indignantly. Repeatedly he used terms identical with those in this passage, though woven into slightly different patterns: "how cruel it is to force," "repealing all the Laws," "emptying their gaols into our settlements," "rogues and villains," "insult," etc. See Smyth (ed.), \textit{Writings}, III. 45-48; V. 86-87, 206-18 (the date of this item should be 1759, not 1769 as in Bigelow and Smyth); VI. 123; IX. 628-30; draft of pamphlet (1766), Franklin MSS, American Philosophical Society, L(ii), 31d; \textit{The Causes of the Present Distractions in America} (1774).
Spirit of which you Englishmen are now pleased so to censure, were, when made, sent over hither, and submitted, as all Colony Laws must be, to the King in Council for Approbation, which Approbation they received, I suppose upon thorough Consideration and sage Advice. If they are nevertheless to be blamed, be so just as to take a Share of the Blame to yourselves.

Scotchman. You should not say we force the Convicts upon you. You know you may, if you please, refuse to buy them. If you were not of a tyrannical Disposition; if you did not like to have some under you, on whom you might exercise and gratify that Disposition; if you had really a true Sense of Liberty, about which you make such a Pother, you would purchase neither Slaves nor Convict Servants, you would not endure such a Thing as Slavery among you.

Amer. It is true we may refuse to buy them, and prudent People do so. But there are still a Number of imprudent People, who are tempted by the Lowness of the Price, and the Length of the Time for which your Convicts are sold, to purchase them. We would prevent this Temptation. We would keep your British Man-Merchants, with their detestable Ware, from coming among us: But this you will not allow us to do. And therefore I say you force upon us the Convicts as well as the Slaves. But, Sir, as to your Observation, that if we had a real Love of Liberty, we should not suffer such a Thing as Slavery among us, I am a little surprised to hear this from you, a North Briton, in whose own Country, Scotland, Slavery still subsists, established by Law.

Scotchman. I suppose you mean the heretable Jurisdictions. There was not properly any Slavery in them: And, besides, they are now all taken away by Act of Parliament.

Amer. No, Sir, I mean the Slavery in your Mines. All the Wretches that dig Coal for you, in those dark Caverns under Ground, un-blessed by Sunshine, are absolute Slaves by your Law, and their Children after them, from the Time they first carry a Basket to the End of their Days. They are bought and sold with the Colliery, and have no more Liberty to leave it than our Negroes have to leave their Master’s Plantation. If having black Faces, indeed, subjected Men to the Condition of Slavery, you might have some small Pretence for keeping the poor Colliers in that Condition: But remember, that under the Smut their Skin is white, that they are honest good People, and at the same Time are your own Countrymen!
Eng. I am glad you cannot reproach England with this; our Colliers are as free as any other Labourers.

Amer. And do you therefore pretend that you have no such Thing as Slavery in England?

Eng. No such Thing most certainly.

Amer. I fancy I could make it appear to you that you have, if we could first agree upon the Definition of a Slave. And if your Author's Position is true, that those who keep Slaves have therefore no Right to Liberty themselves you Englishmen will be found as destitute of such Rights as we Americans I imagine.

Eng. What is then your Definition of a Slave? Pray let us hear it, that we may see whether or no we can agree in it.

Amer. A Slave, according to my Notion, is a human Creature, stolen, taken by Force, or bought of another or of himself, with Money; and who being so taken or bought, is compelled to serve the Taker, or Purchaser, during Pleasure or during Life. He may be sold again, or let for Hire, by his Master to another, and is then obliged to serve that other; he is one who is bound to obey, not only the Commands of his Master, but also the Commands of the lowest Servant of that Master, when set over him; who must come when he is called, go when he is bid, and stay where he is ordered, though to the farthest Part of the World, and in the most unwholesome Climate; who must wear such Cloaths as his Master thinks fit to give him, and no other, though different from the common Fashion, and contrived to be a distinguishing Badge of Servitude; and must be content with such Food or Subsistence as his Master thinks fit to order for him, or with such small Allowance in Money as shall be given him in Lieu of Victuals or Cloathing; who must never absent himself from his Master's Service without Leave; who is subject to severe Punishments for small Offences, to enormous Whippings, and even Death, for absconding from his Service, or for Disobedience to Orders. I imagine such a Man is a Slave to all Intents and Purposes.

Eng. I agree to your Definition. But surely, surely, you will not say there are any such Slaves in England?

Amer. Yes, many Thousands, if an English Sailor or Soldier is well described in that Definition. The Sailor is often forced into

* For another use of the argument by definition, see the spurious letter signed John Paul Jones which Franklin inserted in the pretended supplement of the Boston Independent Chronicle, 1782, in Smyth (ed.), Writings, I. 175-76; more fully in Sparks (ed.), Works, V. 131-36.
Service, torn from all his natural Connections.\textsuperscript{19} The Soldier is generally bought in the first Place for a Guinea and a Crown at the Drum-Head: His Master may sell his Service, if he pleases, to any foreign Prince, or barter it for any Consideration by Treaty, and send him to shoot or be shot at in Germany or Portugal, in Guinea or the Indies. He is engaged for Life; and every other Circumstance of my Definition agrees with his Situation. In one Particular, indeed, English Slavery goes beyond that exercised in America.

\textit{Eng.} What is that?

\textit{Amer.} We cannot command a Slave of ours to do an immoral or a wicked Action. We cannot oblige him, for Instance, to commit MURDER! If we should order it, he may refuse, and our Laws would justify him. But Soldiers must, on Pain of Death, obey the Orders they receive; though, like Herod’s Troops, they should be commanded to slay all your Children under two Years old, cut the Throats of your Children in the Colonies, or shoot your Women and Children in St. G——e’s F——ds.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{19} See Franklin on the impressment of seamen, marginalia in Sparks (ed.), \textit{Works}, II. 334: “If impressing seamen is of right by common law in Britain, slavery is then of right by common law there; there being no slavery worse than that sailors are subjected to.” See also next note: and the speech attributed by Franklin to Sidi Mehemet Ibrahim, in a paper of 1790, Smyth (ed.), \textit{Writings}, X. 89-90.

\textsuperscript{20} In this concluding passage appear clinching proofs of Franklin’s authorship of the essay. On March 14, 1785, Franklin composed a well-known letter to Benjamin Vaughan “On the Criminal Laws and the Practice of Privateering” which was communicated by Vaughan to Sir Samuel Romilly, and printed anonymously by the latter in a pamphlet of 1786, though with a strong hint that Franklin was the author. See Smyth (ed.), \textit{Writings}, IX. 298, for the following portion of the letter, which to my mind must have been written by Franklin with the text of his “Conversation” of 1770 before him. The expression, “in our Colonies,” is curiously out of date in 1785 except upon this assumption, which is further supported by the theme and the phraseology: “It has been for some time a generally receiv’d Opinion, that a military Man is not to enquire whether a War be just or unjust; he is to execute his Orders. All Princes who are dispos’d to become Tyrants must probably approve of this Opinion, and be willing to establish it; but is it not a dangerous one? since, on that Principle, if the Tyrant commands his Army to attack and destroy, not only an unoffending Neighbour nation, but even his own Subjects, the Army is bound to obey. A negro Slave, in our Colonies, being commanded by his Master to rob or murder a Neighbour, or do any other immoral Act, may refuse, and the Magistrate will protect him in his Refusal. The Slavery then of a Soldier is worse than that of a Negro! A conscientious Officer, if not restrain’d by the Apprehension of its being imputed to another Cause, may indeed resign, rather than be employ’d in an unjust War; but the private Men are Slaves for Life; and they are perhaps incapable of judging for themselves. We can only lament their Fate, and still more that of a Sailor, who is often dragg’d by Force from his honest Occupation, and compelled to imbrue his Hands in, perhaps, innocent Blood.”