

*The Patriotism of David Humphreys: Nation, Narration,
Orientalism
and the Algerine Captivity Question
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Abstract

This paper has studied the patriotism of David Humphreys as it is revealed in his Orientalist vision of Algiers during the so-called Barbary captivity crisis. His patriotism works out as a narrative of America's march towards a state of nationhood, which he does through his Orientalist appropriation of Algiers. This is related to his celebration of the ideals of the American nation in contrast to a demonization of Algiers. Therefore, his patriotic poems are considered as narratives of the United States as a nation of liberty and progress contrasted to Algiers as a slave and despotic power. Following Homi Bhabha's idea of *nationness*, the paper has shown David Humphreys's celebration of the American people's march into the status of "freedom's heirs" entitled with "the pursuit of happiness". This is through the workings of the Institutions of the land for the promotion and protection of the ideals of justice, equality and freedom. As narration involves progress rather than regress, he adds that the United States is bestowed a "glorious future" as the people inherited the fundamental principle of the "love of nation" and the commitment to it body and soul. He brings these issues vividly through a contrast he draws with Algiers and the so-called "pirate race" as well as the European nations which tended to be tributary to Algiers and the assaults effected against the new nation.

Introduction

After Independence, the United States revealed itself as a new nation, which required to be imposed as such to the world. To get their nation acknowledged as a free and independent one, the officials had to establish diplomatic relations with other countries. Soon, the so-called North African captivity crisis offered the United States a kind of timely opportunity to make itself recognized as one of the world's powerful nations. The captivity of American citizens by Algerine sea captains in 1785, with the capture of two vessels, and in 1793 with the capture of thirteen other vessels, created a situation where the United States was in a permanent quest for diplomatic overtures with Algiers. Many American officials were being sent to Europe and Algiers in an aspiration to find diplomatic solutions to the problem. Among the diplomats were Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, ambassadors in 1785 to Paris and London respectively and General David Humphreys, secretary to Jefferson in Paris as well as ambassador to Lisbon in 1794. Humphreys particularly engaged in writing a collection of poems and essays that aimed at consolidating American identity. The Algerine question provided him with an important raw material thanks to which his patriotic idea was shaped.

Studies on the importance David Humphreys played in the North African crisis as a statesman and as a poet do agree on his patriotism. Edward Cifelli (1982) writes that the patriotic zeal of Humphreys's poems and public speeches is important; "he produced long addresses to citizens of the United States, verse orations which served as formal restatement of his own patriotic faith. He wrote the first of these poems, 'On Industry', in 1792; the second, 'On the Love of Country' in 1799; and the third, the 'Elegy' on Washington's death in 1800" (1982: 82). Therefore, it seems pertinent an idea to relate this patriotic zeal with his Orientalist vision of Algiers and the captives question. Another scholar of David Humphreys is Lawrence A. Peskin (2009). He observes that Humphreys had been a committed poet and diplomat of the Algerine crisis. As a diplomat, he engaged in an endeavour to get the captives out of slavery, and when he failed he at

least did whatever possible to alleviate their sufferings. As a poet, he wrote patriotic poems that aspired to raise not only a patriotic diligence in his American fellows but also public support for the American captives in Algiers. Both Cifelli and Peskin do not ignore the patriotism of David Humphreys. However, the way this patriotism works out as a narrative of America's march towards a state of nationhood and his Orientalist appropriation of Algiers for that purpose deserve to be studied in a more pertinent and theoretically grounded way.

Issue and Working Hypothesis

The purpose of this paper is to deal with David Humphreys's consolidation of the American identity following a postcolonial perspective. The idea is that General Humphreys celebrates the ideals of the American nation through putting them into a sharp contrast with flaws allegedly endemic to Algiers and other Oriental countries. This means that he makes of Algiers and other Oriental countries the contrastive image of the United States and its people. Therefore, much emphasis will be put on the way he uses the Algerine captivity question to celebrate the American nation. The point is that he appropriates the issue of the American captives in Algiers as a starting point for the celebration of the ideals of justice and freedom endemic to the United States of America, and these he brings to a sharp contrast with the so-called North African evils of slavery, oppression and injustice. It means that there is a sharp contrast between American democracy and North African tyranny. Besides, in revealing these so-called evils there is an aspiration to stir in the American people a nationalist feeling. The nationalism of the American people would prove vital to the war he wished his country conduct against Algiers. As he was against the custom of buying peace by tributes, he early advised that a war was fundamental to stop the attacks against American democracy and love of liberty.

It is important to say that the background of Humphreys's writings involved several elements. In fact, the United States was starting its first steps as a free nation, so it needed recognition as such in the international sphere. Soon the capture of American citizens in

North Africa opened the doors for this as the United States had then an enemy that would recognize its government. This recognition expressed itself in their inquiries for treaties with the United States in the same way as they were doing with the European nations. And as reports about the suffering of the captives were swarming home through letters and captivity narratives, it was urgent that measures against Algiers and the other powers demanded to be taken so as to free the captives and make the practice cease forever. Besides, as there were some internal voices against the new nation and its system of government, the captives' question revealed the most heinous systems that were prevailing in the Orient. This also helped defend the American nation and its government.

This paper will be based upon a selection of Humphreys's patriotic poetry like "On the Happiness of America" (1785), "On the Future Glory of the United States" and the ideas selected for development will be supported by his diplomatic correspondence and essays. From the methodological point of view, it is very appropriate to refer to Homi Bhabha's concept of "nation and narration" due necessarily to the importance given to the American nation in the writings of David Humphreys. Bhabha observes that the concept of *nation* "emerged as an important idea in the West" (Bhabha, 1990: 1), and the idea of *nationness* is based upon the "*heimlich* [or domestic] pleasures of the hearth and *unheimlich* [or strange] terror of the space or race of the Other" (Ibid. 2). David Humphreys's contrast between Algiers and the United States is in direct line with this idea of "nationness" as it is coined by Bhabha. This contrast is, in fact, concomitant to the Orientalization of Algiers as the "contrasting image" of the United States (Said, 1995: 2). This means that the ideas of Edward Said are not without importance in the study of the writings of David Humphreys.

Discussion

The United States during the period that followed Independence was a new and weakened nation by the fact that it had no navy to protect its interests and its civilians in the Atlantic and Mediterranean. Also, the people lost their protection from the British by the time they

declared their war against their motherland. Having no navy to protect the people and the commerce, American vessels were easy a prey to foreign assaults like the Algerine seamen. This was worsened by the American war debt, which meant an important impediment when the so-called Barbary captivity crisis emerged. In fact, without money, the United States could neither get its citizens out of captivity by means of purchase or tributary presents nor aspire to build a navy to cope with the situation by means of war. And the emergence of the Federalist and Anti-Federalist debates over the best way of governing the nation, whether through continuing on the Articles of Confederation or adopting the Constitution of the United States newly drafted by Alexander Hamilton and others, during the years that followed Independence was not without its effect upon the state of the captives in North Africa. This issue implied a kind of domestic instability which added to the foreign crisis related to North Africa. Therefore, in order to consolidate the identity of the American nation, these issues were without doubt of their importance to General David Humphreys. Elizabeth Maddock Dillon (2004) argues that the internal stability of the American nation “was closely related to the status of the nation in the world and to the terms used by the nation to construct and secure its identity and authority both internally and externally” (2004: 409). It means that the capture of American civilians and the reaction to that would certainly show the extent to which American identity was or was not stable.

The United States and Algiers, or Liberty versus Oppression and Slavery

The United States, with its war on Independence, proved to be a land of liberty. The Declaration of Independence writes, [w]e hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness--That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed, that whenever any Form of Government becomes

destructive of these Ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it.

(United States Government, 1979: 1)

David Humphreys, in “On the Happiness of America”, celebrates the ideal of freedom so endemic to the American nation and which bestows upon the Americans the right to “the pursuit of happiness”. For him the people of the United States are “freedom’s heirs” (Humphreys, 1804: 30) and “Blest if they knew to them alone ‘tis given” this Liberty so fundamental to the Constitution upon which the government operates, which inspires from the Declaration of Independence, “Our Constitution form’d on Freedom’s base” (Ibid.). Humphreys draws a distinction between the encroachment of this love and protection of liberty in the institutions of the land with the supposed prevalence of oppression and barbarism in Algiers. He writes, “We lack the gaudy pomp that wails/ On Eastern Monarchs, or despotic states; / Yet well we spare what realms despotic feel, / Oppression’s scourge and persecution’s wheel” (1804: 37). It means that he associates Algiers with despotism and oppression. Therefore, the Americans should be proud of their liberty being defended by the institutions of the land. The poem was written in 1785, soon after Algiers seized two American ships and reduced their passengers into slave labour. This act of enslaving the ‘free’ American people is considered as one of the proofs of the contrast between Algiers and the United States.

Liberty being the pillar of the Constitution of the United States, every man and every woman are born free and thereby their freedom should be protected by law,

Here the fair sex an equal honour claims,
Wakes chaste desire, nor burns with lawless flames;
No eastern manner here consign the charms
Of beauteous slaves to some loath’d master’s arms:
No lovely maid in wedlock e’er was sold
By parents base, for mercenary gold;
Nor forced the hard alternative to try,

To live dishonour'd, or with hunger die.
[...]
No feudal ties the rising genius mar,
Compel the servile toils or drag to war;
But free each youth, his favourite course pursues
(1804: 37)

As the American people are “freedom’s heir”, women, too, have their place as equally free as men. What one understands from this is that the American women have the same privileges as men whereas in Oriental societies, they are always subdued to the authority of their husbands or fathers. If married, they should obey the orders of their husbands, and if not, they are forced to undergo the same oppression from their fathers as if they are married. John Foss in his captivity narrative writes that the way the people of Algiers treat their women is backward as they “imprison” them in the harem or oblige them to be “veiled” (Foss, 1999: 91) in the scarce moments they are allowed outside.

From “eastern manner”, one understands that such customs as slavery and the exploitation of children by their parents are practices supposedly endemic to the Orient. However, they are by no means features akin to the United States, where there are allegedly no slaves, and children do not suffer from the heinous practices of their parents. Besides, the authority of the father or the mother is never excessive as there is much respect of the natural development of the child or the youth. What one understands also from this is that the American people are open to new ideas and never stick to old-fashioned ones. It follows that Humphreys considers the Orientals as born oppressors as they are likely to reproduce the errors of their forebears whereas the Americans are born “freedom’s heirs” so that they would always work to defend this ideal.

Also, from this it is clear that the absence of liberty in Oriental societies is felt at the domestic level as well as the political and public ones whereas in the United States, the institutions of the land are premised upon freedom. The institutions of the Oriental states are

based upon oppression and despotism so that the people live on “oppression’s scourge, and persecution’s wheel” (Humphreys, 1804: 37). “Yet we spare what realms despotic feel” (Ibid). This is to say that the American government and its Constitution defend the rights of the people and deals with the affairs of the state away from the despotic principles. David Humphreys’s patriotic emphasis on the contrast between America as a land of liberty and justice and Algiers as a land of oppression and anarchy is the result of the emergence of the captivity question which opened up American interests in Algiers. Peskin (2009) observes that the “Algerian captives were perfect subjects for” his project of inciting “the love of country” and the “patriotic sensibility” in the American people (Peskin, 2009: 43). This is played out through depicting the ideals of justice, equality and freedom as the domestic “pleasures of the hearth” (Bhabha, 1999: 2) of the United States and the oppression and slavery as the “terror of the space or race” (Ibid.) of Algiers.

The “Barbary” Captives and the Algerine Seamen

The contrast made between Algiers as a slave country with the United States as a land of Liberty is reinforced by David Humphreys’s patriotic poems and other writings on the American captives in North Africa. In “On the Future Glory of the United States”, he calls for arms against the “pirate race” (1804: 52) that “have seiz’d our ships and made our freemen slaves” (Ibid. 51). The process of turning “freemen” to slavery testifies to the depiction of Algiers as an enslaving power in contrast to the United States as a land of freedom as its people were free, if only “the pirate race” did not interfere to subdue them to slavery. Such representation of Algiers came from the vivid correspondence Humphreys maintained with the North African captives. These informed him about their daily toil. As he was also secretary to Thomas Jefferson’s office in Paris, he was in close contact with the information that was pouring down from Algiers. In a letter addressed to an unknown addressee, Captain O’Brien informs his correspondent of “the lamentable situation of [his] crew in the marine where they are employed on the most laborious work and so much

exhausted that if some speedy measure is not adopted to redeem them from slavery”, they are likely to die of the pest that “rages” in Algiers as well as the mistreatment they are forced to undergo daily (O’Brien, 1939: 14-15). David Humphreys is urged by the news he was getting from Algiers to take measures to redeem the captives.

In the beginning, he was adhering to the common belief in the necessity of treating with Algiers as the solution. Therefore, he was appointed by President George Washington to carry out the workings of a treaty with Algiers. However, the Dey of Algiers refused to grant him passport to come and initiate the negotiations. In a letter to George Washington, he writes “you will find that the Dey of Algiers has refused to grant a passport for me to come to Algiers. All hopes of any accommodation by negotiation for the present are therefore at the end” (1917b: 188). Using the Dey’s own words, he adds, “he would not treat with us, even if we were to lavish Millions” (1917: 189). The Dey’s refusal to treat with the United States is motivated by the truce signed between Britain and Portugal, on the one hand, and Algiers on the other. Captain O’Brien writes to Humphreys telling him not “to forgive the British and Portuguese [...] God I hope will severely punish them” (Quoted in Peskin, 2009: 39). The Algerines, now without any constraint to head to the Atlantic, would capture further American vessels (Humphreys, 1917b: 87). This would complicate further American commercial interests. Therefore, the United States would be forced to trade with non-American vessels, and the British and Portuguese would be appropriate for that given the truce as well as their fleets’ large engagement in the Atlantic. As the Dey was refusing to treat with the United States, Humphreys is aware that the situation of the captives would get worse. While waiting for further measures, he advises that the money for their release, being spared, should “be applied [...] to the immediate cloathing and comfort of our naked and distressed countrymen, who are in captivity” (1917b: 189), which would at least bring some comfort for the captives while waiting for effective measures to get them out of the so-called slavery.

Also, Humphreys considers the problem with Algiers as a *national* one so that every American citizen had to be mobilised to get

the captives out of “slavery”. In a letter to President Washington dated November 23rd 1793, he argues that the people as well as their leaders have to unite against the assaults being endured upon their brethren in Algiers. He writes, “the whole nation ought, from every sentiment of patriotism, Liberty and Humanity, to be roused into exertion, as one Man [...] for the liberation of our fellow citizens out of slavery” (1917b: 189). Humphreys ceases the captivity of the Americans in Algiers to celebrate America’s love of liberty and humanity as he contrasts it to the inhumane practice of slavery that allegedly prevails in Algiers. The Americans should be proud of this and ought to let aside any domestic factions in the face of the Algerines. What united them was this ideal so deeply encroached in the rules of the land. In the post-scriptum to this same letter, he adds that the party lines which divided the government should by no means interfere in this endeavour to get the American citizens back to freedom. He writes, “[t]his ought to be the time [...] for extinguishing all the little effects of party spirit among ourselves” (Ibid). He refers to a return to what he calls in “On the Happiness of America”, “the federal ties” (1804: 28) thanks to which the country’s “rights” were defended in the face of Britain. If the people were united against a nation deemed to be their motherland, union against the new oppressor was but an evidence that should not be impeded by “divisive party lines” (Dillon, 2004: 408) in the government of the United States in the 1890s; these were a serious impediment to the celerity with which the captives had to be redeemed from slavery. In celebrating America’s liberty and showing to the American public the evils of slavery as they allegedly prevailed in North Africa, Humphreys consolidates American identity by calling to unity to defend this same ideal so endemic to the land.

Given the truce between Britain, Portugal and Algiers, on the one hand, and the tendency of the other European powers to be tributary to Algiers, he became very critical of all of them. He was, in fact, very harsh with Algiers’ allies in Europe. When in 1793, as a direct consequence of the truce already mentioned, several other American ships were captured by Algerian seamen, Humphreys was not only angry with Algiers but with the Anglo-Portuguese truce, too.

He was also very critical of the tendency to buy peace through tributes and gifts offered to the Dey of Algiers in exchange for the security of their civilians as well as their trade. This is probably the result of the influence of Thomas Jefferson upon him. Indeed, Thomas Jefferson, too, was against this practice and in favour of war against the Algerine powers. And for this he was convinced of the urgency of building an American navy. After the negotiations with Algiers were hampered by the Dey's sudden decision not to accept treaty with David Humphreys, the latter writes to his president that "a naval force has now (to a certain degree) become indispensable" (1917b: 189). It was out of anguish with the America's failure to redeem the captives from slavery that Humphreys started to think about the prospect of leading a war against what Captain O'Brien calls "cruelty perhaps unprecedented in the annals of tyranny" (quoted in Peskin, 2009: 39). If the Americans could create the navy, they would lead this war against Algiers that would not only end with the captives questions, but also confirm America's destiny as a strong nation. There is no denying that Humphreys was influenced by the ideas of Jefferson when he was his secretary in France. Jefferson writes to John Adams, "I acknowledge, I very early thought it would be best to effect a peace through the medium of war. Though it is a question with which we have nothing to do, yet as you propose some discussion of it, I shall trouble you with my reasons" (Jefferson, 1904: 364).

These issues came to be embodied in one of his most important patriotic poems namely, "On the Future Glory of the United States". In this poem, Humphreys is prospecting about America's glorious future when war against Algiers would spare not only the lives of the American civilians but also that of the passive European nations. He writes,

Oh ye great powers, who passports basely crave
 Form Afric's lords, to sail the midland wave –
 Great fallen powers, whose gems and golden bribes
 Buy paltry passports from these savage tribes!
 Ye, whose fine, purples, silks and stuffs of gold
 (An Animal tribute) their dark limbs ---

Ye, whose mean policy for them equips,
To plague mankind, the predatory ship ---
Why will you buy your infamy so dear?
(1804: 54)

Addressing Europe's custom of buying tranquillity with money and tributes, especially Portugal and Britain, Humphreys believes that such a custom was only encouraging the Algerines to get more victims especially on the American side. He considers the tributary European powers as "fallen powers", for they encourage a practice so barbarian. He accused them of making the Algerines the dread of freemen. "Would God, would nature, would their conquering swords/ Without your meanness, make them ocean's lords?" (Ibid.). If Europe participated in this stride against liberty, the United States would be the power to decimate it and instil the blessings of Liberty for the Americans and the other Western civilians. He writes, "[o]urs be the toil; the danger, glory ours" (Ibid.) to secure "the long-infested sea" (Ibid.) from the attacks of the Algerine sea men. Humphreys's call to arms against Algiers, if heard, would make the United States a respected nation in Europe and North Africa.

Conclusion

This paper has studied the construction of the *nationness* of the United States of America in David Humphreys's patriotic poetry and diplomatic correspondence about Algiers. It has shown that his patriotism is premised upon a desire to consolidate American identity through narrating the "happiness" that is the Americans' "inalienable right" and the "future glory" that is also theirs. These two elements are contrasted to the alleged prevalent oppression and tyranny in Algiers as shown in the captivity and enslavement of American civilians. Taken altogether they make up what Homi Bhabha calls *nation* as *narration*. David Humphreys shows the way the American people had become "freedom's heirs" entitled with "the pursuit of happiness". This is through the workings of the Institutions of the land for the promotion and protection of the ideals of justice, equality and freedom. As narration involves progress rather than regress, he adds that the United States is bestowed a "glorious future" as the people inherited the most fundamental principle, namely the "love of nation" and the commitment to it body and soul. He brings these issues vividly through a contrast he draws with Algiers and the so-called "pirate race" as well as the European nations which tended to be tributary to Algiers and the assaults effected against the new nation. He writes to General Washington, "[i]t is scandalous and humiliating beyond expression to see the powerful maritime kingdoms of Europe tributary to such a contemptible Banditti" (Humphreys, 1917a: 333).

The kind of patriotism addressed in this paper is also prevalent in recent years in the United States. Now, the Americans turned their eyes to another kind of "unheimlich terror" namely what has recently been coined by the Bush administration as "international terrorism". Official discourse like George W. Bush's Speech on Iraq, dated September 7th, 2003, is full of patriotic connotations that make of Iraq and other such countries as the cradle from which evil is poured into the world and the United States as the messianic saviour given its now historical devotion to the promotion of democracy, freedom and justice at home and abroad if need be. Bush associates his country with what can be termed "America's burden" of bringing the blessings

of democracy to Iraq and defeat the “[e]nemies of freedom” (Bush, 2003).

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