

Econocide

British Slavery in the Era of Abolition

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The Decline Theory of Abolition

The Emergence of the Decline Theory

For one hundred and fifty years a sense of the extraordinary has pervaded interpretations of the abolition of British slavery. To its supporters abolition represented an almost miraculous example of the triumph of the spiritual over the material, and of "humanitarian" over "interest" politics. The fact that the West Indies were the main theater for the contest encouraged this conception. Just as North American colonization displayed certain characteristics of European politics, released from the encumbrances of tradition, the Caribbean colonies were in their own way caricatures of the European capitalist ethic. In these colonies almost no thought had been devoted to the idea of establishing a community founded on reciprocal relations. The plantations were set up as pure agricultural factories, and the forces of the world market had been allowed to determine the nature of social relations to a degree unknown in Europe. Labor approached the status of a pure commodity more completely than anywhere else in the world ruled by Europe. The colonies' very reason for being was to serve the material needs of the inaptly named mother country. That this vast enterprise, which loomed ever larger in the political economy of the eighteenth-century Atlantic world, should crumble so rapidly before the onslaught of those who insisted on their economic disinterestedness, struck many contemporaries as incredible.

The historiographic tradition has been deeply affected by this dramatic reversal of fortune. The quality of mysterious triumph provided assurance for those who shared the abolitionists' vision of providential progress. It was cause for celebration in periods of imperial optimism and a refuge from disheartening events in periods of social violence and disintegration.

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A cynical historian was ultimately led to remark of this tradition that one might almost believe that the British had founded slavery merely for the purpose of abolishing it.¹ For those who were as offended by the aroma of self-righteousness in abolitionism as by the stench of slavery in the colonies, or who were simply uncomfortable so far outside the world of *realpolitik*, there were two alternative explanations at hand. One was that the abolitionist movement was merely a humanitarian cloak covering economic interests of diabolically Machiavellian cleverness. Some grand strategy, such as the destruction of rival systems, must have lain behind the willingness of the nation of shopkeepers to close down a shop. This theme was a favorite among opponents of humanitarian abolition everywhere in Europe, from the earliest period of antislavery agitation. It also left its mark on histories of British slavery.²

The second alternative, and the most popular, was to emphasize the long-run economic weakness of slavery. In this schema, whatever temporary economic loss was entailed by the dismantling of such a system was a necessary and perceived prerequisite of long-term recovery and growth. This free labor theory was also as old as the debates over the abolition of the slave trade. It was given its conceptual framework by Adam Smith, its empirical plausibility by Alexander von Humboldt.³ Smith provided the rationale for the basic long-run superiority of wage over slave labor. Von Humboldt, writing at the height of the controversy over the international slave trade, believed that he had located the heirs of the slave empires in the "free labor" cane fields of Mexico and India and in the beet fields of Europe. By the time of emancipation, the British West Indies could be dismissed as an aging hothouse growth of a bygone era. First metaphorically, and then causally, their decline came to be seen as a cause of British abolition and a paradigm of abolition elsewhere. This historiographic tradition was strengthened by the relative decline of all the older Caribbean slave colonies during the nineteenth century.

The concept of "failure" now clings as closely to the history of the West Indies as success does to the history of abolitionism.⁴ In 1928 Lowell Ragatz published his carefully researched *The Fall of the Planter Class in the British West Indies*, detailing the decay of the British West Indian system and dating it from the end of the Seven Years' War. His work, in turn, became the basis for Eric Williams's wholesale devaluation of the significance of noneconomic forces in his *Capitalism and Slavery*.⁵ Williams's analysis offered, in neo-Marxian terms, an explanatory model that served three scholarly functions. It was the first general explanation of the rise and fall of European colonial slavery with recourse

to only one major variable. Its focus on long-term economic development afforded the possibility of moving beyond the narrative of abolition in single cases to a general causal explanation of the destruction of slave systems throughout the world during the nineteenth century. The thesis was both simple and theoretically testable: economic interest giveth, economic interest taketh away. Finally, it helped to redirect attention to the economic and temporal contexts of the various European abolitions.

By identifying economic agencies of social change at every juncture in the process, Williams also dispensed with the equivocal, and therefore untestable, historiographic recipe of one part Wilberforce, one part Adam Smith. Wherever the humanitarian school had seen a crusade of saints against ruthless degradation, Williams saw the invisible hand of capitalism. Wherever they had observed the storming of a mighty complex of entrenched interests by a gallant band of disinterested humanitarians, Williams found powerful economic interests sweeping aside a sclerotic colonial system. The "disinterested" forces of abolition were shown to be the ideological cover for another, more powerful force. It had simply not been properly identified and measured. Against the economic network that supported the slave system, Britain's domestic industrial revolution produced a new, hostile set of economic interests. They determined the fate of the failing slave systems in a direct and economically logical way. Once the balance sheet was properly drawn, slavery was shown to have lost its economic underpinnings before any successful assault was launched against it. One of the charms of this hypothesis was its aesthetic simplicity: a see-saw of rising industrial metropolis and falling agricultural colony.

Williams's picture of the British colonies is in turn linked to a much broader theory of economic development and political economy which explains the abolition of slavery as a profit-maximizing or loss-minimizing operation by specific economic groups in a given society.⁶ If the demise of at least one major part of Western slavery can be described in such a way, the British system, as the first to be dismantled, seems to be the best candidate. Its slaveholders are characterized as the most capitalist of all colonials. Its imperial metropolis was obviously the most capitalist and industrial of all European societies by 1800. In concentrating on the British case one is dealing with the market model of abolition on its own grounds and on its home grounds.

Williams's sweeping thesis, that slavery was a phase of commercial capitalism which aroused opposition only when it had ceased to perform its function, was repeatedly attacked for its analysis of the motives of

various political figures.⁷ Other minor flaws in his account have since been subject to continuous scrutiny by more precise and more thorough scholarship. On one central point, however, Williams changed even the perspective of those who rejected this rigorous historical materialism in principle and his treatment of the abolitionists in particular. G. R. Mellor, who vigorously defended the abolitionists from Williams's charges of hypocrisy, took it for granted that the "power of the West India interest was weakened by the growth of industrial capitalism." He only differed in asserting that "the idealism of the humanitarians, however, was the determining factor."⁸ He offers no suggestion as to how one could go about testing either statement. David Brion Davis summed up this view in his masterly overview of the origins of abolitionism in *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*. He noted that it was difficult to get around the fact "that colonial slavery was of greater importance to the British economy in 1750 than in 1789" or that "no country thought of abolishing the slave trade until its economic value had considerably declined."⁹

Davis's sequel to his first work, *The Problem of Slavery in an Age of Revolution*, judiciously qualified these earlier statements by taking note of short-term changes affecting the British slave system, such as the St. Domingue revolution and the Napoleonic wars. But in this case qualification is verification. These events are still characterized as parentheses in the long-term process: British abolition occurred in the context of the secular economic decline of its slave system after 1770, caused by such factors as soil depletion, competition, and monopolistic privilege, on the one hand, and the emergence of laissez-faire industrial capitalism on the other.¹⁰ In a far more subtle and convincing fashion than Williams, Davis depicts the task of the abolitionists as a series of symbolic acts which expressed the social hegemony of the British ruling class and morally legitimized its rule. Although it is not absolutely necessary to all elements of his interpretation, there is an aesthetic economy in the principle that the emptier the solemnly broken vessel, the more obvious is the ritualistic content of the act itself. *perhaps*

Even Roger Anstey, the most recent and thoroughgoing critic of Williams's view of abolition, was originally more royalist than the king on the decline of slavery. Anstey rejected Williams's analysis as a reading of later metropolitan economic development backward into the world of 1800. While rejecting the Williams "rising capitalist" interpretation, however, he accelerated the Ragatz-Williams "falling planter" interpretation. For Anstey, the West India interest was a "shadow of its former self," an "old incubus" by 1790. It was almost pitiful in its decrepitude, merely surviving on the reputation of its former glory. The delay in

the abolitionist victory was fundamentally a sociopsychological problem, that of overcoming a crippling national self-deception about the importance of the slave system. In this schema, if Williams erred, it was in giving too much substance to a specter. The paradigm of destruction is Jericho—one final blast of the trumpet shattered slavery's brittle, fragile, outermost wall.¹¹ Duncan Rice, another historian of abolition not at all partial to Williams's deterministic explanation, refers to the "Williams thesis" of decline as the new orthodoxy and finds it "difficult to see how the thesis that economic change made abolition possible in 1807 and 1833 can be challenged, in view of the obvious growing weakness of the West India planters by the end of the eighteenth century."¹² In his *Rise and Fall of Black Slavery*, Rice is reluctant to accept the decline thesis as applicable to some cases, but accepts it fully for the case of British slavery.

The decline thesis also impinges on more general interpretations of slavery. One may be led to look for a natural history of the institution in a sequence of youth, maturity, and senility. The fact that Britain was the leading economic entity and a model for social change during the century of abolitions is also significant. The planetary network of capitalist slavery seems to unravel beginning with the threadbare British Caribbean. Initial abolitionist successes against the economic "sick man" of plantation America by the dynamo of Europe provided invaluable momentum for victories over admittedly vigorous economies.

In the decades following the publication of *Capitalism and Slavery*, most scholars have therefore been inclined to look for a correlation between the declining importance of the colonial area to the political economy of Europe and the relative ease with which British slavery was transformed by an emergent capitalist society. The argument has been constantly, if cautiously, reaffirmed, accepted as part of the "core" of substantive conclusions about the abolition of slavery and the slave trade in the Caribbean. The decline theory attained the status of a simple empirical statement largely because behind Williams stands the factually more formidable study of Ragatz.¹³

The empirical validation of the "decline" of British slavery is thus the first subject to be faced. We will present an overview of the economic development of the British West Indies in relation to the metropolis prior to abolition. The impact of the Caribbean revolution of the 1790s and of British imperial expansion in the same decade also need to be explored. But the description of economic developments in the West Indies is not an end in itself. Our main focus is on the implications of those developments for British abolition of the slave trade. We will consider how well the process of abolition fits into the context of economic change,

in the Caribbean and the metropolis, prior to the rise of abolitionism and during the two momentous decades before its triumph in 1807. Since the problem must be approached at various levels, we must treat short-term conjunctures separately from secular trends.

Finally, our analysis should lay the groundwork for a fresh investigation of political abolition. The study of the political process in relation to economic change was given an enormous thrust forward by *Capitalism and Slavery*. That study incorporates not only the Ragatzian concept of the declining West Indies, but an overarching concept of a shifting balance of interests in both metropolitan Britain and the empire. From a suggestion of C. L. R. James in *The Black Jacobins*, Williams developed the theme that British abolitionism was demonstrably linked to the rise of the industrial bourgeoisie of Britain, and especially of the cotton industry. Also, giving a unique twist to a fundamental historiographic concept of Reginald Coupland and the imperial school, Williams tied Britain's shift to abolition with the loss of America and with Adam Smith's attack on the protectionist ideology of the "old" empire. Williams concludes that slavery was destroyed by, or because of, the impact of certain interest groups emerging under the banner of laissez-faire, in other words, by a particular form of capitalistic political economy. This assumption has appeared in whole or in part in subsequent histories.¹⁴ In this study we will test the validity of this frame of reference.

It is necessary to enter a preliminary caveat. We will not be testing just one theory of political economy as applied to the abolition of the slave trade. Williams, and those who follow him this far along his analytical path, explicitly identifies abolition as a political process linked to the emergence of a laissez-faire ideology. We hope to show that the decline theory really presumes the action of two coequal and, in part, quite contradictory theories of political economy. One is laissez-faire capitalism; the other is mercantilist capitalism. They are used by Williams as a general might use regular and guerrilla armies to explain one or another phase of the process as the terrain demands. A situation that would explode the theory in laissez-faire terms is explained only in mercantilist terms, and vice versa. Since the terrain, Parliament, remained the same, one is at a loss to know what one set of economic premises was doing in men's minds while its alter-ideology was in the field. This switching of premises to meet every turn in the situation makes the decline theory more difficult to test. We will isolate the premises appropriate to each explanation and ask whether each, taken separately, helps to account for abolition. We further propose to see whether using both together vitiates the usefulness of such explanations as applied to particular sequences of political action,

and of abolition in general. We hope to suggest that a more coherent explanation of British abolition may be achieved by looking for an alternative hypothesis.

The Problem of Measuring Slavery

Economic decline meant much the same thing to contemporaries of abolition as it has to historians of abolition. It implied a measurable deterioration in the significance or performance of some enterprise or economic network. A decline in the value of British slavery would therefore mean a perceptible downturn relative to its past, to the metropolis, to other imperial units, or to other slave systems. Moreover, in eighteenth-century Britain, the political value of a colony was largely a function of its perceived commercial value. This was especially true of the slave colonies. They had little attraction as havens for the British laboring poor, or even as dumping grounds for convicts. As for any intrinsic moral value, the slave islands did not figure among the preferred locations for utopian settlements or visions. The worth of the slave colonies was therefore quantifiable in pounds and products.

The most common indicators of economic value in the eighteenth century were figures on production, population, capital, and trade. By the 1780s political economists could plot the course of British commercial development as graphically as their counterparts in physics or engineering could plot the trajectory of a missile. William Playfair, in his *Commercial and Political Atlas*, congratulated his society for its newly acquired ability to trace the course of its growth. "Had our ancestors," mused Playfair, "represented the gradual increase of their commerce and expenditure . . . what a real acquisition would it not have been to our stock of knowledge?"¹⁵ Colored graphs of a century of trade conveyed the impression of progress to even the economically illiterate. His figures were "nothing more than those piles of guineas represented on paper." The acquisitive society could see its collective progress in a series of line drawings. Publicists could also entertain contemporaries with quantitative tales of progress and decline by tabular representations and maps of values, volumes, and weights.

Ample materials were also at hand for measuring the significance of individual sectors of the empire through the flow of trade. Thomas Irving, the British inspector-general, stood guard over the customs records, not only vouching for their accuracy, but providing a continuous flow of data to Parliament and to the public. As keeper of the holy numbers he was endowed with an aura of authority. At one point special arrangements

were made by Parliament so that he could testify in the evidentiary hearings on the slave colonies.¹⁶ Irving's ordinal cornucopia was supplemented by major fact-finding bodies for every economic activity as the need for specific information was felt.

In parliamentary debates, in political economy, and in public parlance, rise and decline thus had the same fundamental meaning. The same information was manipulated in the same ways. Growth and expansion implied improvement, and contraction, decline. In arguing against regulation of the cotton industry in 1803, for example, two parliamentary speakers cited prodigious growth as sufficient evidence of improvement and of the need for caution in laying on regulatory hands.¹⁷ Contemporaries could also calculate economic importance as a fraction of some larger economic endeavor in regional, national, or international terms. An increasing fraction indicated progress; a decreasing one, decline. By the end of the eighteenth century these calculations, and their graphic representation, had become the common cultural symbols by which a society knew itself and could gauge the significance of its constituent parts. Historians have also used the same "political arithmetic" to calculate values, rates, percentages, trends, and comparisons.

While measures of production and exchange served the purposes of general national policy, other information on slavery became accessible only when the system came under challenge. The mortality rates of slaves and sailors in the African slave trade and the islands were collected by agitators or in official response to agitation.¹⁸ This problem-related data did not usually flow in as regularly as the trade figures, but it offered the possibility of observing slavery in a broader context. Such an opportunity came with the Privy Council's report on the British slave trade in 1788, and with subsequent parliamentary reports. These accounts formed the basis of most arguments used in both polemical and analytical discussions of the British slave system.

The debate over abolition also led to questions about the position of the British slave trade vis-à-vis related systems and to discussions of the impact that British abolition would have on the competitive situation of British slavery. Yet once one probed beyond the British system the reliability and availability of the data fell precipitously. Polemicists often rushed in where officials feared to tread. Even the Privy Council report shows that the information gathered on French slavery, the significant referent for the British system, was random and impressionistic.¹⁹ The report's figures on the French colonial population were ten to fifteen years old, so that comparisons were being made between French estimates for random years in the mid- and late-1770s and British esti-

mates for 1788. This comparison, widely disseminated by the press, left an initial impression that the French and British systems were about equal in size, although the French system was in fact the larger. Foreign production estimates were sometimes as rough as those of population. For example, at various times during the two decades of debate on abolition, estimates of the average annual value of sugar production on St. Domingue ranged from well under equality with the British colonies, to twice the British figures. The French figures were likely to be compiled with care only where real economic commitments were at stake.²⁰ For other French islands, the estimates were usually based only on a fixed proportion of St. Domingue's figures. While the outbreak of revolution and war made the task of assessing French colonial slavery more difficult in one respect,²¹ British occupation of every island sometime during the 1790s provided the government with firsthand information.

Impressionistic as they were, the early figures on French slavery were more readily accessible to the British than those on other systems. It is not clear that any concerted effort was made to gather and publicize information on minor European colonies in 1788. As in the French case, British conquest of all the Dutch and Danish colonies provided firsthand information at a later time. In general, the picture of slavery outside the Anglo-French empires was so diffuse at the beginning of the abolitionist campaign in 1788 that the reading public was informed that the Spanish Empire was the largest employer of slave labor in the Americas. As late as 1807, James Stephen, the most assiduous fact finder among the abolitionists, had difficulty in obtaining up-to-date information on Cuban production and trade.²² Only for certain products was it possible to measure the total output of all European slave colonies with something approaching precision. The African slave trade yielded more figures but hardly absolute certainty. The Privy Council itself was content to reply on the testimony of a single British merchant for its estimate of the British share of the trade. However, while the total estimated human cost to Africa since the beginning of the trade ranged erratically from nine to fifty million and beyond, the *annual* toll in 1788 was realistically put at eighty to one hundred thousand.²³

Considering the point of departure, knowledge of the slave system in imperial and international context was remarkably accurate. The range of error tended to narrow after 1788. Grosser misconceptions were eliminated by the governmental reports. Within a year or two most aspects of British slavery that were readily quantifiable had been diffused to the public through the newspapers, printed propaganda, and public meetings. For those who made the effort, most of the information sub-

sequently used in the decline theory was available in print. By 1807 parliamentary committees could estimate the commodities flowing from the European slave economies with justifiable assurance. The statistics of British slavery and the slave trade were carefully measured elements in one of the most thoroughly discussed questions in British parliamentary history.

The Destruction Process

While the initial part of our analysis will deal primarily with developments in slavery rather than with abolition, it is important that the reader have some idea of the political chronology of British abolition. Prior to 1787 the only major step limiting the expansion of British slavery had been to place some legal restrictions on the intrusion of the institution into Great Britain itself. The juridical contests sponsored by Granville Sharp appeared to have assured the civil rights of thousands of slaves or ex-slaves resident in Britain, whatever the uncertainty of their rights if they returned to the islands.²⁴

With the 1780s came the first attempt at collective association for the legal abolition of imperial slavery and the slave trade. Under the initial impetus of the Quakers in America and England, a national committee to abolish the slave trade was founded in London by 1787. It formed the center of an active provincial network which soon extended into Scotland. The following five years, 1788-1792, are usually bracketed as the period of mass abolitionist agitation, led by Thomas Clarkson and coordinated with parliamentary initiatives by William Wilberforce and William Pitt. This period witnessed two sharp bursts of nationwide agitation. The legislative accomplishments of these years were the Dolben act of 1788, which regulated the slave trade, and the House of Commons bill in 1792, requiring the abolition of the entire trade by 1796. There were also other, unsuccessful initiatives in this period: an abortive attempt at coordinated international abolition in 1787-1788, the defeat of the first bill for general abolition in 1791, and the sidetracking of the 1792 bill in the Lords. The next four years, from 1793 to 1796, were marked by a series of severe setbacks. All attempts to implement abolition, whether partial or total, failed. One bill, designed to abolish only the foreign slave trade, survived the Commons in the spring of 1794, only to be brushed aside by the Lords. Extraparliamentary abolitionist activity almost vanished. Meanwhile, Martinique, Tobago, and St. Lucia were added to Britain's slave system, and St. Domingue was partially occupied.

The next seven years, 1797-1803, are often combined with the previous

four, because again all attempts at general abolition failed. The London committee ceased to meet altogether. No abolition bills were introduced from 1800 to 1804. Even a bill in 1799 to exempt the environs of Sierra Leone, a free-soil colony in Africa, from the slave trade was narrowly defeated in the Lords. New West Indian colonies, Trinidad and Guiana, were seized by Britain. The British government began large-scale purchases of African slaves to fill out its West India regiments. From another point of view, however, this period was far less barren than 1793-1796. In 1797 a resolution was passed affirming the British desire to see amelioratory legislation initiated in the West Indies with a view toward abolition. In 1799, the slave transportation act, hitherto renewed annually, was made permanent and far more stringent. Steps were also taken by the British government to prevent the opening of Trinidad to unrestricted development by slave labor. Thus at the moment when general abolition was still unobtainable, important strategic gains were made in both principle and practice. By 1803, the abolitionist forces had been more successful than in 1793-1796.

A fifth period may be said to run from mid-1804 to the triumph of total abolition in 1807. It was characterized by major abolitionist successes in the House of Commons in 1804, 1806, and 1807, and only one narrow defeat, in 1805. In the more hostile upper house there was one technical setback in 1804, and then the three substantial victories of 1806-1807. Even 1805 was marked by a decisive extraparliamentary abolitionist victory. Despite the continued governmental policy of Caribbean expansion, the slave trade to the conquered colonies was sharply reduced by executive order, and the rationale was prepared for abolition of the foreign trade in 1806. The London abolition committee was also revived in 1804 and the propaganda campaign renewed in 1805. Public opinion was again mobilized, although within narrower, self-imposed limits than in 1788 or 1792.

From 1808 to 1815 there was a final period of abolitionist activity directed against the African slave trade. On the parliamentary level it was marked by quiet, continuous elite initiatives for tightening imperial enforcement and international extension. The period was climaxed by another extensive popular and parliamentary campaign in 1814. That year also marked the beginning of a vigorous new abolitionist foreign policy by the British government. After 1820, British abolitionism began to transform itself into a general emancipation movement and to move back toward the broad aims which its leaders had apparently abandoned for tactical reasons in 1787.

The temporal boundaries of political abolition in Britain are quite

clear. In 1785 not one major figure in either house of Parliament conceived it to be a practical option, whatever their individual moral reservations about the slave trade.²⁵ In 1814 not one figure in either house dared to suggest that its restoration was either politically possible or morally defensible. We must analyze the extent to which the economic development of British slavery provoked or encouraged abolition by British capitalism.

2

The 1770s as the Pivot of British Slavery

The decline thesis, however elaborate, comes to this: In the first half of the eighteenth century the slave economies were far more important to the mother country than afterward. Small islands in the Caribbean could rival continents in significance because of their relatively rapid rates of development. Their specialized production was of undisputed value in the imperial system, and their profits may have helped to fuel the capital needs of the industrial revolution.¹ Somewhere after the middle of the century, the slave economies began to lose their developmental lead and were unable to maintain their former position either as customers or as tropical producers. As they became encumbrances to emergent British capitalism, the door was opened for the destruction of their inefficient, anachronistic economy. Their decline was only accelerated by the abolitionist campaigns and legislation from 1788 to 1807.²

The argument that abolition was a result of either the relative or absolute decline of the slave economy may be further broken down into two general statements: British slavery diminished as a factor in the imperial political economy before and during abolition; at the same time, it succumbed to competition with similar economic systems in the international market. In both cases the assumption is that the West Indian colonies were less valuable and less vigorous in the last third of the eighteenth century than before. Although there is no general agreement on when the secular decline in proportionate value begins, the American Revolution is most often depicted as the decisive event in the cycle.³ Some turning point is of course significant for any causal argument, since the decline must be shown