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British Capitalism and Caribbean Slavery

The Legacy of Eric Williams

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British Capitalism and Caribbean Slavery: The Legacy of Eric Williams: An Introduction

Eric Williams, in *Capitalism and Slavery*, presented four important themes: (1) slavery was an economic phenomenon; and thus racism was a consequence, not the cause, of slavery; (2) the slave economies of the British West Indies caused (the strong version) or contributed greatly (the weaker version) to the British Industrial Revolution; (3) after the American Revolutionary War the slave economies declined in profitability and/or importance to England; and (4) abolition of the slave trade and emancipation of the slaves in the British West Indies were driven not by philanthropy or humanitarianism but by economic motives within England. While all of these themes have been debated, it is the second and fourth that have had the most impact upon subsequent scholarship, and each has become a "Williams thesis."

I. SLAVERY AS AN ECONOMIC PHENOMENON To Eric Williams, modern slavery in the Americas was not racial in origin, nor the result of color, inherent inferiority, or climate. Rather, it was a matter of economic profitability: "a specific question of time, place, labor and soil."[1] Williams's explanation derives from the economic arguments presented in the nineteenth century by Wakefield, Merivale, and Cairnes. In a new colony, with simple agricultural technology and where land is abundant and therefore cheap, there will be no voluntary supply of labor, because "the

1 Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (New York, 1966), b. All subsequent page references in the text of this essay are to this edition, published by Capricorn Books.

Williams restricts his analysis of slavery to the modern period and to slavery in the colonies of European powers. Thus he omits discussion of the very long history of slavery and of its wide distribution. Given, however, the unique characteristics of New World slavery, Williams's issues remain of importance.

laborer [will] exercise his natural inclination to work his own land and toil on his own account" (p. 5). In these circumstances, if there is to be a labor supply, it must be coerced.

The British had colonial possessions in America reflecting both outcomes of the availability of abundant land. In the North the "mere earth-scratcher" was "practicing . . . intensive agriculture and wringing by the sweat of his brow niggardly returns from a grudging soil" (pp. 4–5). In the South and the Caribbean, slave labor was engaged in large-scale production of staple crops for export. Following Cairnes and Merivale, Williams argued that economies of scale and gang labor in certain crops—sugar, cotton, and tobacco—determined the adoption of slavery. To Williams, stories of racial inferiority, the " 'subhuman' characteristics so widely pleaded, were only the later rationalizations to justify a simple economic fact: that the colonies needed labor and resorted to Negro labor because it was the cheapest and the best" (p. 20).[2]

> Negro slavery therefore was only a solution, in certain historical circumstances, of the Caribbean labor problem. Sugar meant labor—at times that labor has been slave, at other times nominally free; at times black, at other times white or brown or yellow. Slavery in no way implied, in any scientific sense, the inferiority of the Negro. Without it the great development of the Caribbean sugar plantations, between 1650 and 1850, would have been impossible. (P. 29)

In his chapter "Race and Slavery: Considerations on the Williams Thesis," William A. Green points out that Williams turns the tables on those who see blacks as "weak and backward" and in need of a "civilizing mission." Rather, he presents them as a productive source of wealth for England and as victims of economic exploitation past and present. Green's chapter discusses the debate on racial versus economic theories of slavery with respect to Virginia and Barbados.

In the literature on Virginia, the Williams position that racism was a consequence and not a cause of slavery gained support in the 1950's from such influential scholars as the Handlins, Stampp, and Myrdal. But Degler's response did weaken this position, and by the early 1970's the theory of the prior origins of racism appeared to have conquered the field. This was buttressed in particular by Jordan, who saw racism as a complex psychohistorical problem, and argued against the view that slavery was a choice of labor supply alone, based on relative cheapness. While he recognized that once in place slavery could exacerbate racial attitudes, Jordan pointed to an earlier presence of racism. Hoetink and Degler denied that slavery had a primary role in explaining race prejudice, while Craven doubted the existence of a relationship between economic forces and black slavery in colonial Virginia.

"By the early 1970's then," Green writes, "the Williams-Handlin-Stampp position was in full retreat. The origin of black slavery in the American mainland colonies was being interpreted primarily as a function of race, not economic necessity." But the eclipse was only temporary. The appearance of Morgan's influential *American Slavery—American Freedom* offered new political and economic explanations for the adoption of slavery, arguing that racism had been deliberately fostered by the planter class as a means of severing any possible bond between white and black laborers. The pendulum thus swung back toward the Williams view. Breen and Innes and Evans, from a wide reading of historical evidence, further supported the idea that there is nothing inherent in blacks which accounts for discrimination and that race relations are the result of economic and political power relationships.[3]

Clearly, Williams's position against the consensus of prewar scholars continues to command widespread support. His economic theory of slavery was not original, but was his own blend of the mercantilists and early classical economists. But by 1944 these views had either been discredited or forgotten, and slavery was being explained by race, climate, and geography. Nearly a century of silence on the economic analysis of slavery separates Cairnes from Conrad and Meyer. The reintroduction of eco-

2 Williams omits discussion of the prior history of the enslavement of blacks in the Middle East and in southern Europe. While earlier slavery could have lead to a predisposition to treat blacks and whites differently, legally and culturally, it could have been that it was only after the establishment of large-scale black slavery that racism became reinforced and magnified into its modern form.

3 *Inherent* refers to genetic factors, as contrasted with cultural perceptions that led to a differential attitude toward whites and blacks.

nomic analysis into the analysis of slavery caused a furor in the history profession. Thus, Williams's insistence on treating slavery as a supply of labor, with certain productivity and costs, whose adoption was determined by considerations of profit-maximization, was prophetic and has remained indispensable.

Williams devoted only a few pages to support his dictum that racism was a consequence and not a cause of slavery. His evidence was the case of white indentured servants who coexisted with black slaves: he argued that discrimination followed and did not precede the widespread substitution of black slavery in the labor force.[4] He made no attempt to trace the subsequent path that led to racism or to investigate the power relationships and alienation associated with the institution. The conclusions of Morgan, Breen and Innes, and Evans are in broad agreement with Williams, although the recent literature displays a sophistication and deeper understanding of colonial history than Williams possessed. Green concludes that "if [he] seemed vindicated in the 1980's it was the direction of his thinking, not the credibility of his argument, that gained scholarly endorsement."

II. CARIBBEAN SLAVERY AND THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION. Solow's chapter follows Williams's economic explanation of slavery and extends it in time and space. She identifies a pattern of export-oriented colonial tropical agriculture producing (mainly) sugar with slave labor, a pattern which had its roots in the Italian colonies of the Mediterranean in the late Middle Ages and spread to the Atlantic islands, the islands off Africa, and finally to the Western Hemisphere. She sees the slave-sugar complex as the economic institution that formed the main bridge from the Old World to the New, and the economic relation with the Third World that endured longest and contributed most to European economic development. Following Williams, she agrees that this complex is not an accidental development but the solution to Europe's problem of how to exploit underpopulated colonial conquests quickly.[5] The solution is seen as capitalistic in organization

4 In regard to the literature on the choice between white indentured labor and black slave labor there have been several noteworthy recent works emphasizing the economic aspects of this choice. See, for example, the work of Menard, Galenson, and, for the Barbados case, Beckles.

5 Note that Williams does not discuss the epidemiological consequences of the interaction of European and native American populations.

from the first, combining European capital, African slave labor, and cheap land, to maximize profits by growing and processing a commercial crop and marketing it on a Europe-wide scale.

Through slavery, Europe gained greater investment opportunities, furthered her commercial institutions, and exchanged some of her manufactures for colonial primary products. Solow argues that these flows of factors and commodities become quantitatively important for the economic growth of eighteenth-century Britain, which was developing for domestic reasons and therefore able to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the plantation sector.

This is certainly one of Williams's main themes: "The West Indian islands became the hub of the British Empire, of immense importance to the grandeur and prosperity of England. It was the Negro slaves who made these sugar colonies the most precious colonies ever recorded in the whole annals of imperialism" (p. 52). Quoting Postlethwayt, Williams calls the eighteenth-century empire "a magnificent superstructure of American commerce and naval power on an African foundation." The trade gave a triple stimulus to British industry, sending British manufactures to Africa in return for slaves; to the West Indies in return for tropical products; and to New England and Newfoundland in return for foreign exchange they had earned by exporting agricultural products and fish to the West Indies. Quoting another eighteenth-century writer, Gee, Williams claims that "By 1750 there was hardly a trading or a manufacturing town in England which was not in some way connected with the triangular or direct colonial trade." "The profits obtained," Williams continues, "provided one of the main streams of that accumulation of capital in England which financed the Industrial Revolution" (p. 52). He then goes on to cite specific industries whose growth was associated with the triangular trade and to give examples of the investment of plantation profits into banking, insurance, shipping, and, most importantly, the industrial development of the early Industrial Revolution.

Three lines of criticism have been levelled at these arguments. When Sheridan presented quantitative estimates showing sizable returns on British investment in the West Indies, Thomas countered by criticizing both Sheridan's methods and numerical estimates. He concluded that, if properly measured, the colonies'

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contribution to the mother country was negative: British income would have been greater without them.[6] Second, Engerman argued that even a deliberately overstated estimate of the profits of the slave trade was too small to have greatly affected British investment and income. Third, critics were quick to point out that no great surge in investment was associated with the onset of the Industrial Revolution: most new industries had modest capital requirements and were financed by personal savings of family or friends. The conclusions of Thomas and Engerman have been disputed by Solow, and the three chapters on this subject all lend support to Eric Williams's original contention. While there are important differences among them, Inikori, Richardson, and Solow all agree in attributing an important role to the plantation economies in explaining the spurt in British industrial output of the late eighteenth century.

For Inikori, this case is an example of a more general thesis that foreign trade was the principal impetus leading from subsistence agrarian economies to developed industrial economies within Europe. According to him, the Atlantic trading system saved England from the fate suffered by the Mediterranean countries in the seventeenth century. Combining African slaves with New World land, England was able to reap great advantages from her Atlantic empire. It constituted a large common market containing diversified economies: in this setting, mercantilist policies assisted her development, in contrast with their deleterious effects in the Iberian countries. Inikori sees the Atlantic system in the seventeenth century as providing England with commodities for re-export and thereby strengthening her mercantile sector. In the eighteenth century he finds the Atlantic trade propelling her toward industrialization by contributing to the growth of trade, transport, and manufacturing.

large market

raw mats

1

Richardson's chapter focuses on developments in a specific time period. He argues that the increase in British trade in the third quarter of the eighteenth century was associated with the Atlantic economy (Africa, the Caribbean, and the North Ameri-

6 It should be noted that Thomas's response raises an important analytical issue for further consideration in this debate—the extent to which England, at this time, can be considered to be an economy with relatively full employment of its productive factors, or rather if the opportunity costs of employment within the slave nexus were low or zero in many cases.

can colonies); that the principal roots of this trade lay in the response of the slave economies to increased demand for sugar in Britain; and (since the counterpart of British sugar imports was British manufactured exports) that the growth of this trade assisted significantly in shifting the British economy away from nonindustrial production and toward industrial production at this time.[7] Thus British industrial growth in the third quarter of the century is seen to depend not exclusively but importantly on the Atlantic trade, and Caribbean sugar is the key to this trade: "exports to Africa and America in particular proved to be at least a very capable handmaiden in promoting further expansion in England's emerging industrial regions before 1776."

2

Richardson's statistical estimates of the British slave trade to the Caribbean show the greatest expansion coming in the third quarter of the eighteenth century. He speculates that this growth was accounted for by buoyant demand for sugar in England, due to changes in taste, to price-induced shifts in consumption patterns, and to increased incomes in London and the newly industrializing areas, such as $\boxed{\text{Lancashire.}}$ At this time the British economy was probably experiencing decreasing rates of growth of total output; industrial output, however, was rising faster that at any previous time in the century. There was thus a sharp divergence between the growth of the industrial and nonindustrial sectors, signaling substantial structural change. It is in this context that the link to Caribbean developments is found.

The acceleration in new industrial growth based on exports depended to a considerable extent on purchasing power generated by the British West Indies. Tentative calculations suggest that the African, Caribbean, and North American demands ultimately generated by the sugar colonies may have raised British

7 Note that Richardson's argument here resembles that of Deane and Cole, in that the increased demand from the New World colonies for British goods is not exogenous, but represents an endogenous response to higher demands for colonial products emanating from Great Britain. The exogenous factor is the institution of slavery which, by providing an elastic supply of cheap productive labor, allows for the continuing production of sugar.

Another important issue that remains when "expansion" is used as a measure of the value of the slave colonies is that since trade, both before and after the American Revolution, was carried on under a protectionist commercial policy, expansion may merely indicate more and more misallocation of resources. This argument was familiar in eighteenth-century England, among influential politicians as well as others.

total exports "by almost £1.6 million per annum between the late 1740's and the early 1770's." These colonies may be responsible for more than half of the growth of English domestically produced exports in the third quarter of the century, and about 8.5 percent of the growth in English industrial output during that time.

The slave-sugar complex and the trade and capital flows it engendered were important to British economic growth in the late eighteenth century.[8] This is the conclusion of Solow, Inikori, and Richardson, and was the broad consensus of the conference. To this extent Williams was correct. But slavery did not contribute by sending a vast stream of capital investment to finance technological change in cotton and iron in late eighteenth-century England. There was no such sudden large increase in investment. To this extent Williams was wrong. However, drawing on Solow, Inikori, and Richardson, one can formulate a different causal explanation to support his thesis.

Instead of West Indian profits leading to increased investment in England, it is likelier that there was an abundance of saving and a lack of investment opportunities. This is consistent with the falling interest rates in England. Once an elastic supply of productive labor was added to the cheap land of the Caribbean and the American South, such an investment outlet was in place. Colonial investment followed slavery. West Indian mortgages constituted a relatively large share of the London market. If we accept Sheridan's estimate of the total value of investments in the Caribbean of about £37 million and Price's estimate for the American South of about £5 million (both for the period just prior to the Revolution), we can see that the institution of slavery had an important effect in increasing investment in the Empire, and that the return on this investment increased income in England.

Such investment was dependent on slavery, and was not merely a diversion of funds from potential domestic investment. It increased British income *whatever the recipients of the income chose to do with it:* whether they spent it on land or coaches or wine—or on textile machinery. It did not have to be invested in order

8 It can be argued that it was the slave colonies that benefited Great Britain by providing a market for British industrial exports when domestic sources of growth were weak, and that they mattered less to her as the Industrial Revolution quickened its pace.

for there to be a relation between colonial slave production and British income—any positive return on investment does that. If some of the returns were saved, there was a greater ultimate increase in income than if they were all consumed. But the income recipients did not themselves have to invest in order to establish a relation between colonial sugar production and British industrial production. Eric Williams was wrong about that relation. His was a misunderstanding of elementary macroeconomics.

But the increased British income associated with colonial investment is not the whole story. Richardson's paper makes this clear. The pounds spent for sugar by British consumers cover not only the profits but also the costs of producing the sugar. These latter pounds were earned by slave traders, shippers, and insurers, and by the suppliers of fish, flour, horses, timber, and other commodities to the plantations. The after-profit pounds paid by British sugar consumers appear in the incomes of the people in England, in Africa, in the West Indies, and in the North American colonies, whose economic activity constituted the costs of producing the sugar. A substantial part of these pounds was spent on importing British goods. In particular, some counterpart of British expenditures on sugar became British exports to the North American colonies and the West Indies, the exports to North America probably exceeding those to the islands.

This colonial trade changed the direction and content of British foreign trade in the eighteenth century as well as its magnitude: on this Solow, Inikori, and Richardson are in agreement. Previously Britain traded wool textiles to Europe for primary products; the continent to a large degree produced its own manufactures. By the eighteenth century France, Germany, and Austria began to supply their own woolen textile needs, and traditional British export markets faltered. Here the colonial trade became important: not only did it provide new markets for increased exports, but it provided a new pattern of trade. For the trade was of British manufactures for foodstuffs, not of woolens for raw materials. The North American colonies were important customers for British manufacturers; population there increased tenfold from 1700 to 1774, and their total income rose even faster. They spent the greater part of their foreign exchange earnings—most of it earned either in the British West Indies or from the production within their own slave sector—on British manufactures: silk, linen, wool, hats, glass, cordage, gunpowder, and above all a wide range of small metalwares, like buttons, nails, cutlery, watches, and jewelry.

The value of British manufacturing exports more than doubled between 1699–1701 and 1772–74. Between those dates the share of manufacturing exports going to Europe fell from 82 percent to 42 percent, while the share going to America and Africa rose from 12 percent to 43 percent. Thus, it was the widening of the market through the earnings of the colonies from the production of slave-grown commodities that provided Britain with new markets when the old ones were drying up. Second, the new export demand was for manufactures and encouraged the development of the nonagricultural sector of the home country. Neither Solow nor Richardson claims that all the increased industrial production or all the increased exports were due to exogenous colonial demand. Both—but not Inikori—find the roots of the increased colonial demands in the domestic economy. But all three agree that the increased demand for British manufactured exports played an important role in the expansion of the British industrial sector.[9] Behind this increased colonial demand was the slave labor of the Caribbean and the American South, without whose work colonial production could never have reached such levels.

Williams's story of plantation profits being invested to produce the technological changes we call the Industrial Revolution does not hold up. But if the technical change of the Industrial Revolution is put into the context of an increasingly rich, commercial, manufacturing society, then the connection holds. For slavery helped make eighteenth-century England more rich, more commercial, and more industrial. Where investment is sluggish and technical change is slow, external stimulus through market-widening will be an important means to stimulate growth. In Britain these forces were added to those in the domestic economy pushing toward industrialization. It would be hard to claim that they were either necessary or sufficient for an Industrial Revolution, and equally hard to deny that they affected its magnitude and timing.

9 If there were unemployed resources in Britain, foreign demand would have further expanded British incomes through the multiplier process; i.e., by the respending of the incomes initially earned through the export market.

Writing as he did before Deane and Cole, Davis, Crafts, Crouzet, and Feinstein, and with no economic analysis beyond that of the early nineteenth century, it is surprising how well Eric Williams's general position has withstood the test of time. He was right in his intuition but excessive in his claims and incorrect in some of his arguments. His originality lay in identifying neither exports nor colonialism but slavery as an active force contributing to British growth. He anticipates subsequent scholars in stressing the productivity and economic importance of slave economies. Had all emigration to the Western Hemisphere been voluntary and none coerced, the British economy and its North American colonies would have developed more slowly.

III. THE DECLINE OF THE BRITISH WEST INDIES Scholars like Drescher, Eltis, and Temperley go beyond Williams in describing the contribution made by slavery to the British economy. They maintain that this contribution never diminished as a result of economic conditions, but was strangled by the legislative acts of abolition and emancipation passed in contradiction to British economic interests. They hold that the British inflicted severe economic loss on themselves by adopting antislavery measures; the idea is well captured by Drescher's neologism for the effects of the ending of the British slave trade—*econocide*. For Williams the slave-based plantation economies contributed to the British Industrial Revolution and a different kind of British economy, but after the American Revolution the slave system made, at best, a negligible or, at worst, a negative contribution. To him British antislavery policy was dictated by British metropolitan interests, and there was nothing paradoxical about it and nothing that justified any self-congratulation.[10]

The "decline" of the British West Indies can only be discussed if we are clear about precisely what it was that did or did not decline. Since we are interested in the relation between the colonies and the metropolis we must specify the mechanism of that relation before we can evaluate its changes. If one accepts the link posited by Williams between West Indian profits and British industrial investment, then the relevant decline could be

10 As Williams discusses both the origins of slavery in the British West Indies and then its endings, it can be seen that the British only ended what they themselves had begun—another ground for denying them a self-congratulatory reaction.

in rates of return on sugar plantations. If one accepts the importance of the role of trade patterns, the relevant decline would be in the functioning of the entire multilateral trading system. And if one argues the view that the demand from the plantation colonies led to a new industrial economy in Britain, the relevant measure would be the colonies as a source of economic growth and structural change within England.

Drescher has vigorously attacked the whole idea of decline. He asserts that there was no decline in the value of the slave system to the metropolis, that West Indian slavery was expanding until its growth was terminated by the abolition of the slave trade. Further, there was no critical change in the colonial system after the American Revolution and no dramatic change in British imperial policy in regard to colonial trade until after emancipation. Carrington's chapter, following Williams and an older tradition going back to Pitman, argues that American independence dealt the Old Colonial System a blow from which it never recovered.

Carrington argues that the British North American colonies were an essential ingredient in the West Indies' value to Britain. The entire system—capital exports from Britain; slave exports from Africa; sugar imports into Britain; North American exports of supplies to the West Indies; British manufacturing exports to North America, Africa, and the West Indies; and North American imports of rum and minor staples—he sees as an interdependent whole, impossible to function without the economic involvement of the North American colonies. He argues that the American Revolution had a devastating impact on the West Indian colonies and initiated an uninterrupted decline in their importance. As evidence he cites severe shortages in food and lumber; increased freight and insurance costs; uncertain, irregular, and diminished shipping; declining sugar prices; and disappearing markets. After the war only Jamaica continued to increase its import of slaves; Barbados, Antigua, and Dominica showed declines in the numbers of slaves imported, and French Saint-Domingue and Spanish Cuba were taking an increasing share of the slaves brought to the West Indies. According to Carrington, British West Indian exports to, and merchandise imports from, Britain declined after 1779.

Drescher, following what he regards as Williams's key variable, measures the value of the colonies by their share in the value of British long-distance trade. He argues that this percentage was consistently higher after 1776 than before. According to him the British West Indies were as valuable to Britain in 1828–32 as in the mid-eighteenth century. The subsequent decline of West Indian importance was due, first, to the abolition of the slave trade and, a quarter-century later, to the emancipation of the slaves. Drescher rejects the argument that any downturns in West Indian production, slave imports, and their share of British trade during some years within the period 1783–1807 can be taken as evidence of permanent secular decline. He argues that those declines that occurred were mainly a short-run phenomenon, and that the slave plantations in the colonies were operating with undiminished profit rates until 1820. Drescher also maintains that long-run decline in sugar production in the older islands is not incompatible with expansion of the system as a whole; indeed, it was the expansion of the new areas that lowered profitability and production in the old islands. Drescher's final verdict is that Williams was wrong to claim a permanent diminution in the value of the colonies after the Revolutionary War, and also wrong to see the triumph of antislavery as a victory for nascent capitalist classes over the old mercantile class, but that Williams was correct in recognizing that it was new classes thrown up by the Industrial Revolution that propelled the antislavery forces to their ultimate success. His disagreement with Williams concerns the question of which of the new classes was instrumental in raising and resolving the antislavery issue.

On the decline issue the conference came to no clear-cut consensus. By positing a direct link between an alleged decline in the economic importance of the West Indian colonies and the success of the antislavery movement, Eric Williams perhaps muddied the issue more than he clarified it. In fact there are two quite separable issues: (1) what are the simple economic facts about the contribution of the West Indies to British growth, how do we measure it, and how does it change over time; (2) what role, if any, do these simple economic facts play in explaining the success of the antislavery movement?

Carrington's argument is that the West Indies' importance depended on the functioning of the whole network of trade flows that characterized the Old Colonial System and that the functioning of this system changed drastically after American indepen- dence. His chapter mainly addresses the period 1775–91. The questions of timing still remain. It was not until after the War of 1812, for example, that the share of the United States in the growth of British exports began to fall sharply. The United States then began to develop domestically and became less dependent on Britain for manufactures and less dependent on the West Indies for the foreign exchange with which to buy them. Southern cot- ton exports began to take care of that. A simple measure like the share of British trade going to the West Indies will alone not capture the implications of the changed role of the United States in making the West Indian colonies valuable to the mother coun- try. It was the American market that had translated as much as half of the West Indian sugar earnings into British exports at the end of the eighteenth century; this now changed as the United States developed economically and turned from deficit toward surplus on merchandise account.

It can be argued that changing conditions in England dimin- ished the colonial contribution in the nineteenth as compared with the eighteenth century. The Old Colonial System can be seen as an important means of stimulating industrial development by en- couraging exports through market-widening, when investment is sluggish and technical change is slow. This characterized Eng- land during the late eighteenth century: in the last two decades of the eighteenth century nearly 60 percent of additional indus- trial output was exported. British export growth rates declined after 1802 and remained slow until midcentury. The ratio of ex- port growth to national product growth, which Crouzet calcu- lates as 40 percent in 1783–1801, became negative in 1801–11 and does not become large again until the 1840's. The leading role of exports did not survive the eighteenth century. The nineteenth- century home market was expanding faster than was foreign de- mand, and domestic consumption and investment and technical change increased relative to exports as sources of growth. It was only in the last two decades of the eighteenth century that ex- ports played a role in leading industrial output. The United States accounted for a major portion of this export spurt, but after the War of 1812 this changed drastically. Within the (diminished) ex- port sector, India, Australia, and Latin America increasingly sup- planted the areas of the Old Colonial System as Britain's best customers. The diminished role of exports in British growth and

the further diminished importance of the Old Colonial System both antedate abolition and emancipation, according to this ar- gument, and cannot be accounted for by them. The implication is that an end to slavery in the 1770's would have severely dimin- ished the demand for English manufactures but that an end to slavery after the 1820's had an imperceptible effect on the British economy.[11]

In the conference discussion David Eltis argued that the comparison should be with how the British economy would have benefited had slavery not been ended. He contended that by abolishing slavery while the Empire was expanding into under- populated tropical areas—for whose products demand remained high—the British missed a great opportunity. Had they abolished their own slave trade but refrained from interfering with that of others; or had they allowed intercolonial slave trade from the old areas to Trinidad and Demerara; or had they repealed the aboli- tion altogether and reopened the slave trade, they would have been better off than by pursuing the course they took. The same elastic supply of cheap productive labor that helped the British economy before 1807 would have continued to do so after 1807 if it had been allowed: cheaper British West Indian sugar and other plantation produce, more employment at home, more British exports, a higher standard of living, and better relations between capital and labor would have been the consequence.

The decline issue thus continues to be in dispute. None of the conferees followed Eric Williams in seeing the West Indian slave system as an obstacle to British growth—although at times Williams appeared to have equated British trade protection with slavery, which is quite a different story. But his portrayal of a concerted conspiratorial step-by-step attack by capitalists on the slave trade, slavery, and the sugar duties drew no support.[12] It was felt to have reflected an outdated view of British politics.

11 Note that this measure of decline is relative to the overall growth of the British economy. It does not argue that the profitability of slavery in the West Indies had fallen, nor that the West Indies had become responsible for a smaller share of British foreign trade. Rather it indicates that the role of the West Indies, and of exports in general, had become less critical to the British economy relative to the importance of the home mar- ket. Thus the West Indian slave system had become more dispensable to the British— however profitable and productive it might have continued to be.

12 Williams's conspiratorial view is perhaps best seen from a long-run vantage; he fur- ther attributed the specific timing of the successful accomplishment of the first two to the same cause—overproduction of sugar.

Yet problems remain with each of the views that were put forth at the conference. The discussion was marked by a failure to distinguish the causes and effects of abolition in 1807 from those of emancipation (1833), and by a tendency to lump them together as antislavery. Of course they are related. But the agitation for one began in the 1780's and for the other in the 1820's; they occurred in quite different economic environments; the generation between them saw changes in both the British and the colonial economies; they can be expected to have had different causes as well as effects; and the respective campaigns were organized by different people, with different techniques, in different political circumstances.

The conference thus left many unresolved problems related to the topic of the economic decline of the West Indies and (to the extent that one occurred) its consequences. Were the conditions pointed to by Carrington for the period 1775–91 continued or reversed? If Drescher is correct that the colonies were at peak value in 1828–32, what does that imply about the effects of abolition? Eltis disagrees about the role of trade and exports in the British economy, arguing that exports earned a high percentage of national income and international trade became an increasing factor in British growth between 1800 and 1850. Eltis's argument raises the question of how much difference it would have made in a free-trade world if Britain had imported sugar, coffee, and cotton from Trinidad and Demerara rather than from Cuba, Brazil, and the United States. These are only examples of the range of issues still under discussion.

Finally, with a single exception, not much was said about internal developments in the West Indian islands in assessing their economic decline. The one major area of Caribbean history to which Eric Williams did not contribute is demographic analysis: its development is recent but very important. Dunn's chapter makes a major contribution here, as did the earlier work by Barry Higman on the economic implications of Jamaican demographic decline after abolition.

Dunn discusses the work experience of the slave labor force of a Jamaica plantation for which continuous data are available from 1762 to 1831. He discusses demographic development, work patterns, sex roles, health, and miscegenation. Among many interesting findings, those on the changing slave sex ratios may

have implications for the decline issue. The female/male ratio, which was low in the 1760's, turned to a female majority by 1810. This shift, Dunn finds, was a general phenomenon in Jamaica. His data show that 95 percent of female adult slaves became prime field hands, compared with only 65 percent of males. Females were excluded from jobs as craftsmen and drivers and from miscellaneous other skilled occupations. They thus came to outnumber men in the field gang, with probably adverse effects on their health and reproductive capacity. Even so, females lasted longer in prime field work than did males, and they lived longer. His work raises the question of the possible effects of a lowered productivity in sugar production from a more female labor force in planting and harvesting, not only in Jamaica, but elsewhere in the British West Indies as well. These demographic developments, with their possible significant effects on plantation profitability, appear to antedate the abolition of the slave trade. Dunn's findings raise the question to what extent profitability of slave plantations may have been changing for internal reasons.

IV. THE BASIS OF ABOLITION AND EMANCIPATION The connection between economic decline in the British West Indies and the British antislavery movement has generally been discussed in the terms set by *Capitalism and Slavery*. Against the idea that the abolition and emancipation exemplified disinterested, philanthropic altruism, Eric Williams opposed an explanation based on the narrow economic motives of the British industrial capitalist class. This has given rise to some heated, but often unfruitful, debates about humanitarian versus economic motives, but the conference discussion did not proceed along these oversimplified lines. Yet there were strongly contrasting opinions. To those who denied that the West Indies declined in importance, antislavery legislation presented a paradox. Why, asked Temperley, was a thriving useful capitalist system of agriculture dismantled by the legislative arm of a capitalist society? For Eric Williams and for David Brion Davis, and for Drescher, Eltis, and Temperley as well, the West Indian slave system was destroyed by a capitalist society: to its advantage in the first case; to its economic detriment in the second.

The discussion did not portray the antislavery movement as a simple clash among abolitionists, planters, and capitalists, but set it in a broader context of changes occurring within the slave economies on the one hand and English society on the other. The question addressed was not *whether* ideology or economic forces affected the movement but *how* they affected it.

Drescher argues against the notion that the antislavery movement came when the colonies diminished in importance to the British economy. Having denied such diminution, he denies any simple role for economic motivation in the antislavery movement. He is also skeptical about ideology as a motivating force. He views the "historians of ideology"—among whom he includes Temperley and Davis—as relying on a convergence of humanitarian ideals and capitalist ideology, and he finds their explanation of how this combination functions obscure. Neither the philanthropy of the Saints, nor the ideology of the capitalists, nor the economic analysis of Adam Smith alone explains the rise of abolitionism, according to Drescher.

Instead, "the diffuse and often ambivalent ideology of antislavery became rooted as a national social movement at the cutting edge of the Industrial Revolution. It was British public opinion that launched the great 'takeoff' of abolitionism in the winter of 1787–88. And it was the abolitionists of the booming, industrializing North of England, who, quite independently of the London Saints, made the mass abolition petition the principal new weapon of abolitionism." Manchester, a hard-nosed manufacturing town, not London, the home of an isolated sect with a tender conscience, drove the movement. Abolitionism was engrafted into the everyday practices of commercial capitalism and consumer capitalism, Drescher maintains. For him, as for Eric Williams, Manchester brought down slavery. For Williams, Manchester stands for a new kind of industrial economy which slavery and mercantilism brought about and which then outgrew its need for both of them. For Drescher, however, Manchester represents the emergence of a new social movement of entrepreneurs, artisans, and skilled laborers that used mass petitions to attack slavery.

It may be asked, however, why, if the slave colonies were pouring undiminished wealth into Britain, was Manchester signing these petitions? This is the question that Temperley and others have seen as critical to those who would put economic motives out of court. As Davis asks, why were so many Britons of

different rank and background concerned about Negro slavery, an institution thousands of miles away?

Davis addresses a narrower question than Drescher: how did abolitionist sentiment gain widespread acceptance in the era of reactionary politics from the late 1790's to the early 1820's? Not only does Davis shrink from offering a global explanation, he raises serious questions about the value of such attempts. The context of antislavery movements differed enormously from country to country, and continuities are exaggerated within countries as well. For his own question, Davis argues that, although abolitionist thought served conflicting ideological functions, in the end it helped reinforce a hegemony of capitalist values. The argument is subtle and complex and far from the crude notion that somehow capitalists used abolitionism to deflect working-class antagonisms from themselves.

By defining slavery in a particular way, as a legal status where persons can be bought and sold and owned as property, abolitionist discourse also defined slavery's opposite, "freedom," in a particular way. Wilberforce and the elder Stephen could sharply contrast the colonies with England and her celebrated free institutions: slavery affected people of a different color in foreign lands. Not being a slave meant one was free to sell one's labor in the marketplace. Buying and selling and *owning* people was wrong; buying and selling and *renting* labor was not only morally acceptable but positively desirable. This formulation can be made to fit perfectly into the rhetoric of laissez-faire capitalism. If property rights are clearly defined and confirmed, then when individuals pursue their own self-interest, the invisible hand of the unfettered market will ensure an optimal result for society. Economic as well as moral problems ensue when one's labor is someone else's property. Adam Smith's attack on slavery converts it to a principal agent problem, and Temperley has elaborated on this without using the term.

The terms of abolitionist discourse then permitted ruling elites to join with reformers in a nonthreatening way. Landlords, merchants, and manufacturers could affirm moral standards while containing debates about morality and oppression within limits that served to reinforce the legitimacy of the existing social order. Of course they could not monopolize the use of abolitionist terms and techniques, and slavery in other hands became a powerful metaphor in radical British ideology. But for the most part, "governing elites could tolerate and even encourage reforms that redeemed the national character and enhanced their own authority."

Davis is not concerned with the issue of the economic decline of the West Indies and mentions Eric Williams only in terms of his "cynical reductionism." The importance of decline to Williams is that, just for that reason, abolition and emancipation offered ruling elites an attractive opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to morality and justice, without cost, and possibly even with great benefit, to themselves. Williams's decline explanation can be used to explain the timing of the antislavery movement. At the very least, the decline story fits well with the hegemony story in locating the British antislavery movement in a middle ground between crude economic determinism and simple ideological determinism. Together they take account of the realities of economic and class power.

Others argued that while the economy had undergone important social and economic changes in the years from the 1780's to the 1820's—in urbanization, industrialization, religion, and squire-tenant relations—the old eighteenth-century polity of unreformed Parliament, Church, merchants, and landed aristocracy remained in control of political power. The West Indian planters were part of this establishment. The people associated with the changing economic and social structure pressed for political power commensurate with their emergent numbers and importance. They were the Outs just starting to attack the Ins—not just cotton capitalists or the bourgeoisie of Marxian literature, but elite skilled workers, clerks, shopkeepers, even disaffected rural people. Their target was the political hegemony of the eighteenth-century establishment, and they supported antislavery because it was an effective ideological weapon against that establishment. Neither economic determinist nor ideological, this argument has a different flavor, derived perhaps from Victorian historians like Kitson Clark, and would be compatible with Davis's hegemony story in a certain sense. The antislavery campaigns are thus seen as part of the entire movement for reform, free trade, religious toleration, and penal reform that began in the 1820's but had its roots

in the prewar era before the reaction to the French Revolution set in.

Another important set of issues concerning the process of abolition lies in the effect of the petitions of the 1780's, emphasized by Drescher, on the unreformed Parliaments of George III. Was Pitt's accession to abolition influenced more by petitions than by his friendship with Wilberforce and his attraction to the doctrines of Adam Smith? In the structure of eighteenth-century politics, how many petitions were worth one Pitt to the antislavery camp? Did petitions turn Castlereagh and the Duke of Wellington away from the West Indian interests or had they simply ceased to believe in their crucial importance?

Craton's chapter explores the reciprocal relation between slave revolts in the islands and the antislavery movement in England. His chapter highlights the difference between the two generations of antislavery agitation. In the reactionary era, when Creole Christian slaves revolted in Barbados in 1816, Wilberforce's antislavery arguments were undercut, and the planters were able to embarrass the movement by blaming them for the revolt. In the era of the Tory Liberalism of Canning and Huskisson, when Wilberforce ceased to be active and Buxton and Brougham led the movement, slave revolt could be presented as a response to planter resistance to ameliorist policies, and a gulf could be opened between the ruling class in the islands and that in the metropolis.

V. *CAPITALISM AND SLAVERY* IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Wright's contribution compares the American slave experience with that of the British colonies. The basic difference between investment in slaves and investment in land and capital, he observes, is that slaves are movable while land and capital are not. This distinction helps explain differences between slave and free societies in population growth, public and private investment, exploration for mineral wealth, and political development. Northern perceptions that the antebellum South was poor and backward arose because Northerners mistook the absence of Northern forms of wealth for poverty. Like nomads, Southerners held their wealth in movable form. Nevertheless, Southerners were less expansionist geographically than Northerners: Southern expansion was slower, "reflecting a collective interest in high slave prices," and westward expansion meant increased competition for the planters of the Old South.

Despite their many differences, Wright finds that American and Caribbean slave societies shared many characteristics. Slavery fostered no strong tie between planter and land in both; the profits derived from slavery helped finance early industrialization elsewhere in both economies; planters were reluctant to open new slave territories in both. The islands exhibited a life-cycle trajectory, with high initial growth followed by subsequent retardation. This occurred because of low investment incentives for land and capital. Over time the economic interests of both came to lie in abolishing the slave trade to protect the value of their stocks.

Wright concludes that neither abolition nor emancipation hurt the British domestic economy. In preindustrial societies economic growth is more dependent on expansion of trade and commerce, while in industrial societies technical change and investment are more important sources of growth. The movement by which Britain successively abolished the slave trade and emancipated the slaves marched in parallel with this change in economic interests: if the British did not actually "do well by doing good," they did themselves little harm.

From Wright's analysis one can draw a picture that would be compatible in certain respects with a Williams thesis (although this is not Wright's intention): early prosperity and value to Britain, followed by decline and a reluctance to expand, followed by an end to the slave system without serious harm to the British economy. This does not quite correspond to Wright's picture of the Southern economy where per capita income (including slaves) grew as fast as or faster than the national average, and per capita income of free Southerners was about equal to that of Northerners. The average wealth of adult free male Southerners was nearly double that of their Northern counterparts. This is not the picture of a declining life cycle: Wright contends that "by no conventional measure of performance was the South stagnating or declining, nor was slavery unviable economically." The contrast with the Caribbean remains to be explained. Questions were also raised about the relation between Wright's basic point that the hallmark of slave societies is the mobility of their assets with his later point that slave societies are recalcitrant to expansion.

The papers presented at the final session of the conference placed *Capitalism and Slavery* and its author in historical perspective. Beckles discussed the relation between Williams's work and the modern plantation school of political economy in the West Indies. The contemporary theorists acknowledge Williams as a seminal thinker and have extended some of his views to the postslavery period.

The conference closed with papers by Paul Sutton, W. A. Darity, Jr., and Richard B. Sheridan. The former two are not published in this volume. Darity saw *Capitalism and Slavery* as Marxist analysis, but in some respects flawed Marxist analysis. He further suggested that some of what appear to be inconsistencies in the work can be made to disappear when the Marxist framework is better understood and articulated. Sutton's paper considered Eric Williams as economic historian, development economist, political theorist, social critic, and educator. Sheridan's paper traced the history of Williams's work since its appearance and discussed its critics, its supporters, and its overall influence and status. His comprehensive and judicious assessment was an appropriate conclusion to the proceedings.