
Capitalism & Slavery

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with a New Introduction by

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BRITISH CAPITALISM AND THE WEST INDIES

WHEREAS BEFORE, in the eighteenth century, every important vested interest in England was lined up on the side of monopoly and the colonial system; after 1783, one by one, every one of those interests came out against monopoly and the West Indian slave system. British exports to the world were in manufactured goods which could be paid for only in raw materials—the cotton of the United States, the cotton, coffee and sugar of Brazil, the sugar of Cuba, the sugar and cotton of India. The expansion of British exports depended on the capacity of Britain to absorb the raw material as payment. The British West Indian monopoly, prohibiting the importation of non-British-plantation sugar for home consumption, stood in the way. Every important vested interest—the cotton manufacturers, the shipowners, the sugar refiners; every important industrial and commercial town—London, Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham, Sheffield, the West Riding of Yorkshire, joined in the attack on West Indian slavery and West Indian monopoly. The abolitionists, significantly, concentrated their attack on the industrial centers.¹

A. THE COTTON MANUFACTURERS

The West Indian planters in the eighteenth century were both exporters of raw cotton and importers of cotton manu-

factures. In both respects, as we have seen, they had become increasingly negligible. The steam engine and the cotton gin changed Manchester's indifference into downright hostility. As early as 1788 Wilberforce exulted at the fact that a liberal subscription towards abolition had been raised at Manchester, "deeply interested in the African trade."²

Manchester was unrepresented in the House of Commons before 1832, so its parliamentary denunciation of the West Indian system comes only after that date. But the seat of the cotton industry was interested in the problem before 1832. In 1830 Cobbett, the workers' champion, presented himself as a candidate for the constituency of Manchester. His opposition to the landed interest would have endeared him to the later seat of the Anti-Corn Law League. The test came on his attitude to West Indian slavery. Cobbett hated Wilberforce and the Methodists. When he fled to the United States in 1818 he wrote a letter to Orator Hunt, in which he stated that America had "No Wilberforces. Think of *that!* No Wilberforces."³ The Methodists were "the vilest crew God ever suffered to infest the earth," and he encouraged the people to pelt them with rotten eggs. In his opinion the slaves were "fat and lazy niggers," laughing from morning till night, and the slave-owners men as gentle, as generous and as good as ever breathed.⁴ The West Indian monopoly cost the English people nothing.⁵ Manchester turned him down, and his conversion to the cause came too late.

Manchester was openly in favor of the campaign on behalf of East India sugar. On May 4, 1821, the Manchester Chamber of Commerce presented a petition to the House of Commons deprecating a preference to one colony over another, and particularly a preference to a settlement of slaves over a nation of free men.⁶ In 1833 Manchester advocated the admission of Brazilian sugar for refining. Mark Philips, its representative in Parliament, spoke briefly but tersely on the vast importance of the subject to the great seat of the cotton manufacture which he represented. He emphasized the hardships imposed on ships having to return from Brazil without cargoes, and argued that the encouragement of sugar refining would increase employment for the industrious laboring classes.⁷

In this single name Philips is summed up the whole evolution of Manchester and its cotton industry. In 1749 the firm of J. N. Philips and Company was deeply engaged in the West Indian trade. In 1832 Mark Philips was elected as one of the two members to represent Manchester, for the first time, in the Reformed Parliament.⁸ Philips' West Indian connections still persisted. A relative of Robert Hibbert, he was selected by the latter as one of the first board of trustees to administer the Robert Hibbert Trust.⁹ But economically his connections with the West Indies were over. He was opposed to the foul blot of slavery, a sentiment which aroused cheers at a dinner given in the town to celebrate his election. Mr. Hadfield's eloquent humanitarianism on the same occasion evoked loud applause. "I appeal to you . . . if liberty could possibly be enjoyed by any rational men without the desire to communicate it to others? . . . Shall the mere distinction of black and white for ever cause one race to be slaves while another is free? Shall it always be that one man should be a slave because he is black, and another be free because he is white? . . . I tell you, that until we wash out this foul pollution from the institutions of our country, liberty itself is not safe anywhere."¹⁰ The foul pollution was not slavery but monopoly. Manchester was interested not in the Holy Scriptures but in the census returns.

After 1833 the Manchester capitalists were all for free trade in sugar, which meant slave-grown sugar. Philips supported the equalization of the East Indian sugar duties. The planters had had their compensation and should not get a farthing more.¹¹ In 1839 he was for the equalization of the duties on all foreign sugar, for it was the duty of Parliament to lower the prices of all the necessities of life and afford every encouragement to the valuable trade with Brazil.¹² John Bright and Milner Gibson, who at one time was Vice-President of the Board of Trade, held the free trade flag aloft. They argued that the protecting duty to the West Indians forced the British working class to pay higher prices for sugar and so took away from them the money earned in the factories.¹³ They called the duty an "obnoxious tax,"¹⁴ a "species of parliamentary charity,"¹⁵ which was more than the cost of production. If the Brazilians could

grow sugar for nothing, if their sugar rained down from the skies, if the West Indian planters had stolen their sugar, it would have made no difference.¹⁶ Protection, said John Bright, was an opiate which made the planters everlasting grumblers—like Oliver Twist always asking for more.¹⁷ The cotton manufacturers, he boasted, asked for no protection and needed none,¹⁸ conveniently forgetting the protection they had asked for a century and a half earlier against Indian goods and ignorant of the protection they would ask for three-quarters of a century later against Japanese textiles. The free traders, Bright warned, might be defeated, but they would return to the charge with renewed energy.¹⁹ The planters' demands were impudent;²⁰ it was not the duty of Parliament to make sugar cultivation profitable,²¹ and Bright advised them to grow cloves and nutmegs.²²

B. THE IRONMASTERS

As early as 1788 an abolition society was started in Birmingham and a liberal subscription collected for the cause.²³ In this society the ironmasters were prominent. Three of the Lloyd family, with their banking interests as well, were on the committee. The dominant figure, however, was Samuel Garbett.²⁴ Garbett was an outstanding figure of the Industrial Revolution, more reminiscent of the twentieth than the eighteenth century. In his breadth of vision, the scope of his activities, the multiplicity of his interests, he reminds us of Samuel Touchet. Like Touchet a partner in the spinning enterprise of Wyatt and Paul, Garbett was an associate of Roebuck's in the Carron Works, a shareholder with Boulton and Watt in the Albion Mills and in the copper mines of Cornwall. "There were indeed," writes Ashton, "few sides of the industrial and commercial life of his day that he did not touch." In addition his energy was thrown into the politics of industry rather than into the details of administration. He became the ironmaster's spokesman to the government.²⁵ This was a dangerous man indeed to have as an opponent, for Garbett, in the larger sense, was Birmingham.

At a meeting of many respectable inhabitants of Birmingham on January 28, 1788, Samuel Garbett presiding, it was decided to send a petition to Parliament. The petition stated, *inter alia*, that, "as inhabitants of a manufacturing town and neighbourhood your petitioners have the commercial interests of this kingdom very deeply at heart; but cannot conceal their detestation of any commerce which always originates in violence, and too often terminates in cruelty." Gustavus Vasa, an African, visited Birmingham, and received a sympathetic welcome.²⁶

This was not to say that Birmingham was unanimous or single-minded on the issue of abolition. The manufacturers still interested in the slave trade held counter-meetings and sent counter-petitions to Parliament.²⁷ But Samuel Garbett, the Lloyds and others of that caliber were, from the West Indian standpoint, on the wrong side of the fence.

In 1832 Birmingham was the center of that agitation which, led by the ironmaster Attwood, brought England to the verge of revolution and culminated in the Reform Bill of 1832. Again the town was divided on the emancipation issue. A public meeting held in the Assembly Room of the Royal Hotel on April 16, 1833, was of a noisy and turbulent character and ended in disorder, the proprietor claiming damages for broken chairs and glass.²⁸ Birmingham was one of the many industrial centers which voted in 1833 for a shorter period of "apprenticeship" under which, by the Emancipation Act, Negro slavery was perpetuated in a modified form. Joseph Sturge was a prominent figure in the emancipation struggle. After 1833 Sturge took the lead in England in protest against the apprenticeship system. With the abolitionist Gurney he sailed to the West Indies in 1836 "with the benevolent idea of making personal inquiries as to the state of the Negro population, in the hope of obtaining further amelioration of their condition." His safe return the following year was celebrated by a public breakfast in his honor at the Town Hall, in appreciation of "his unwearied philanthropic exertions in the cause of negro emancipation."²⁹ This was nineteenth century and no longer eighteenth century Birmingham, and yet another vested interest had turned against the colonial system.

With Birmingham may profitably be considered Sheffield, the center of the steel industry. Sheffield's interest in the colonial system had at most been slight; "with no vested interest in the maintenance of colonial slavery, (it) offered a favourable field for the abolitionist." Sheffield, like Manchester, Birmingham and other centers of industry, was unrepresented in Parliament before 1832. It formed a part of the county of York whose representative was first Wilberforce and then Brougham—both outstanding abolitionists. "I am an advocate for the abolition of West Indian slavery," campaigned Brougham in the town in 1830, "and both root and branch I will tear it up. I have loosened it already, and if you will assist me, I will brandish it over your heads."³⁰

Some part of Sheffield's assistance can be attributed to its interest in the East. In 1825 the abolitionists began a boycott of West Indian produce and urged the consumption, instead, of the sugar and rum of India. Sheffield was the center of this movement. An auxiliary society was formed in the same year for the relief of the Negro slaves. The committee organized a thorough campaign in the town. Each member took two streets in order to make a canvass as to the practicability of inducing housekeepers to adopt the use of East India produce. The committee estimated that for every six families who used East India sugar one slave less was required in the West Indies—obviously a far-fetched argument, but any stick was good enough for beating the West Indians, so long as the West Indians were beaten. "Surely," the committee urged their fellow townsmen, "to release a fellow-creature from the state of cruel bondage and misery, by so small a sacrifice, is worthy the attention of all." Sheffield rose to the occasion: the sale of East India sugar doubled in six months.³¹

In May, 1833, the Anti-Slavery Society of the town forwarded a memorial to the Prime Minister urging immediate rather than gradual emancipation.³² To the end it protested against compensation to the slave owners and the apprenticeship scheme, and Sheffield, like Birmingham, voted ultimately for terminating the apprenticeship in the shortest possible time.³³

C. THE WOOLEN INDUSTRY

The woolen industry, too, joined the chorus of opposition. Wilberforce and Brougham spoke, not only for the humanitarians, but also for the woolen centers. Was the House, asked Mr. Strickland for Yorkshire in 1833, to take freedom of commerce and the extension of the employment of capital as the rule in legislating, or was it to increase monopolies by restrictions? He gave the answer himself: all monopolies ought to be removed, as destructive to the progress of commerce.³⁴

John Bright in cotton, Samuel Garbett in iron. These were mighty names, to be joined by one mightier still, speaking for the woolen industry—Richard Cobden. On the question of the West Indian monopoly the evangelist of free trade and the leader of the Anti-Corn Law League spoke with a vigor, a logic and a popular support that were irresistible.

The West Indians' claim to the monopoly was, in principle, an audacity. There was a time, thundered Cobden, resurrecting the shades of the Long Parliament and Charles I, when no member would have dared to rise in Parliament to make a claim on the ground of a monopoly.³⁵ Men of business would calculate the cost, and could not be expected to be satisfied if they found themselves paying half as much in expenses as the whole value of the colonial trade.³⁶ If Britain had made a present to the planters of her exports, in return for free trade with Brazil and Cuba, she would actually have gained.³⁷ Then what sort of trade was this? "It was precisely as if a shopkeeper should give, with every pound's worth of goods, half a sovereign to his customer." The House of Commons conducted business with less wisdom than was required for the successful management of a Chandler's shop.³⁸

On the argument that the differential duty in favor of West Indian sugar was intended to prohibit the consumption of slave-grown sugar Cobden poured withering scorn. What right had a people who were the largest distributors of textiles to go to Brazil with their ships full of cotton goods manufactured from slave-grown material, and then turn up the whites of their eyes, shed crocodile tears over the slaves and refuse to take slave-

grown sugar in return?³⁹ The situation was farcical, and Cobden wrote a skit on it in the form of an imaginary interview at the Board of Trade between Lord Ripon and the Brazilian Ambassador. The Ambassador taunts the embarrassed Lord Ripon: "No religious scruples against sending slave-grown cottons into every country in the world? No religious scruples against eating slave-grown rice? No religious scruples against smoking slave-grown tobacco? No religious scruples against taking slave-grown snuff? . . . Am I to understand that the religious scruples of the English people are confined to the article of sugar?" Ripon, obviously uncomfortable, reiterates his inability to take Brazilian sugar, and pleads, in defence, the promptings of the Anti-Slavery Party led by Joseph Sturge. At this moment in walks Sturge, with a cotton cravat, a hat lined with calico, a coat sewn with cotton thread, pockets well lined with slave wrought gold and silver. The two diplomats burst into laughter.⁴⁰

Logic, if not humanity, was on Cobden's side. So was the Anti-Slavery Party. That party, he boasted with justice, had had its strength and headquarters in the industrial towns, and was now in the ranks of the Corn Law repealers.⁴¹ He and they spoke with one voice. "I am the representative of the woollen industry," he asserted in 1848, "an indigenous industry, of which there is no jealousy in this House. . . . I am the representative of a county which was eminent in the slavery movement. . . . Now, I unhesitatingly assert that nearly all the men who led the agitation for the emancipation of the slaves, and who by their influence on public opinion aided in producing that result, are against those hon. Gentlemen in this House who advocate a differential duty on foreign sugar with a view to put down slavery abroad."⁴²

D. LIVERPOOL AND GLASGOW

Perhaps the most bitter fact for the West Indians was that Liverpool, too, turned and bit the hand that had fed it. In 1807 there were still seventy-two slave traders in the town, and it was from Liverpool that the last of the English slave traders,

Captain Hugh Crow, sailed just before the abolition bill became effective.⁴³ But if Tarleton continued his opposition in Parliament to so necessary a measure as the abolition of the British slave trade to the foreign sugar colonies,⁴⁴ in 1807 Liverpool was also represented by William Roscoe, whose anti-slavery sentiments have already been noticed.

Whilst Liverpool still carried on the slave trade in 1807, the slave trade had become less vital to the port's existence. In 1792 one out of every twelve ships belonging to the port was engaged in the slave trade; in 1807 one out of every twenty-four.⁴⁵ In 1772, when 101 Liverpool ships were engaged in the slave trade, the dock duties were £4,552; in 1779, when, as a result of the American Revolution, only eleven ships sailed from Liverpool to Africa, the dock duties were £4,957.⁴⁶ In 1824 they were £130,000.⁴⁷ Clearly abolition could not ruin Liverpool. As Roscoe stated, the inhabitants of the town were not unanimous in opposing abolition, and to those who would be affected by the measure, he held out the enticing prospect of a trade with India by pleading that the abrogation of the East India Company's monopoly would be compensation for any loss which the abolition of the slave trade might inflict on British merchants.⁴⁸

But if Liverpool turned against the slave trade, it still retained its interest in slavery. It was no longer, however, West Indian slavery but American, no longer sugar but cotton. The American cotton trade became the most important single trade of Liverpool. In 1802 half of Britain's cotton imports came through Liverpool, in 1812 two-thirds, in 1833 nine-tenths.⁴⁹ Liverpool had built up Manchester in the eighteenth century; Manchester blazed the trail in the nineteenth and Liverpool trudged obediently behind. In the age of mercantilism Manchester was Liverpool's hinterland, in the age of laissez faire Liverpool was Manchester's suburb.

Liverpool followed the free-trade lead given by the cotton capital. Among its representatives after 1807 it selected Canning and Huskisson, men who spoke the language of free trade, if in somewhat subdued tones. Exclusive privileges, said Huskisson in 1830, were out of fashion,⁵⁰ thereby earning the magnificent

service of plate the town had bestowed on him as a "testimony of (her) sense of the benefits derived to the nation at large from the enlightened system of commercial policy brought forward by him as President of the Board of Trade."⁵¹ Any minister, said its new representative Ewart in 1833, thinking of Manchester's goods, who should continue to impose fetters on British commerce deserved to be impeached.⁵² The merchants and shipowners of the town petitioned Parliament in the same year, praying that the exclusive colonial monopoly of the home market be considered.⁵³ There was a powerful Brazilian Association in the town, emphasizing that, as a result of the West Indian monopoly, more than two millions of British capital were forced into other channels, giving employment to foreign shipping and paying to foreigners freights, commissions and charges, to the great loss of British shipowners.⁵⁴ The merchants and shipowners of Liverpool expressed the hope that while Parliament was legislating for the benefit of slaves in distant colonies, it would also consider the present condition and future welfare of the laboring population at home.⁵⁵

In Glasgow, too, the West Indians lost another friend. The days of Macdowall and the sugar heiresses were over. The change can be symbolized in the vicissitudes of one Glasgow family. In the eighteenth century a humble citizen of the town, Richard Oswald, migrated to London. There, through a fortunate marriage with an heiress of great sugar plantations, he made his fortune.⁵⁶ He was for years a large dealer in slaves, owning his own factory on Bence Island in the mouth of the Sierra Leone River.⁵⁷ The wealth eventually passed to James Oswald, Glasgow's first representative in the Reformed Parliament. In 1833 Oswald presented a petition, bearing the signatures of many respectable men, praying for a reduction of the excessive duties levied on Brazilian sugar imported for refining.⁵⁸

E. THE SUGAR REFINERS

In the nineteenth century no less than in the eighteenth Britain's ambitious plan was to become the sugar emporium of the world, to sweeten the world's tea and coffee as the Indus-

trial Revolution had permitted her to clothe the world. This world view was in conflict not only with the declining importance of West Indian production relative to world production, but also with the persistent determination of the West Indian planters to restrict their cultivation in order to maintain monopoly prices.

The slave insurrection in Saint Domingue sent the prices of sugar in the European market spiralling. Prices rose by fifty per cent between September, 1788, and April, 1793.⁶⁹ The sugar refiners of England sent a petition to Parliament in 1792. They were no longer as modest as they had been forty years before. They blamed the evils of the West Indian monopoly, pointed to "the decay of their once flourishing manufactory," prayed for the admission of foreign sugar in British ships at higher duties, and demanded the equalization of the duties on East and British West Indian sugar.⁶⁰ Sabotage had begun, right in the West Indian planter's backyard. Public opinion unjustly blamed the refiners for the high prices.⁶¹ But a committee set up at a public meeting to consider means of reducing the price of sugar exonerated the refiners and advocated the admission of East India sugar on equal terms as "an act of justice."⁶²

The Indian question, as we have seen, was sidetracked when the rich Saint Domingan plum was dangled before the eyes of the British Government. But the issue was revived in the 1820's, when India needed to export some raw material with which to pay for British manufactures. Competition with American cotton was impossible,⁶³ so Indian traders, it was urged, had to choose between sugar and the sands of the Ganges.⁶⁴ The East Indians spoke free trade but their real aim was to share the West Indian monopoly of the home market. Here they and the refiners parted company. As Ricardo put it: "No exclusive protection should be granted to either the East or the West Indies, and we should be free to import our sugar from any quarter whatever. No possible injury could arise from this."⁶⁵

The situation of the sugar refiners in 1831 was desperate. The West Indians had a monopoly of the home market. Indian sugar could be imported only at excessive duties, except for re-export. Annual acts were passed by Parliament permitting the

importation of Brazilian and Cuban sugar solely for refining and re-exportation. This was clearly unsatisfactory. There was a large capital invested in the sugar refining industry, estimated at between three and four millions in 1831.⁶⁶ As a result of the prohibition of all but British West Indian sugar the industry was on the verge of ruin. The higher costs of British West Indian sugar meant that continental refiners were displacing the British in all the European markets. In 1830 there were 224 pans at work in London; in 1833 less than one-third that number. Two-thirds of the sugar refining trade in the entire country was at a complete standstill.⁶⁷

Were the West Indian interests, asked John Wood for the sugar refiners of Preston, alone to be regarded?⁶⁸ Would Parliament, "to gratify monopolists, consent to ruin our future resources"?⁶⁹ Britain, said Huskisson of the Board of Trade, might be made the entrepôt of the sugar of the world, and might thereby give employment to her idle men and idle capital in refining that sugar for the markets of Europe. Indeed, he knew of no channel in which capital might be more beneficially employed than in sugar refining.⁷⁰ Relief from the West Indian monopoly, said William Clay for the sugar refining district of the Tower Hamlets, "would be cheaply purchased by granting the West India proprietors the full amount of the compensation proposed."⁷¹

This was going too fast for a government still dominated, in 1832, by the landed aristocracy and therefore sympathetic to its colonial brethren. The government adopted a temporary compromise. In return for emancipation, the right of the West Indians to the monopoly of the home market was confirmed, whilst the unrestricted importation of foreign sugar was permitted but only for refining and export to Europe.

The situation was fantastic. The explanation offered was that Brazilian and Cuban sugar was slave-grown. But so were American cotton and Brazilian coffee. If the same restrictions had been applied to foreign cotton as were applied to foreign sugar, what would have become of Britain's industrial pre-eminence in the world? The distinction between free-grown and slave-grown products was a principle for individual agency, not a

rule which could direct international commerce.⁷² The capitalists wanted only cheap sugar. They could see only one thing, that it was "monstrous" to have to depend for their supply on sugar produced at a monopoly price.⁷³ They could not, as Lord Lansdowne put it, try things by a special thermometer, which rose to boiling point on Cuban sugar, and sank to a most agreeable temperature on Carolina cotton.⁷⁴

F. SHIPPING AND SEAMEN

The West Indians had always pointed, in justification of their system, to their contribution to the naval supremacy of England. Thanks to the researches of Clarkson, England learned the price she had to pay for this contribution. Bearding the lion in his den, Clarkson, at much personal risk, roamed the docks of Liverpool, Bristol and London, questioned seamen, examined muster rolls and collected evidence which was a terrific indictment of the effects of the slave trade, not now upon the blacks, but upon the whites.

According to Clarkson, the proportion of deaths in the slave trade compared to those in the Newfoundland trade was as twenty to one.⁷⁵ Wilberforce estimated the annual losses at one-fourth of the sailors.⁷⁶ From the muster rolls of Liverpool and Bristol he showed Parliament that on 350 slave vessels, with 12,263 seamen, there were 2,643 deaths—twenty-one and a half per cent—in twelve months, whereas of 462 ships engaged in the West Indian trade, with 7,640 seamen there were only 118 deaths in seven months—or less than three per cent annually.⁷⁷ William Smith exploded the fallacy that the slave trade was responsible for introducing many "landsmen" to the marine. The proportion of the landsmen, from the Bristol muster rolls, was one-twelfth; in Liverpool it was one-sixteenth.⁷⁸ According to Lord Howick, the losses among seamen in the slave trade were eight times the losses in the West Indian trade, and the former was unique in the readiness with which men deserted it on their arrival in the West Indies for the King's ships.⁷⁹ The Abolition Committee declared that the mortality in the slave trade was more than double that of all the other branches of commerce in the kingdom.⁸⁰ John Newton, an authority on

the subject, spoke of the "truly alarming" loss in the slave trade.⁸¹ Ramsay summed up the general feeling: "It forms not but destroys seamen. And this destruction of seamen is a strong argument for the abolition of it. If we have any regard to the lives of seamen, we ought to abandon a branch of trade which dissipates the men in so unprofitable a manner."⁸²

By 1807 the shipowners' interest in the slave trade had declined considerably. On the average of ten years preceding 1800 the capital invested in the slave trade was less than five per cent of the total export trade of the country; in 1807 it was one and a quarter per cent. In 1805 two per cent of British export tonnage, excluding Ireland and the coastal trade, was employed in the slave trade, only four per cent of the seamen engaged in general trade.⁸³

The shipowners, too, began to find the West Indian monopoly irksome. They were promised that equalization of the duties on East India sugar would give employment to forty per cent more shipping.⁸⁴ British shipping engaged in the trade to India increased four times between 1812 and 1828, and Huskisson admitted that the difficulty was to find returns from India.⁸⁵

The shipowners were equally alive to the value of Brazilian sugar. Poulett Thomson of the Board of Trade emphasized that the importation of foreign sugar for refining was most beneficial to the interests of the British shipowners.⁸⁶ According to Ewart, such an importation would furnish freight for 120,000 tons of shipping annually from Brazil alone, while Santo Domingo (Spanish), Cuba, Manila and Singapore would provide cargoes for a further 200,000 tons.⁸⁷ Mark Philips told the House a piteous tale of vessels returning from Brazil empty—in 1832 fifty-one vessels sailed from Liverpool to Rio de Janeiro, not one of which could get a return cargo home.⁸⁸ According to William Clay, of four British vessels which had sailed monthly from Liverpool to Brazil in 1832, not one had returned with the produce with which their cargoes had been purchased.⁸⁹

The shipowners were all for free trade, but only when someone else's monopoly was involved. In 1825 the Navigation Laws were modified. The British West Indies were given permission to trade with every part of the world. This was the thin edge

of the wedge. In 1848 the Navigation Laws, the very heart and core of the colonial system, were swept away by the full tide of laissez faire as the lumber of former times. Ricardo ridiculed the roundabout and expensive way whereby exchanges of produce were carried on. He quoted one instance where American hides were taken from Marseilles to Rotterdam. Not finding a market, they were taken back to Marseilles, whence they were sent to Liverpool. At Liverpool they were seized on the ground that they were imported in a French vessel, and released only on the condition that they should be sent back to New York. The Spaniard, Ricardo continued, was not permitted by the English Navigation Laws to take in a cargo of sugar at Cuba for delivery to a French port, where he would take in wine for England. In England he would be met by a custom house officer, who would tell him that he could not land his cargo. "Why?" the Spaniard would inquire. "I understood you wanted wine." "So we do," the officer would reply. Then the Spaniard would say, "I will exchange my wine for your earthenware." "That will not do," replies the officer. "It must be brought by Frenchmen on a French ship." "But the French do not want your earthenware." "We cannot help that," the officer replies. "We must not let you violate our Navigation Laws." If the Spaniards wanted earthenware, concluded Ricardo, the French sugar, and the English wine, "why on earth should we forbid the natural course of the transaction?"⁹⁰

The shipowners would have none of it. They had voted against the monopoly of corn and the monopoly of sugar but would not relinquish the monopoly of shipping. Where corn and sugar were on the run, shipping could enjoy no immunity. In 1848 the Navigation Laws were repealed. The final nail was driven into the coffin of mercantilism when Ricardo advised the advocates of the "long voyage" to sail their cargo three times round the British Isles.⁹¹

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"THE COMMERCIAL PART
OF THE NATION"
AND SLAVERY

THE CAPITALISTS had first encouraged West Indian slavery and then helped to destroy it. When British capitalism depended on the West Indies, they ignored slavery or defended it. When British capitalism found the West Indian monopoly a nuisance, they destroyed West Indian slavery as the first step in the destruction of West Indian monopoly. That slavery to them was relative not absolute, and depended on latitude and longitude, is proved after 1833 by their attitude to slavery in Cuba, Brazil and the United States. They taunted their opponents with seeing slavery only where they saw sugar and limiting their observation to the circumference of a hogshead.¹ They refused to frame their tariff on grounds of morality, erect a pulpit in every custom house, and make their landing-waiters enforce anti-slavery doctrines.²

Before and after 1815 the British government tried to bribe the Spanish and Portuguese governments into abolition of the slave trade—in 1818 Spain was given £400,000 in return for a promise to do so. All to no avail. The treaties were treated as scraps of paper, as abolition would have ruined Cuba and Brazil. The British government, therefore, urged on by the West Indians, decided to adopt more drastic measures. Wellington was sent to the international conference at Verona to

propose that the Continental Powers boycott the produce of countries still engaged in the slave trade. If he were met with the inquiry, whether Britain was similarly prepared to exclude the produce of slave-trading countries imported not for consumption but in transit, he was to express his readiness to refer that proposition for immediate consideration to his government.³ These instructions did little justice to the perspicacity of the Continental statesmen. Wellington's proposal was received in silence, and he observed "those symptoms of disapprobation and dissent which convince me not only that it will not be adopted, but that the suggestion of it is attributed to interested motives not connected with the humane desire of abolishing the slave trade!"⁴ As Canning reported to his cabinet: "The proposed refusal to admit Brazilian sugar into the dominions of the Emperors* and the King of Prussia was met (as might be expected) with a smile; which indicated on the part of the continental statesmen a suspicion that there might be something of self-interest in our suggestion for excluding the produce of rival colonies from competition with our own, and their surprise that we should consent to be the carriers of the produce which we would fain dissuade them from consuming."⁵

It was clearly what a member of Parliament was later to call "lucrative humanity."⁶ The independence of Brazil gave Canning a better opportunity. Recognition in return for abolition.⁷ But there was a danger that France would recognize Brazil on condition that the slave trade be continued.⁸ What then of the British carrying trade and British exports? "There are immense British interests engaged in the trade with Brazil," Canning reminded Wilberforce, "and we must proceed with caution and good heed; and take the commercial as well as moral feelings of the country with us."⁹ Morality or profit? Britain had to choose. "You argue," wrote Canning candidly to Wilberforce, "against the acknowledgment of Brazil unpurged of Slave Trade . . . you are surprised that the Duke of Wellington has not been instructed to say that he will give up the trade with

*Of Russia and Austria-Hungary.

Brazil, (for that is, I am afraid, the amount of giving up the import and re-export of the sugar and cotton), if Austria, Russia and Prussia will prohibit her produce. In fair reasoning, you have a right to be surprised, for we ought to be ready to make sacrifices when we ask them, and I am for making them; but who would dare to promise such a one as this without a full knowledge of the opinions of the commercial part of the nation?"¹⁰

The commercial part of the nation did not leave Canning long in doubt. A bill had already been presented in Parliament in 1815 to proscribe the slave trade as an investment for British capital. Baring, of the great banking house which was to have such intimate relations with independent Spanish America, issued a solemn warning that every commercial organization in Britain would petition against it,¹¹ and the House of Lords threw it out.¹² In 1824 one hundred and seventeen merchants of London petitioned for the recognition of the independence of South America—the petitioners were, in a word, the city of London.¹³ The President, Vice-President and members of the Chamber of Commerce of Manchester declared that the opening of the South American market to British industry would be an event which must produce the most beneficial results to British commerce.¹⁴ British capitalism could no longer be content with smuggling.

This South American market, Brazil in particular, was based on slave labor and required the slave trade. The British capitalists, therefore, began a vigorous campaign against their government's policy of forcible suppression of the slave trade by stationing warships on the African coast. The policy was expensive, exceeding the annual value of the total trade with Africa. African exports were £154,000 in 1824; imports £118,000 in British goods and £110,000 in foreign. This was the great extent of commerce, said Hume, for which the country was to make such a vast sacrifice of human life on the deadly slave coast.¹⁵ Humanity for English sailors demanded its abandonment. If some abolitionists were suffering from a humane delusion, why should they be allowed to delude the English Parliament?¹⁶ The British people could not afford to become

purchasers on such extravagant terms of indulgences for Africa.¹⁷

All this was before 1833, contemporaneous with the capitalist attacks on West Indian slavery. After 1833 the capitalists were still involved in the slave trade itself. British goods, from Manchester and Liverpool, cottons, fetters and shackles, were sent direct to the coast of Africa or indirectly to Rio de Janeiro and Havana, where they were used by their Cuban and Brazilian consignees for the purpose of purchasing slaves.¹⁸ It was said that seven-tenths of the goods used by Brazil for slave purchases were British manufactures,¹⁹ and it was whispered that the British were reluctant to destroy the barracoons on the coast because they would thereby destroy British calicoes.²⁰ In 1845 Peel refused to deny the fact that British subjects were engaged in the slave trade.²¹ The Liverpool representative in Parliament, questioned point blank, was not prepared to contradict that Liverpool exports to Africa or elsewhere were appropriated to "some improper purpose."²² British banking firms in Brazil financed the slave traders and insured their cargoes, thereby earning the goodwill of their hosts. British mining companies owned and purchased slaves whose labor they employed in their enterprises. "We must needs adopt the painful conclusion," said Brougham with reference to Cuban and Brazilian development, "that in great part at least such an ample amount of capital as was required, must have belonged to the rich men of this country."²³ John Bright was well aware of the interests of his Lancashire constituents when he argued eloquently in 1843 against a bill prohibiting the employment of British capital, however indirectly, in the slave trade on the ground that it would be a dead letter, and that the matter should be left to the honorable and moral feelings of individuals.²⁴ In that very year, British firms handled three-eighths of the sugar, one-half of the coffee, five-eighths of the cotton exported from Pernambuco, Rio de Janeiro and Bahia.²⁵

The capitalists had had enough of Britain's "noble experiment." Commerce was the great emancipator.²⁶ The only way to put down slavery was to trust to the eternal and just principles of free trade.²⁷ Leave the slave trade alone, it would

commit suicide. If the miscreants of any nation chose to engage in it, their guilt be upon their own heads; leave to a higher tribunal the moral government of the world.²⁸ The money expended in fruitless efforts to suppress the slave trade could be more beneficially and philosophically employed at home.²⁹ Bright criticized as audacity the idea that justice to Africa should be done at the expense of injustice to England.³⁰ They had a great deal to do at home, argued Cobden, within a stone's throw of the Houses of Parliament, before they embarked on a scheme of redeeming from barbarism the whole of Africa.³¹ The activities of the British squadron on the African coast were described as buccaneering expeditions,³² which weeded England annually of her best and bravest and desolated countless English firesides.³³ There were other occasions on which to devote attention to the social happiness of the world, other means of endeavoring to advance that happiness, and they should not interfere violently by fiscal regulations with the feelings of others.³⁴ Public opinion in the slave trading countries must be won over to the cause of humanity, not alienated by a policy of coercion, and the Brazilians could not be expected to travel the humanitarian road faster than the English had done.³⁵ Britain's "blundering and ignorant humanity" had only aggravated the sufferings of the slaves.³⁶ They had used, said Hutt, "the utmost latitude, one might say licentiousness, of means—public money to any extent—naval armaments watching every shore and every sea where a slave ship could be seen or suspected—courts of special judicature in half of the intertropical regions of the globe—diplomatic influence and agency such perhaps as this country never before concentrated on any public object."³⁷ Despite all this, the slave trade had increased. It was a wild crusade, and not all the forces of the British Navy, not all the resources of the British Treasury could suppress it.³⁸ They had been laboring for thirty years, and not even a lunatic would entertain any optimistic illusion about their future success.³⁹ Had the British government surrendered its reason to philanthropy? ⁴⁰ Had it prostituted its diplomacy to the purposes of an unreasonable fanaticism? ⁴¹ It was curious to see administrations, not distinguished by devotion to con-

stitutional liberties at home, assuming that a distant and barbarous people had more claims on their conscience than their own countrymen.⁴² The nations were disgusted with "this philanthropic cant."⁴³ These vagaries, this rash and idle system⁴⁴ must be abandoned, as sinister and spurious philanthropy,⁴⁵ costly and abortive experiments,⁴⁶ which hazarded the peace of the world.⁴⁷ The laws of Heaven did not authorize the British people to keep the whole world in a pother about the slave trade.⁴⁸

Where was Palmerston? The slave trade has been called Palmerston's "benevolent crotchet" and he emerges in our textbooks as the persistent opponent of the slave trade. In office Palmerston accomplished little. Out of office he goaded the government to greater efforts to accomplish what he had failed to do. A simple motion for returns of the slave trade between 1815 and 1843 was accompanied by a speech which fills over twenty-five columns in Hansard; a rhetorical display crowned by a magnificent peroration, which might have been culled from anti-slavery speeches of the last half-century, accompanied a simple innocuous motion.⁴⁹ As if he were appealing to Parliament and the country for full appreciation of his labors in the cause, once every month he drew attention to those labors.⁵⁰ But when Manchester's representative emphasized the difficulties which Britain's suppression policy was causing with the Brazilian government and deprecated armed interference, Palmerston spoke about France, Cuba, the Imam of Muscat, everything but the Brazilian slave trade.⁵¹ And with the parliamentary campaign against the suppression policy at its height, Palmerston contented himself with the hope that "no Committee will recommend a course the reverse of that which we have been pursuing . . . no one will be found to say that we ought to retrace our steps."⁵² They had given proof, he thought, of their zeal for the suppression of the slave trade, and if they prohibited the importation of Brazilian sugar, Brazil would think that they did not really believe that free labor was cheaper than slave.⁵³ In urging the Spanish claim to reciprocity, he warned that they would lose their trade with Spain (Cuba) as they were losing it with Brazil, all because of the "absurd

tariff and mischievous policy" of the government. "They have sacrificed the commercial interests of the country in the Brazilian trade, in the Spanish trade, and I fear, also in other quarters about to follow, and all for the purpose of maintaining a favourite crotchet, based upon hypocritical pretences."⁵⁴ The "last candle of the nineteenth century" had been snuffed out.

Disraeli, too, condemned the suppression of the slave trade on grounds of economy and as questionable policy which involved Britain in difficulties in every court and in every colony.⁵⁵ Wellington called it criminal—"a breach of the law of nations—a breach of treaties."⁵⁶ Even Gladstone was forced to choose between the needs of the British capitalists and the needs of the West Indian planters. In 1841 he was all for suppression, and asked the capitalists whether, for small and paltry pecuniary advantages, they were prepared to forgo the high title and noble character they had earned before the whole world. Were they dragging every inconsistency into the light for the purpose of using it as a plea for further and more monstrous inconsistency, or in order to substitute a uniformity in wrong for an inconsistent acknowledgment of what was right?⁵⁷ In 1850, however, he condemned the policy of suppression as anomalous and preposterous. "It is not an ordinance of Providence that the government of one nation shall correct the morals of another."⁵⁸

Ironically enough, it was the former slave owners of the West Indies who now held the humanitarian torch. Those who, in 1807, were lugubriously prophesying that abolition of the British slave trade would "occasion diminished commerce, diminished revenue and diminished navigation; and in the end sap and totally remove the great cornerstone of British prosperity,"⁵⁹ were, after 1807, the very men who protested against "a system of man-stealing against a poor and inoffensive people."⁶⁰ Barham, a West Indian, introduced the bill of 1815 to make penal the employment of British capital in the foreign slave trade, and even to make the insurance of ships in the slave trade criminal.⁶¹ Among the remedies suggested by the West India interest in 1830 to meet the increasing distress of the colonies was a resolution "to adopt more decisive measures than

any that have hitherto been employed to stop the foreign slave trade; on the effectual suppression of which the prosperity of the British West Indian colonies . . . ultimately depend(s)."⁶² Jamaican envoys, sent to Britain in 1832, declared that "the colonies were easily reconciled to the abolition of a barbarous commerce, which the advanced civilization of the age no longer permitted to exist; but they have thought, and apparently with reason, that the philanthropists should not have been satisfied with the extinction of the British trade."⁶³ A great mass movement for abolition of the slave trade developed in Jamaica in 1849. All classes, colors, parties and sects were united on the question of justice to Africa. They denounced the slave trade and slavery as "opposed to humanity—productive of the worst evils to Africa—degrading to all engaged in the traffic, and inimical to the moral and spiritual interests of the enslaved," and pleaded that "the odious term 'slave' (be) expunged from the vocabulary of the universe." "SLAVERY MUST FALL, and, when it falls, JAMAICA WILL FLOURISH." England, they declared pointedly, had gone to war for less justifiable causes.⁶⁴

The British capitalists, however, remained unimpressed. In 1857 an editorial in the London *Times* declared: "We know that for all mercantile purposes England is one of the States, and that, in effect, we are partners with the Southern planter; we hold a bill of sale over his goods and chattels, his live and dead stock, and take a lion's share in the profits of slavery. . . . We fête Mrs. Stowe, cry over her book, and pray for an anti-slavery president . . ., but all this time we are clothing not only ourselves, but all the world besides, with the very cotton picked and cleaned by 'Uncle Tom' and his fellow-sufferers. It is our trade. It is the great staple of British industry. We are Mr. 'Legree's' agents for the manufacture and sale of his cotton crops."⁶⁵ British capitalism had destroyed West Indian slavery, but it continued to thrive on Brazilian, Cuban and American slavery. But West Indian monopoly had gone for ever. In the Civil War the British government nearly recognized the Confederacy. By a supreme irony it was left for the West Indian, Gladstone, to remind an audience in Newcastle that the Amer-

ican Civil War had "perhaps become the most purposeless of all great civil wars that have ever been waged," and that "there is no doubt that Jefferson Davis and other leaders of the South have made an army; they are making, it appears, a navy; and they have made what is more than either, they have made a nation."⁶⁶