

HOW HAS *CAPITALISM AND SLAVERY* SHAPED CURRENT DEBATES ON THE COMMERCE IN AFRICAN SLAVES AND THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY? WHAT RELEVANCE, IF ANY, DO THESE DEBATES HAVE FOR TODAY'S STUDENT? / BY DEXNELL GERVAIS PETERS, WINNER, ERIC WILLIAMS MEMORIAL ESSAY COMPETITION, 2007

Capitalism and Slavery has been the most influential scholarly work from a Caribbean historian about the Caribbean and its relation to the world. Williams took an unorthodox but highly logical and justified stance on the commerce of African slaves, effects of slavery and the cause of its abolition. Selwyn H.H. Carrington states that "Caribbean history was written from the Eurocentric perspective associated with the British imperial school of historical writing...they paid little attention to the contributions of the colonies"¹

The historical setting is important in looking at the impact of the publication of *Capitalism and Slavery*. British colonialism was still embedded deeply in Caribbean culture. *Capitalism and Slavery* launched a full scale attack against this institution with a concrete argument. It is because of this that an over fifty year debate has ensued. Clearly the book has experienced much success within the Caribbean region as well as the wider world. None can question the success of the book – it is a classic.

In the field of literature classic books are those that stand the test of time and continue to be studied or, better yet, critiqued many years after their publication. The book has continued to be at the forefront of the discussion on the commerce of African slaves and the abolition of slavery.

In Williams' view, slavery was very profitable but prior to the ending of the slave trade it began to decline in profitability. This, in turn, played a major role in the abolition of the slave trade and slavery. Williams links the commerce of African slaves and the British economy to show evidence of the development of British capitalism. Therefore, with "mature industrial capitalism"² the stage was now set for the abolition of slavery.

Williams pioneered the study of African slaves, showed the political, social and economic value concerned and allowed for the expansion of the topic. This may be the reason why the book is still of such significance today.

Many historians will agree that the book touches on a number of important issues outside of its main concern. Professor Brogan wrote, in an introduction to the book, that he found it was "as topical as it was in 1942."³ Carrington says "the study contains several theses and numerous sub-theses, which are of as immense importance in this modern era."⁴

One of the most important aspects of the book is its universality. Williams' speaks about the topic in a manner which can be applicable to the events of today as well as to other fields of study. It is not only history but sociology, economics and political science. *Capitalism and Slavery* still stands up to the scrutiny that modern historians with modern research technology attempt to give it. Perhaps what is most interesting is the extent to which the debates over the book have evolved over the years.

¹ Selwyn H.H. Carrington, "Capitalism & Slavery and Caribbean Historiography: An Evaluation." *The Journal of African American History*. Volume 88 No. 3, 2003, p. 304+

² Eric Williams, *Capitalism & Slavery*, The University North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC, 1994, p. ix.

³ Eric Williams, *Capitalism & Slavery*, Andre Deutsch, London 1964, p. ix.

⁴ Selwyn H.H. Carrington, "Capitalism & Slavery and Caribbean Historiography: An Evaluation." *The Journal of African American History*, Volume 88 No. 3., 2003, p. 304+

The issue of the profitability of slavery was the first to attract attention in the academic fraternity. This debate is traced from the publication of the book, to the 1970s and the present day. When the book was in the process of being published, Pitman made the claim that the book was not original, stating that the "work adds little to what scholars in the field know."⁵ If Pitman was referring solely to the decline in the profitability of the slave trade his point is well noted.

Ragatz published a book showing depreciation in the economic value of the slave trade and slavery. In retrospect, Ragatz was not the first to hold this view. Selwyn Carrington states in an article that the idea of depreciation in the plantation economy was first put forward by Hall Pringle. What Williams did was agree with the theory, give further evidence to it and use it in support of a more macro view of slavery in relation to the world. Therefore, as Palmer puts it, "Pitman failed to appreciate the book's refreshing originality."⁶ In any case, Williams dedicated the book to Ragatz. Williams also admitted to two works that were of great significance to him; a thesis, "Africa and the Rise of Capitalism" by W.E. Williams and The Black Jacobins by C.L.R. James.

Erica Williams Connell stated in an article "Williams may have owed an intellectual debt to these two writers... but he developed and took the relevant ideas in directions perhaps not necessarily anticipated by either of them."⁷

Williams agreed with these views, elaborated on them by stating further evidence and put them into a different and broader perspective which, in turn, made *Capitalism and Slavery* a completely advanced and original book.

The decline theory continues to stand its ground through the support of other noteworthy scholars such as William Darity, Jr.⁸, David H. Makinson⁹, Richard B. Sheridan¹⁰, Barbara L. Solow¹¹ and David Brion Davis¹². They have all in some way or the other helped to further Williams' argument. Davis in an essay wrote that "opposition to slavery cannot be divorced from the vast economic changes occurring at the time."¹³

⁵ Eric Williams, Capitalism & Slavery, The University North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC, 1994, p. xiii.

⁶ Eric Williams, Capitalism & Slavery, The University North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC, 1994, p. 13.

⁷ Erica Williams Connell, Introduction: Symposium on the Life and Writings of Eric Williams, *The Journal of African American History*, Vol. 88, 2003.

⁸ William A. Darity, Economic Aspects of the British Trade in Slaves: A Fresh Look at the Evidence from the 1789 Report of the Lords of Trade. "Capitalism and Slavery Fifty Years Later: Eric Eustace Williams--A Reassessment of the Man and His Work. Ed. Heather Cateau and S.H.H. Carrington, Peter Lang, Inc., New York 2000, p. 137-153.

⁹ David H. Makinson, Barbados: A Study of North-American-West-Indian Relations, 1739-1789, - London, Mouton, 1964.

¹⁰ Richard B. Sheridan, Sugar and Slavery: An Economic History of the British West Indies 1623-1775, University of the West Indies Press, Kingston, Jamaica, 1994.

¹¹ Barbara L. Solow, Caribbean slavery and British growth: The Eric Williams hypothesis, Journal of Development Economics, 1985.

¹² David Brion Davis, The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, New York, 1976.

¹³ David Brion Davis, "Reflections on Abolitionism and Ideological Hegemony," *American Historical Review* 92, No. 4, 1987, p. 806.

In this he supported Williams' emphasis on the economic factor. The decline theory would eventually gain opposition – particularly around the 1970s.

In 1968 Roger Anstey would publish a critique of the book. Anstey calculated figures depicting the profit of the slave trade from 1761 to 1807. He calculated it as "9.5% (8.2%, 12.1%, 10.7%, 13% for the first four decades and 3.3% for the years 1801-1807)."¹⁴ He believed that this did not warrant an end to the trade but definitely could not have been enough to be a major factor in the development of capitalism in Britain.

The debate shifted from the discourse of claims or qualitative evidence to the discourse of quantitative evidence. Seymour Drescher is described as the most notable antagonist of the decline theory. Davis Brion Davis in a review of the book *From Slavery to Freedom* described Drescher as "the historian who [in *Econocide*, 1979] demolished the long-standing thesis that British abolitionists succeeded only because the slave colonies were in a state of irreversible decline (1999)."¹⁵ This quote echoes the sentiments of many historians during this period and sometime after. Drescher's main view was that slavery was, in fact, still quite profitable and, thus still significant to Britain when the abolition of the slave trade occurred.

The abolition of slavery marks another dimension of the fifty year debate. Anstey, who attempted to give statistical evidence to show that slavery was still profitable, was an avid believer that the abolition of the slave trade was solely based on Christian benevolence. Drescher also gives great significance to the humanitarians. Their main arguments were that if the slave trade was still profitable then looking at the abolition of slavery from the perspective of economy, the move was in contradiction to the interests of Britain.

Drescher declared that Williams "mistook effects for causes."¹⁶ According to Drescher the colonies only lost value because of the abolition of the slave trade. On the other hand, Drescher did receive criticism as well. "Drescher proves more adept at refuting explanations than devising his own."¹⁷ This statement suggests that Drescher provided a logical opposition without producing a logical, wider setting as done in *Capitalism and Slavery*. There seems to be a need to refute Williams' thesis on the commerce of African slaves and the abolition of slavery, possibly due to the insult to the metropole and its political framework administered by Williams. Nevertheless, this shows another impact of the book on the topics concerned.

The main consensus of the book would again change as the nineties approached. While the book might have been somewhat disregarded for some two decades it began to pick up steam again. A number of critical studies quoting the book began to arise – for example, Joel Mokyr in 1993. Joseph Inikori alluded that the Cold War influenced views on the issues brought forward by *Capitalism and Slavery*. He felt that scholars were forced to defend capitalism in every which way which would inevitably put Williams' book in the doghouse.

Inikori further linked the book to the ideals of the commercial revolution which he stated began to be discredited around the same time of Williams' book. He said that when the commercial revolution began to rise again so too did *Capitalism and Slavery*. Additionally, the correlation between the commerce of African slaves and the abolition of slavery with world history has become stronger

¹⁴ Cedric J. Robinson, "Capitalism, Slavery and Bourgeois Historiography." *History Workshop Journal*, Volume 23, Number 1, 1987, p. 122-140.

¹⁵ Palgrave Macmillan, "Reviews on 'From Freedom to Slavery'",
<http://www.palgrave.com/products/title.aspx?PID=258851>, 1999

¹⁶ Christopher L. Brown, *William and Mary Quarterly*, Review of Books, Vol. 57.3, Rutgers University, 2000.

¹⁷ Ibid.

over the years. Furthermore, the integration is done seamlessly through the attention that the book receives.

The idea of African slavery providing a suitable channel for the industrial revolution brought forward by Williams seems to be the main topic of debate in contemporary times. The major issue at hand is whether the profits of slavery were large enough to support such a major revolution. There have been concessions that the Caribbean benefited Britain during the 18th century.

Williams states that the triangular trade was highly profitable - profits in most cases were trebled. He goes on to show the development of industries through the profit gained from the triangular trade as well as the demand in the Caribbean for the goods made.

Joel Mokyr in 1993 made the point that the industrial revolution was inevitable and if it wasn't for the slave trade something else would have eventually sparked it. He says that profits from the triangular trade went back to the Caribbean.

In looking at the trend of abandoned plantations during the industrial revolution as well as the atmosphere of revolt it is difficult to see how profits could have gone back to the Caribbean. Nevertheless, it can be clearly observed that the debate still has life in it to this day.

Other scholarly works are still being produced from *Capitalism and Slavery's* ideas such as Carrington's 'The Sugar Industry and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1775-1810' (2002). *Capitalism and Slavery* continues to influence modern thinking. Williams' three main points in *Capitalism and Slavery* continue to individually receive criticism by various historians and his initial ideas continue to expand as new debates arise. The book is so thorough that it constantly attracts opposition as many seek to take it apart at the core.

Capitalism and Slavery had a phenomenal impact on the Caribbean region. Williams blatantly attacked imperialism and relayed to the world the role of Caribbean people in the development of Britain and the abolition of slavery. The predominant Eurocentric notions pertaining to slavery were usurped, at least in the Caribbean. The highlighting of the economic decline in the Caribbean encouraged other Caribbean historians and writers to be as bold in challenging the existing perspectives on slavery. It has been said that Walter Rodney was highly influenced by this work. This provides evidence of how this book has impacted those entering the historical academic field in the Caribbean.

Today's student of history does indeed have a lot to benefit from the ongoing debates on the issue of the commerce of African slaves and the abolition of slavery. Furthermore, Williams had a lasting effect on the contemporary setting of the world. The conclusion of the book lays this out for us. He states that his study can be used as a module for explaining the behaviour of political systems. He bluntly states that most, if not all decisions, have some association to the fiscal feasibility of it. Students can now read *Capitalism and Slavery* and use the implications of it to further explain the events of world history.

Prior to this study, the issue of the commerce of African slaves and the abolition of slavery was not a major area of contention. The Eurocentric view that the abolitionists freed the slaves out of a still thriving plantation economy was the norm. Of course, Williams' view would completely refute this and further create a specific area of specialisation within the field of both world and Caribbean history. The plethora of books and articles written after *Capitalism and Slavery* has created a great amount of detail on the topic. Today *Capitalism and Slavery* and its critical counterparts occupy special attention in courses at universities worldwide. The inclusion of African studies as a subject owes some gratitude to *Capitalism and Slavery*.

Most importantly, students of Caribbean history now have a specialised course to study – modules specifically dealing with issues arising from *Capitalism and Slavery*. *Capitalism and Slavery* and its counterparts allow a greater understanding of the Caribbean. Regardless of the credibility of either side, students of Caribbean history can now experience accelerated and continuous insight into the history of their region. European and American history have always dominated the historical field

of study, more so, because of the continuous exhaustive research and analysis that is done. *Capitalism and Slavery* has encouraged continuous exhaustive research and analysis about the Caribbean from the world and among Caribbean historians and students.

Furthermore, in this still very discriminatory world, today's student can feel motivated about the study of Caribbean history. Williams was a very opinionated historian who challenged the orthodox estimations of the Caribbean. According to Williams we can assert that the Caribbean played a major part in the development of the modern world.

It may be that if Williams' book was never a reality, the Caribbean perspectives from it and from what arose would have remained subjugated history to this day. We would have still been subjected to European history in our educational system.

Capitalism and Slavery can be observed as one of the main works which defines the colonial history of the Caribbean region. This book can be considered the starting point to the eventual liberation of the Caribbean from its physical imperial shackles. Williams touches on a plethora of topics in this book regarding the economic, social and political environment of slavery and the industrial revolution.

Williams was highly critical of the political system which in his conclusion he relates to today and the decisions that are made by many governments. Decisions, whether queer, popular or unpopular, according to Williams are based primarily on economic factors.

Capitalism and Slavery is an academically appealing book that still invites debate among contemporary historians – debate that continues to change over time. The early stages saw debate on whether slavery was profitable due mainly to Williams' assertion that subsequent to the ending of the slave trade, slavery was not profitable. This is not to say Williams was the first to bring this point to attention. He was, however, the first to bring it about in such a context and with a greater degree of qualitative analysis.

It is this approach that has allowed greater discussion. New associations continue to be made, for example, many people relate the book to the opinions of Karl Marx. David Gaspar states that "this book marks the beginning of the scientific study of slavery from the international point of view and shows the necessity for a definitive study of slavery in all parts of the new world."¹⁸

The book has stood the test of time. J.E. Inikori observed: "That the Williams thesis has been subjected to repeated attack since the 1950s indicates that the critics are not convinced that their attacks have been effective."¹⁹

Despite the many efforts by historians in support to defend *Capitalism and Slavery*, the book itself continues to be its main defence. Ergo, *Capitalism and Slavery* will continue to shape debates on the commerce of African slaves and the abolition of slavery.

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¹⁸ David Barry Gaspar, They "Could Never Have Too Much of My Work": Eric Williams and the Journal of Negro History, 1940-1945." *The Journal of African American History*, Vol. 88, 2003.

¹⁹ J.E. Inikori, 'Market Structure and the Profits of the British African Trade in the Late Eighteenth Century', *Journal of Economic History*, XLI, 4, 1981, p 746.

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