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Antislavery Debates: Tides of Historiography in Slavery and Antislavery

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This article reviews the changes in historical writing about slavery and the slave trade over the last 50 years.

Half a century ago, the historiography of antislavery remained comfortably within the frame of reference set by the first abolitionist account written immediately after the abolition of the British slave trade in 1807. For a century and half thereafter the history of antislavery was largely the history of the dramatic triumph and expansion of the movement launched by small bands of abolitionists in America and Britain in the 1770s and 1780s. After millennia of the acceptance of slavery as a global institution, Britain was among the first nations to permanently ban its own slave trade (1807), and to emancipate its colonial slaves (1834). It was thereafter the principal agent in securing the ending of the transoceanic slave trades of the world. As late as the centennial of British emancipation in 1933 the British role in the process was celebrated as a story of humanity's ascent to a higher moral plane. It was evoked as a selfless action that legitimized Britain's imperial stewardship over millions of people in the Caribbean, Africa and Asia, who were still deemed to be too weak to speak for or protect themselves. In the economically depressed world of 1933 and in the face of expanding despotism and brutalization the story of abolition offered dramatic evidence of the reality of moral progress in history. Amidst the ominous news of intensively coercive regimes emanating from Germany and the Soviet Union, the long march of antislavery was hailed as the supreme example of groups with

religious ideals and motivations who were able to mobilize public opinion and political will to outlaw an institution accepted throughout the world for millennia. To explain the origins of this triumphal process, historiographical attention naturally focused on the initiative of gallant individuals or small bands of heroes in Britain, the Americas, and Europe who galvanized the moral conscience of the West. Historians continued to draw upon Thomas Clarkson's classical history of the convergence of individuals whose voices finally produced a great public tide in the affairs of men and brothers that swept abolition on to victory in the name of providence and humanity.^{1,2}

There were, of course, counter-currents to this tradition throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. Initially, the dominant driving force was tied to the economic and imperial power of Pax Britannica. In the 19th-century, the United States' South, continental Europe, and Latin America critics of the abolitionist crusade questioned Britain's motives. They insisted that claims of humanitarians and reformers were fronts for British policies with economic or even revolutionary aims. They lacked any motivation to investigate the history of antislavery on a continental or global scale. They invariably interpreted British abolition cynically, emphasizing economic or imperialistic motives rather than humanitarian or idealistic ones.³ The moral meta-narrative remained dominant for a century and a half after the abolition of the Anglo-American transatlantic slave trades in 1807.

By the time of the sesquicentennial of British slave emancipation in 1983, however, the old interpretative frame of reference was in retreat. The mass annihilations and coerced labor systems of the Second World War had eroded the meta-narrative of Western history as a secular civilizing process. Decolonization struggles and 'third world' migrants in Britain called for increased attention to the experience of enslaved Africans as victims, martyrs and resisters. A new generation of African and West Indian historians emerged. They viewed the abolitionist process with far more cynicism than their British predecessors.

The change of mood was epitomized in the sesquicentennial conference at the University of Hull in 1983. The opening speaker observed that even in the birthplace of William Wilberforce, the old leading actors in the historiography of abolitionism had virtually vanished from the agenda. There were no panels devoted specifically to British abolitionism, nor to its statesmen, nor to its 'Saints' – not even a single paper on Hull's hometown hero, William Wilberforce himself. The speaker was reminded of an English radical's observation when he was forced to leave England in 1817 at the height of Wilberforce's sanctification. Highest on Cobbett's little list of things that he would not miss was: 'No Wilberforces. Think of *that!* No Wilberforces!'⁴

As though to symbolize the new trend, the keynote speaker of the conference, was C. L. R. James, a radical Trinidadian writer, famous for having made the

Saint-Domingue Revolution, not British abolition, the pivot of Africa's long march from chattel slavery to political independence. James was appropriately introduced by a descendant of Wilberforce.⁵

It was Eric Williams, however, another Trinidadian of slave descent, who in 1944 framed the postwar historiographical challenge to the traditional narrative. A student at Oxford in the 1930s and by then a professor at Howard University in Washington, DC, Williams launched a frontal attack on the earlier view that the British had transcended self-interest in abolishing the transoceanic slave trades and colonial slavery. His *Capitalism and Slavery* was republished (with far greater impact) in the mid-1960s, after he had become the first Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago. Williams set out to devalue the entire idealistic pedigree of British antislavery. When one looked for causality in history, politics and morals were merely rationalizations for or against the thing attacked or defended. The real object of the struggle was always measurable 'in pounds sterling or pounds avoirdupois, in dollars and cents, yards, feet and inches.'⁶

The history of slavery flowed directly from the ebb and flow of capitalism, the principal economic system of modern times. In phase one (mercantilism) the profits from the expanding slave trade and slavery provided the wealth that financed the British industrial revolution. In a second phase, beginning with the American Revolution and the shift to free trade capitalism, irreversible, continuous decline of the British slave system made it an encumbrance to the emergent British economy. The erstwhile 'disinterested' forces of abolition were thus revealed as the ideological cover for the more powerful force of industrial capitalism. The implications of this rise and decline theory of slavery were vast. Britain was not only the world's leading industrial power during the 19th century but the hub of antislavery and the lynchpin of global emancipation in the age of abolition. The rise of antislavery depended upon the prior and irreversible decline of slavery.

By the early 1970s, what one scholar coined Williams's 'decline thesis' of abolition had gained currency even among scholars who objected to his uncompromising historical materialism in principle, and his dismissal of the abolitionists' significance in particular.⁷ In a 1977 monograph, *Econocide*, I systematically challenged both the decline thesis of British slavery and that the ending of the slave trade should be viewed as a response to that development. Systematically analyzing both Williams's favored data set and others that had not yet been examined, *Econocide* showed that the rise of British abolitionism in the 1780s and the subsequent slave trade abolition act of 1807 came when the British Afro-Caribbean slave system was expanding, not declining. Abolition came precisely when Britain led the world in the production of sugar and coffee. It also came at a moment when naval supremacy and colonial expansion enabled Britain to exponentially expand its tropical slave frontier. With the seizure of new territories in the Caribbean, in South America and in Africa the British were in a

position to increase their transatlantic slave trade indefinitely and to dominate that trade for generations to come.⁸

One historian has continued to challenge *Econocide's* refutation of the economic decline thesis and another has argued for a truncated temporal version of Williams's argument. On the whole, however, 'most other historians take the opposite view, discounting any overall case for serious economic decline in the British Caribbean by 1807.'⁹ Summing up the overall consensus David Richardson concludes: 'Contrary to the assumptions of some historians, therefore, British abolitionism came against a background of economic growth and prosperity, not stagnation, decline or crisis in Britain's slave colonies, with slave owners enjoying lifestyles unimaginable to the huge majority of Britons.'¹⁰

A decade after *Econocide's* publication, David Eltis made another major contribution to the debate. His *Economic Growth and the Ending of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (1987) extended the story to the termination of the transatlantic branch of that massive forced migration of Africans in the 1860s. Eltis mobilized elegant analytic arguments and massive empirical evidence to demonstrate that the British sacrificed substantial economic, fiscal, diplomatic and consumer benefits, not only in abolishing their own slave trade, but in acting as the major catalyst in suppressing the entire transatlantic system. The tension between economic growth and abolition remained as patent at the end of the abolitionist process as at the beginning. Eltis's leadership in the compilation of the Transatlantic Slave Trade Database during the two decades following the publication of *Economic Growth* further confirmed the finding that the transatlantic slave trade remained a massive, viable and profitable enterprise for nearly half a century after British abolition. Only British-led naval and diplomatic pressures brought it to an end.¹¹

Ironically, even historians who focus on validating Williams's claims for decisive contributions of 'rising' slavery to the British Industrial Revolution before 1775 sometimes inadvertently lend support to the Drescher/Eltis refutation of the decline theory of abolition. The most massive recent compilation of data in favor of the decisive contribution of Atlantic slavery to British economic development is Joseph E. Inikori's *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England* (2002). Inikori's own tables indicated that the total value of commodities imported by Britain from the slave-labor zones of the Americas increased from the pre-abolitionist era to the outbreak of the American Civil War. His own sources also indicate that the British Caribbean share of this trade dropped only after the abolition of the British slave trade and slavery.¹²

The reassessment of the vitality of British slavery at the moment of the abolitionist turn had implications for the relation of economic development to the ending of slavery far beyond Britain and the transatlantic slave trade. The authors of *Econocide* and *Economic Growth* offered evidence against another deeply

embedded concept in the historiography of slavery and abolition. Both Williams and the historians whom he challenged all accepted the proposition that slavery, a backward and inefficient mode of production, was rendered uncompetitive by free labor. Given this premise it could be argued that the obsolescence of the British slave system had actually been postponed by imperial protection. Slave owners, Williams had concluded, became Rip Van Winkles. 'Drugged by the potion of mercantilism...[they] had gone to sleep for a hundred years' before 1776 (Ref. 6, p. 125).

The rediscovery of British slavery's continued vitality now converged with a major historiographical breakthrough on the other side of the Atlantic. Three years before *Econocide* the idea of slave labor's inefficiency was dramatically challenged by Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman's *Time on the Cross* (1974).¹³ Using systematic econometric methods and an abundance of new data they demonstrated the remarkable efficiency, profitability and competitiveness of antebellum slavery in the United States' South. The authors' principal focus was the economics of slavery, but they ultimately confronted the long dominant 'free labor ideology' in American historiography. That historiography rested on the implicit assumption that slavery's inherent immorality, brutality and hyper-exploitation bred attitudes that entailed excessive soil exhaustion, general indebtedness, disincentives to industry, high levels of poverty, illiteracy, and lethargy in all facets of civil society. Such arguments relied upon Adam Smith's dictum declaring the inherent superiority of free labor, on enlightenment or socialist theories of historical progress, and on the abolitionist axiom that no good could come of evil.

Slavery's putative inefficiency was often equally attractive to anti-abolitionist historians. They could argue that slaveholders had actually sacrificed efficiency to the mission of civilizing slaves. In this perspective, slaveholders had assumed a 'white man's burden,' sustaining an unprofitable economic system that Christianized and educated African savages. In this scenario abolitionist fanaticism was the catalyst for the most blood-drenched path to emancipation in the history of the Americas.¹⁴

The discovery of slavery's dynamism and profitability therefore opened a whole new perspective on the fate of the institution. What was violently or non-violently ended was not an anachronistic institution somehow briefly surviving amidst modernizing capitalism. It was an integral part of Western economic growth and processes. It had to be destroyed despite its continued economic contribution to capitalism. Once historians entertained this new paradigm, they could more easily explain the economic incentives that induced one Atlantic European society after another to ship masses of slaves for three centuries to areas of low population and to produce highly desired commodities for European production and consumption.

Historians working on a wide range of New World societies could now consider the Atlantic world in a new light. For nearly 300 years before 1830 four out of every five migrants brought to the New World came as involuntary African slaves. Robert Fogel, Stanley Engerman, David Eltis, Rebecca Scott, Herbert Klein, Laird Bergad and many others illustrated the ways in which colonial slave societies continued to produce consumer goods and raw materials for a rapidly expanding European economy into the late 19th century.¹⁵ Slaveholders also produced considerable wealth for themselves as well. A succession of plantation societies ranked among the most productive and, per capita, the wealthiest zones on the planet: Brazil, Barbados, Jamaica, Saint-Domingue and Cuba. On the eve of the American Civil War, the monetary value of Southern US slaves was equal to 80% of the annual Gross National Product of the United States – equivalent to what today would be \$9.75 trillion. As David Brion Davis notes, ‘there were good reasons why, in 1860, two-thirds of the richest Americans lived in the slaveholding south.’¹⁶

One result of these two paradigm shifts – the challenges to the decline theory of abolition and to the free labor ideology seems clear. There is now a greater appreciation of the profound incompatibility between economic self-interest and antislavery policy.¹⁶ This was true not only for Great Britain and the United States but for all of the major New World Slave systems and some of those in the Old World as well. In the French empire the first abolitionist attack was launched at the very moment that France possessed the most productive and valuable slave colony in the Americas. Similarly, in the Spanish and Portuguese Americas, both internal agitation and external pressure for slave trade abolition and slave emancipation began immediately after British slave trade abolition. The universal perception by both rulers and merchants was that ‘the south Atlantic system and colonial political economies did depend on the survival of slavery.’¹⁷

Moreover, when the slave systems of the Old World began to come under pressure, in the late 19th century, emancipation began in many areas that had just undergone a surge of growth in their slave and slave trade systems. Indeed, the caution exercised by European imperialists in dismantling slave labor systems in Afro-Asia often involved a conviction of the failure of the free labor ideology in the New World. This was only reinforced by imperialist difficulties in recruiting Africans for voluntary wage labor. Increasingly, historians of slavery and abolition have realized that explanations for the turn against slavery have to come to terms with the notion that modern capitalism proved to be ‘supremely agnostic and pluralistic in its ability to coexist, and to thrive, with a whole range of labor systems right through the abolitionist century after 1780.’ And, as David Davis has added: ‘One should now extend that period to the very present’ (Ref. 11, p. 15; Ref. 8, p. 186)

Thus, the assumption that free labor was inherently superior to slave labor was never a consensual ideology in the West at any time during the age of abolition

and emancipation. Abolitionists, of course, invoked a series of brief quotations from very eminent writers of the 18th and 19th centuries in order to bolster this perspective. They quoted Montesquieu, Franklin, Adam Smith, Tocqueville and others. Some historians also treated these disparate quotes as a consensual Western perspective throughout the age of abolition. Further research has since demonstrated that no such consensus existed regarding overseas slavery. Indeed, during the course of their respective abolitions, policy makers in most countries were deeply skeptical about the applicability of the free labor ideology to the problem of emancipation. This applied as much to Old World imperial emancipations at the beginning of the 20th century as to the New World colonies at the beginning of the 19th.¹⁸

Alternatives

If systematic investigation of economic development and the political economy seems to reveal as many obstacles as encouragement for explanations of anti-slavery and the ending of slavery, how can one account for the near globalization and victories of antislavery during the course of the 19th and early 20th centuries? In the 1960s, David Brion Davis already posed the question in his *Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (1965). He explored Western writings on slavery stretching over two millennia, and brought the story to the brink of the emergence of abolitionism in the 1770s.¹⁹

The key issue, however, still remained to be addressed. How could one explain the transformation of isolated examples of writers' unease or even occasional denunciations of its barbarity into full-fledged political attack, and into their triumph of abolition over entrenched and rapidly expanding overseas slave systems?²⁰ How could one explain the paradox that New World slavery was complementary to an expanding Western free labor capitalist system? One way to attack the problem was to give a new twist to the old actors in the humanitarian narrative. In 1975, Roger Anstey rooted the emergence of abolition in an extension of late 18th-century British religious doctrine to overseas slaves. Nevertheless he attributed the first major triumph in 1806 to deft abolitionist political manipulation of 'national interest'.²¹ In 1806, an abolitionist Bill was presented to Parliament as a blow against foreign plantations conquered by the British in the conflict against Napoleon. It prevented British slavers from supplying Africans to these colonies in wartime. The abolitionist's strategy was to effect a humanitarian outcome in a Machiavellian disguise. Abolition's triumph was to dress a humanitarian sheep in wolf's clothing.²²

In the same year (1975) David Brion Davis offered another explanation of British abolitionism's victory as another kind of triumph of class morality in disguise. In Davis's scenario the emergence of British abolition was reconfigured as an elite displacement of the intensification of class exploitation and dislocation

created by British capitalist industrialization. In this sense, abolition functioned as it had for many early 19th-century British radicals, as a diversion from domestic exploitation. In Davis's subtle psychological perspective, however, the abolitionists were no more engaging in a conscious Machiavellian maneuver for metropolitan capitalism in 1807 than were Anstey's abolitionists in 1805, prohibiting British capitalists from investing in non-British plantations. In short, for Davis, the abolitionist impulse was an unconscious reaction to disturbing discontents closer to home.²² What both Anstey and Davis shared was an acknowledgement of the limits of offering moral idealism alone in explaining the victory of abolitionism over a deeply entrenched institution and its related economic interests.

Many historians continued to invoke Davis's early interpretation of abolition as a ruling class diversion after he himself eased away from it. Others dissented. The first challenger, Thomas L. Haskell, relocated the origins of abolition not in the emergence of unconscious class tensions generated by the Industrial Revolution, but in the activities and 'cognitive style' generated among long distance vendors. For Haskell, immersion in the international market accounted for the unprecedented 'wave of humanitarianism reform sentiment' [and movements that] 'swept through the societies of Western Europe, England and North America in the hundred years following 1750.' Haskell's hypothesis dismissed any need for an 'unconscious dimension', or even an unconscious capitalist displacement of class interest in abolitionism. The market itself was the medium of expanding moral perception and political action.²³

This was the opening salvo in a series of exchanges about class consciousness and antislavery between Haskell, David Davis and John Ashworth, in what was ultimately published in a volume entitled, *The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism as a Problem in Historical Interpretation* (1992) (Ref 25, see also Ref. 4, p. 11). There it became clear that one of the major difficulties in Haskell's argument derives from the fact that it posits for the entire West what could hardly be found anywhere on the European continent in the century after 1750. There was no wave of abolitionist reform sentiment and virtually no abolitionist movement in most Western societies, least of all any that could be connected to international commercial capitalism. In other words what happened in one part of Anglo-America was simply ascribed to Europe as a whole. As David Eltis later showed (1999), Haskell's correlation between the market and antislavery could be better used to invert Haskell's own equation: The same traits designated by Haskell to be 'embodied in market behavior, could have had almost exactly the opposite effect ... [leading] to moral restrictions [against] enslaving one's ... fellow Europeans but not [against] the purchase of a non-European who was already a slave ...'.²⁴

The other, perhaps more significant, change from Davis's initial focus on abolitionist elites in his *Age of Revolution* was a turn towards investigating the

behavior of broader publics in the abolition process. One thing that Williams, Anstey, Davis and Haskell all shared was their attraction to the most articulate members of metropolitan societies, whether in business, politics, religion, or culture.²⁵ An upsurge of historiographical interest in alternative agents in the ending of slavery also began in the 1970s. It looked more closely at the mass mobilizations that led to the containment or expansion of slavery after the 1780s. One set of historians turned their attention towards slaves themselves as the key agents in the overthrow of slavery. The model for this historiographical reorientation had already appeared in 1938. As is evident from its title, C. L. R. James's *The Black Jacobins*⁵ aimed at integrating the story of the largest and most successful slave uprising in world history into the larger history of the Age of Revolution after 1776.

Only in the late 1970s, however, did historians of slavery begin to argue systematically in favor of the Saint-Domingue Revolution's central position in the history of antislavery. Robin Blackburn's history *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776–1848* (1988),²⁷ pivots on his chapter, 'Revolutionary emancipation and the birth of Haiti.' His narrative weaves the history of antislavery through the series of political upheavals and military conflicts that crisscrossed the Atlantic world, from the successive revolutions in the British, French and Spanish empires. Even British abolition in 1807 is reinterpreted primarily as a response to a class crisis posing a revolutionary threat.²⁶

Haiti's was the largest and the only successful slave revolution in history. Before and after it, however, the revolutionary wars of independence in North and South America offered ample recruitment opportunities for slaves desiring to attain freedom and for stimulating emancipation legislation that incorporated slaves into free civil status either gradually or immediately. Later New World emancipations, in the French (1848) and Spanish (1878) empires and in the United States (1865), all came in the wake of revolutions or armed conflicts. Those in the Old World's European empires usually originated in imperial decrees from the metropole. They came in the wake of Europe's transformation from empires of slavery to empires of antislavery. Some of these Old World emancipations were accompanied by mass flights of enslaved populations in the wake of such decrees.²⁷

Renewed interest in the agency of slaves in the history of emancipation was also driven by a concern to diligently accumulate the evidence of slave resistance, whether successful or unsuccessful, as a means of registering the broadening consciousness of the enslaved. Some historians have recently suggested that, by resisting slavery, slaves were the primary agents in achieving their own freedom. This of course, not only diminishes the role of the heroic leaders. Most historians of antislavery imagine its long history from below as a more complex process than slave self-liberation.²⁸

This brings us to the historiography of that other rank-and-file of abolitionism – the free populations of republics and empires. Significantly, these were the last cohorts of antislavery actors to receive systematic and comparative attention in the 1980s. One reason was that in both the Old and New World's societies with slaves there was little collective civil activism against slavery to discuss. Most abolitionist legislation came in the wake of revolutionary decrees or external economic or military pressures. From the first attempts at comparative studies of abolitionist movements, however, it was apparent that there were two contrasting variants of abolitionism. Mass abolitionism, best exemplified in the Anglo-American and Brazilian cases, developed distinguishing characteristics of mass social movements. They used the public sphere to bring pressure to bear upon (often reluctant) politicians and economic interests. They used mass propaganda, public gatherings, lawsuits, boycotts and mass petitions. They usually aimed at expanding participation welcoming groups otherwise excluded (by sex, religion, class, race, legal status or locality) from the existing political process. In Europe, Britain was the outstanding 19th-century example. France and Spain briefly attempted to imitate this model. Only toward the end of the 19th century was the British example replicated on the European continent. In the Western hemisphere, the northern United States and Brazil most closely approached the model first inaugurated in British society.²⁹

The fact that late-eighteenth-century Anglo-Americans possessed the world's most highly developed and autonomous public spheres allowed the British to become the pioneer organizers of a long-term national social movement against slavery. Thus, between 1788 and 1815 an unprecedented proportion of Britain's people not only took decisive steps in forming a national opinion against the slave trade, but decisive steps towards creating national lecture tours, giant petition drives, vast coordinated public petition meetings and the formation of special-purpose associations of all kinds. Thereafter, Britain became an example for civil society abolitionism in the United States (1830s) and Brazil (1880s). In the United States, northern abolitionist popular mobilization provoked a counter-mobilization that resulted in the bloodiest and most costly of the New World emancipations. In Brazil, popular mobilization produced an abolitionism that achieved emancipation almost despite the national government.³⁰

In another great surge of slavery scholarship during the past generation, societies with lesser abolitionist movements or societies without slavery have found their historians. They never generated mass abolitionist movements. These variants of abolitionism were usually confined to local or cultural elites. They were often imitators or even satellites of the British movement, limited both in duration and ambition. They rarely lasted beyond the demise of their own society's or empire's slave system. Historians identify a second surge of anti-slavery mobilization toward the end of the 19th century. In 1889, after a century

of relative quiescence, Catholic societies were invited to become institutionally involved in a crusade against the slave trade and Muslim slavers in newly imperialized Africa. These societies have not yet elicited systematic and comparative historical analysis. Nor have the religiously-based societies in Afro-Asia. To the extent that this second wave was active it appears to have played far less of a role in the global emancipation process than its early 19th-century predecessor.³¹

New paths and reconsiderations

What is the state of the historiography of slavery and antislavery after half a century of dynamic development? One must first note the quantitative explosion in research and scholarship, whose annual bibliographical listing alone now requires 200 pages of the journal *Slavery and Abolition*. The historiography has become far more global with a dramatic surge of research on slavery and emancipation beyond the Atlantic world.³² Increased attention is being devoted to integrating the history of coerced labor and servitude in Europe. The advent of the Gulag in the 20th-century Soviet Union and the vast system of slave labor in Nazi Europe offer new areas of slavery for research and comparison. They amply demonstrate that the history of slavery and antislavery is not a linear one from bondage to freedom. There were, in fact, more slaves toiling in the heart of Europe in the 1940s than there had been in all of the Americas a century earlier. Nor does the history of servitude end with the 20th century. The search for 'slave-like' conditions in many parts of the world continues to remind us that success is never final.³³ New fields of inquiry have been expanded on themes of race, class and gender, of representation, memorialization and reparation.³⁴

The major debates on slavery and abolition during the last half century now seem to have produced a second shift. At the beginning of this essay I remarked that there was a withdrawal from the moral dimension of slavery and abolition in the historiography of the 1960s and 1970s. In that age of decolonization, historians' wariness of ascribing change to morality was reflected in Eric Williams's devaluation of the abolitionist's role. It was also reflected in historians' propensity to ground the motives of actors within the boundaries of class and class conflict.

If we compare the bicentennial commemoration triggered by the Anglo-American slave trade abolitions of 2007 with the sesquicentennial of British slave emancipation in 1983, a change of tone seems evident. In 2007, there was certainly no return to the humanitarian triumphalism of 1933. Eric Williams had seen to that. However, there was a clear sense that the materialistic overtones that had so much intuitive assent in the 1960s and 1970s had simply left too many questions unaddressed. In contrast to the 1970s and early 1980s, the approach of the commemoration saw the publication of a book on the origins of British

Abolitionism, Christopher Brown's *Moral Capital* (2006).³⁵ At the same moment, David Brion Davis's most recent work, *Inhuman Bondage* (2006),¹⁶ traced the rise and fall of New World slavery. Davis boldly opened his chapter on 'Explanations of British Abolitionism' with the observation that this baffling subject raised the issue of 'moral progress in history.' Historian Philip Morgan began an essay on abolition noting that his aim was 'emphatically not to devalue the abolitionist achievement' or to reduce the significance of the 'moral revolution' identified by Davis four decades earlier.³⁶

Robert Fogel, looking back over his own decades of intense involvement in the 'slavery debates' in the United States³⁷ noted that his subsequent major venture into the rise and fall of American slavery had attempted to rectify a significant lacuna in the earlier book that he authored with Stanley Engerman. That lacuna was a systematic consideration of the 'Moral Problem of Slavery,' and of its significance in the ideological and political campaign against slavery. None of these distinguished historians would have ventured to return to the traditional historiography of pure idealism, encapsulated in Lecky's epitome of the British crusade 'as probably ... among the three or four perfectly virtuous acts recorded in the history of nations.' Yet all of these historians explicitly acknowledged the role of moral arguments in explaining abolition. They all referred to the language of morality rather than of ideology. The discourse of morality was treated as an appeal to inclusiveness and universal norms. Even Robin Blackburn, writing in the radical tradition and focused on explaining the revolutionary significance of Haitian slaves' violent destruction of the institution, noted that historians have begun to study that great revolution 'as an event in the history of the moral imagination as well as a dramatic episode ...'.³⁸

However different their approaches, the work of these historians hints at yet another shift in historiographical perspective. In any event, the tendency to ground that momentous change within a single overarching stage of capitalist development appears to have considerably diminished.

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8. S. Drescher (1977) *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press) reprinted, with a New Preface, and a Foreword by David Brion Davis (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), pp. xiii–xxx.
9. For the dissenters, see S. H. H. Carrington (2002) *The Sugar Industry and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1775–1810* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida) who identifies *Econocide* as 'one of the most polemical books since Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*' (p. 4); and D. B. Ryden (2009) *West Indian Slavery and British Abolition, 1783–1807* (New York: Cambridge University Press). Alvin O. Thompson, a Caribbean historian, notes that 'within the last few decades more polemical literature in the form of monographs and journal articles, has been written on this subject than perhaps any other aspect of slavery.' A. O. Thompson (2002) *Unprofitable Servants: Crown Slaves in Berbice, Guyana 1803–1831* (Barbados: University of the West Indies), p. 3.
10. Quotes from K. Morgan (2000) *Slavery, Atlantic Trade and the British Economy, 1660–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 53; D. Richardson (2007) The ending of the British slave trade in 1807: the economic context. In: S. Farrell *et al.* (eds) *The British Slave Trade: Abolition, Parliament and People* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), pp. 127–140 (quotation on p. 133). D. B. Davis (2010), Foreword In: S. Drescher *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition*, 2nd edn (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press); Drescher; and S. Drescher (1997) Capitalism and slavery after fifty years. *Slavery and Abolition*, 18(3), pp. 212–227; also in Cateau and Carrington, *Capitalism*, 81–98.
11. D. Eltis (1987) *Economic Growth* (New York: Oxford University Press) esp. chs 1, 12, 13; and D. Eltis, S. D. Behrendt, D. Richardson and H. S. Klein. Voyages: the trans-atlantic slave trade database, <http://www.slavevoyages.org/tast/index.faces>.

12. J. E. Inikori (2002) *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England: A Study in International Trade and Economic Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press), p. 176, Table 4.2. Inikori's data for 1784–1856, are mainly derived from R. Davis (1979) *The Industrial Revolution and British Overseas Trade* (Leicester: Leicester University Press) appendix, Tables 57-64. It should be noted that Inikori's book is primarily a defense of another of Williams's arguments. *Capitalism and Slavery* asserted that the profits of the slave trade and plantation slavery were the principal sources of capital for the British Industrial Revolution. For a succinct response to this other thesis, see the article by D. Eltis and S. Engerman (2000) The importance of slavery and the slave trade to industrializing Britain. *Journal of Economic History* (March). In his Introduction, Inikori states that the main arguments concerning the economic basis of abolition have stood the test of time 'in spite of voluminous opposition,' (J. E. Inikori (2002) *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England : A Study in International Trade and Economic Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press), pp. 6–7. Although Inikori does not refer to abolition in the text, he emphasizes (p. 118) that the most dynamic part of English overseas trade was with the slave-based Atlantic economies right down to 1850 (i.e. the year of Britain's most decisive naval intervention against the slave trade outside its own empire (in Brazil). The views of the main participants in this debate are collected in B. L. Solow and S. L. Engerman (eds) (1987) *British Capitalism and Caribbean Slavery: The Legacy of Eric Williams* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
13. R. W. Fogel and S. L. Engerman (1974) *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery*, 2 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown).
14. R. W. Fogel (2003) *The Slavery Debates: A Retrospective, 1952–1990* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press).
15. D. Eltis (2000) *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (New York: Cambridge University Press).
16. D. B. Davis (2006) *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 298. Davis reminds us that, of course, the GNP was small by today's standards.
17. J. Adelman (2006) *Sovereignty and Revolution in the Iberian Atlantic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), pp. 56–58, and 90–100.
18. On the widespread American historiographical assumption of antebellum subscription to free labor superiority, see R. W. Fogel and S. L. Engerman (1989) *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery*, 2nd edn (Boston: Little, Brown), pp. 286–287. On European skepticism towards the proposition of free labor's inherently productive superiority, see S. Drescher (2002) *The Mighty Experiment: Free Labor versus Slavery in British Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press). For Western skepticism of its applicability in the European dominions of the Old World see, inter alia, F. Cooper (1996) *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press) ch. 2; and P. C. Emmer (1996) The ideology of free labor

- and Dutch colonial policy. In: G. Oostendie (ed.) *Fifty Years Later: Antislavery, Capitalism and Modernity in the Dutch Orbit* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press), pp. 207–222.
19. D. B. Davis (1965) *Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press).
 20. S. Drescher (1997) Capitalism and slavery after fifty years. *Slavery and Abolition*, **18**(3), pp. 213–221; D. B. Davis (2010) Foreword In: S. Drescher *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition*, 2nd edn (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press), p. xix.
 21. R. Anstey (1975) *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1760–1810* (London: Macmillan).
 22. Compare D. B. Davis (1975) *Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press) ch. 5, 8, 9, with D. B. Davis (2006) *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press) ch. 11.
 23. T. L. Haskell, D. Davis and J. Ashworth (1992) in what was ultimately published in a volume entitled, *The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism as a Problem in Historical Interpretation* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1992) Haskell's quotation is found on p. 107.
 24. *Ibid.*, p. 107.
 25. Both D. B. Davis (2006) *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press) and Williams devoted space to the slave uprisings in the French or British colonies but they were not at the center of their argument. Williams's final chapter, on 'The slaves and slavery' was a coda, added on to the manuscript at a late stage in the process of publication. For Davis's own shift of attention to mass mobilizations of both slaves and citizens in the ending of New World slavery see, his five chapters on slave resistance and Anglo-American abolitions in D. B. Davis (2006) *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 205–322.
 26. See R. Blackburn (1988) *Overthrow of Colonial Slavery* (London: Verso); and R. Blackburn (2006) Haiti, slavery and the age of the democratic revolution. *William and Mary Quarterly*, **63**(4), pp. 643–674; For varying assessments of Haiti's pivotal position in the history of emancipation, see E. D. (1979) Genovese. In: *From Rebellion to Revolution Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the New World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press); L. Dubois (2004) *Avengers of the New World: the Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press); and D. P. Geggus (2001) *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press).
 27. For an overview see, S. Drescher (2009) *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (New York: Cambridge University Press); For the most mobilizing decrees in the early 20th century, see M. A. Klein (1998) *Slavery and Colonial rule in French West Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press) ch. 10; P. E. Lovejoy and J. S. Hogendorn *Slow Death for*

- Slavery: The course of Abolition in Northern Nigeria, 1897–1936*; On the formal transition to empires of antislavery, see S. Miers (2003) *Slavery in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield) chs 2 and 3.
28. On the Atlantic slave trade, see, inter alia, S. Behrendt, D. Eltis and D. Richardson (2001) The costs of coercion: African agency in the pre-modern Atlantic world. *Economic History Review*, **54**(3), pp. 454–476; On a version of the Haskellian expansion of increasing identification with slaves as victims, via reports of shipboard revolts, see D. Eltis (2009) Abolition and Identity in the very long run. In: W. Klooster (ed.) *Migration, Trade, and Slavery in an Expanding World* (Leiden: Brill), pp. 227–257; In some slave revolts, in Demerara (1823) and Jamaica (1831) the leaders attempted to minimize violence in favor of negotiation, and succeeded in strengthening metropolitan abolitionism and accelerating the pressure for British emancipation. See D. B. Davis (2006) *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press), ch. 11; and S. Drescher Civilizing insurgency: two variants of slave revolts in the age of revolution. In: E. R. Toledano (2010) *Who Abolished Slavery? Slave Revolts and Abolitionism: A Debate with João Pedro Marques*, eds S. Drescher and P. C. Emmer (New York: Berghahn Books), pp. 120–132. There are now abundant histories of slave resistance in the Western hemisphere and a less developed scholarship on slave resistance in the East. E. R. Toledano (2007) *As if Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East* (New Haven: Yale University Press).
29. For the theory and practice of the two variants of abolitionism, see, S. Drescher (1999) *From Slavery to Freedom: Comparative Studies in the Rise and Fall of Atlantic Slavery* (New York: NYU Press), chs 2, 3, 5 and 6; and S. Drescher, *Abolition and its Aftermath* (London: Frank Cass) chs 8, 9 and 11. On the evolution of a new civil/political society, see C. Tilly (1995) *Popular Contention in Great Britain 1758–1834* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), pp. 197–204. For British abolitionism other relevant studies are, inter alia, S. Drescher (1987) *Capitalism and Antislavery: British Mobilization in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Oxford); S. Drescher (2009) History's engines: British mobilization in the age of revolution. *William and Mary Quarterly*, **66**(4), pp. 737–756; J. R. Oldfield (1997) *Popular Politics and British Antislavery* (Manchester: Manchester University Press); and C. Midgley (1995) *Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780–1870* (1992) (New York).
30. For the significance of popular mobilization in the United States, see inter alia, R. W. Fogel (1989) *Without Consent or Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery* (New York: Norton); D. N. Gellman (2006), *Emancipating New York: The Politics of Slavery and Freedom 1777–1827* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press); in the Spanish empire, see C. Schmidt-Nowara (1999) *Empire and Antislavery: Spain, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, 1833–1874* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press); R. Scott (1985) Explaining abolition: contradiction, adaptation and challenge in Cuban slave society. In: M. M. Friginals, F. M. Pons and S. L. Engerman (eds) *Between Slavery and Free Labor: The Spanish-Speaking Caribbean*

- in the Nineteenth Century (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press), pp. 25–53; and for Brazil, C. T. Castilho (2008) Abolitionism matters: the policy of antislavery in Pernambuco, Brazil, 1869–1888 (PhD dissertation, University of California Berkeley). On France’s less robust second metropolitan abolitionist movement and second slave emancipation, see L. C. Jennings (2000) *French Anti-Slavery: the Movement for the Abolition of Slavery in France, 1802–1848* (New York: Cambridge University Press).
31. See O. Pétré-Grenouilleau, (ed.) (2008) *Abolir l’esclavage: Un réformisme à l’épreuve (France, Portugal, Suisse), xviii-xixe siècles* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes); J.-P. Marques (2006) *The Sounds of Silence: Nineteenth-Century Portugal and the Abolition of the Slave Trade* trans. Richard Wall (New York: Berghahn Books); T. David, B. Etemad and J. M. Schaufelbuehl (2005) *La Suisse et l’esclavage des noirs* (Lausanne: Éditions Antipodes).
 32. I will not here attempt an extensive overview of the recent historical works on abolition in Africa and Asia. Its historiography is less systematically embedded in or contrasted to the Western historiographical tradition. But for an introduction, see O. Pétré-Grenouilleau (2004) *Les Traités négrières: Essai d’histoire globale* (Paris: Gallimard); G. Campbell, S. Miers and J. C. Miller (eds) (2008) *Women and Slavery*, 2 vols (Athens, OH); S. Miers (2003) *Slavery in the Twentieth Century* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press); M. Klein (ed.) (1993) *Breaking the Chains: Slavery, Bondage, and Emancipation in Modern Africa and Asia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press); E. R. Toledano (2007) Introduction. In: *As if Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East* (New Haven: Yale University Press); W. G. Clarence-Smith (2006) *Islam and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press); and E. Keren (2009) The transatlantic slave trade in Ghanaian academic historiography: history, memory, and power. *William and Mary Quarterly* 66(4), pp. 975–1000.
 33. S. Drescher (1985) In: D. Richardson (ed.) *Abolition and its Aftermath: The Historical Context* (London: Frank Cass, 1985) ch. 14.
 34. See S. L. Engerman (2009) Apologies, regrets and reparations. *European Review*, 17(3,4), pp. 593–610; and G. Oostendie (ed.) (1996) Public memories of the Atlantic slave trade in contemporary Europe. In: *Fifty Years Later: Antislavery, Capitalism and Modernity in the Dutch Orbit* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press), pp. 611–626.
 35. C. L. Brown (2006) *Moral Capital: The foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press); D. B. Davis (2006) *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press) ch. 12 which now emphasizes the moral dimensions of free labor.
 36. P. D. Morgan (2010) Ending the slave trade: a Caribbean and Atlantic context. In: R. Peterson (ed.) *Abolitionism and Imperialism in Britain, Africa, and the Atlantic* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press), pp. 101–128. Concluding his study of the economic context of British slave trade abolition David Richardson emphasizes ‘the more enlightened moral

- content of an emergent political economy and their own humanitarian belief.' D. Richardson (2007) *The ending of the British slave trade in 1807: the economic context*. In: S. Farrell *et al.* (eds) *The British Slave Trade: Abolition, Parliament and People* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), pp. 127–140, quotation on p. 140. For geographic extensions of the use of the moral dimension of antislavery see Peterson's Introduction and Jonathon Glassman's essay in the same volume: 'Racial violence, universal history, and echoes of abolition in twentieth-century Zanzibar,' *ibid* pp. 175–206.
37. R. W. Fogel (2003) *The Slavery Debates: A Retrospective 1952–1990* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), pp. 45–48; R. W. Fogel and S. L. Engerman (1989) Afterword. In: *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (Boston: Little, Brown), p. 289.
38. R. Blackburn (2006) Haiti, slavery, and the age of the democratic revolution. *William and Mary Quarterly*, **63**(4), pp. 643–674. For a fine synthesis of the British and Haitian paths to abolition see A. Hochschild (2005) *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves* (New York: Houghton Mifflin). The revalorization morality in accounting for the outlawing of slavery does not preclude studies of shifts and ambiguities in the understanding of 'morality' during the past century. See also K. A. Appiah (2010) *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen* (New York: W. W. Norton), ch. 3.

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Seymour Drescher is Professor of History at the University of Pittsburgh and a long-time student of the slave trade across the Atlantic, the history of colonial slavery and of abolition, on which he has published several books and numerous articles. His best-known work is *Econocide, British Slavery in the Era of Abolition* in which he questions the economic rationale behind the abolition of the British slave trade.