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ERIC WILLIAMS: BRITISH CAPITALISM AND BRITISH SLAVERY

SEYMOUR DRESCHER

I. THE MAKING OF *CAPITALISM AND SLAVERY*

Just over forty years ago the University of North Carolina Press published *Capitalism and Slavery*.¹ Its author was a young Trinidadian, Eric E. Williams, then teaching at Howard University in Washington, D.C. If one criterion of a classic is its ability to reorient our most basic way of viewing an object or a concept, Eric Williams's study supremely passes that test.

For more than a century following British slave emancipation in 1833–1838 the historical context of British slavery and its demise remained virtually unaltered. The Centenary of the Emancipation Act in 1933 was unabashedly celebrated by Britain as an imperial triumph in behalf of humanity. The *London Times* appropriately headlined its account of the principal festivities as “The Centenary of Wilberforce,” the *Liberator* who had died dramatically only days before the Emancipation Bill cleared its last hurdle in Parliament. Hull, the hometown of Wilberforce, was the logical center of commemoration. A great civic procession, led by the Lord Mayor and a host of dignitaries and descendants of Wilberforce, filed past his home, his grammar school, and his statue. The proceedings were solemnly consecrated by the Archbishop of York, to the accompaniment of choral hymns and spirituals. At the appropriate moment in the proceedings the flags of fifty nations unfurled before twenty thousand participants.²

For the celebrants at Hull, and for its scholarly interpreters, there seemed little ambiguity about either the historical concept of the original event or its long-range significance. Professors G. M. Trevelyan in the *Times* and Reginald Coupland at Hull agreed that the abolition was an act of the British nation which had lifted mankind to a higher moral plane and nurtured the religious and secular optimism of the Victorian Age. These historians riveted the national memory on that gallant band of evangelical “Saints” whose leader's remains had been

* Previously published in this series: Jonathan M. Wiener, “*Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, by Barrington Moore, Jr.,” *History and Theory* 15 (1976), 146–175; Hans Kellner, “Disorderly Conduct: Braudel's Mediterranean Satire,” *ibid.* 18 (1979), 197–222; Richard T. Vann, “The Youth of *Centuries of Childhood*,” *ibid.* 21 (1982), 279–297; Robert Harding, “Pierre Goubert's *Beauvais et le beauvaisis*: An Historian ‘*parmi les hommes*,’” *ibid.* 22 (1983), 178–198.

1. Eric E. Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1944).

2. See *The Times*, 29 July 1933, esp. 13–14.

honored with a funeral at Westminster Abbey. The beneficiaries of emancipation were also appropriately evoked — at the horizon of the event. The historians pointed first to the grateful slaves who had solemnly assembled on the hills on August 1, 1834 to greet the rising sun of freedom from the East, and to the natives of Africa, still unaware, in 1833, that half a century later British domination would bring the disappearance of slavery in their own “heart of darkness.” Such was the imperial historical vision of 1933.³

With the exception of the African postscript, the British historians of the 1930s had made no change whatever in the ideological context of Thomas Clarkson’s first history of abolition. A corrupted nation was roused by a band of prophets who gave humanity a decisive victory over avarice, materialism, and brutal exploitation. Here, if anywhere in the mainstream of the Anglo-American historiographical tradition, was a watershed in the Whig interpretation of history. Clarkson had actually provided a watershed map of pre-abolitionist history. It began with scattered rivulets of isolated thinkers in the sixteenth century broadening into a vast transcontinental sea of abolitionism at the end of the eighteenth.⁴ In the 1930s the story of slavery remained a progressive political narrative fleshed out with religious inspiration. Historians never wearied of recalling W. E. H. Lecky’s famous dictum that the crusade against slavery was probably “among the three or four perfectly virtuous pages comprised in the history of nations.”⁵ The story was dramatic, the motives clear, and the ending happy. In 1833 Britain had been made safe for reform, the West Indies for freedom, and Africa for penetration.

Now consider the situation half a century after that Centennial. On August 1, 1984, Prime Minister Forbes Burnham of Guyana told a rally of 5,000 in Georgetown that Britain had freed the slaves not for humanitarian reasons but because slavery had become unprofitable, risky, and expensive. Similar sentiments were voiced by the Minister of Sports Culture and Youth Affairs at an international conference on slavery held in Trinidad two days earlier.⁶ Perhaps the most dramatic evidence of the shift was registered in Hull. In 1983 the Sesquicentennial of Emancipation was concluded by an international conference on social change in the West Indies after slavery. There were no sessions devoted to British anti-slavery, nor to its statesmen, nor to its Saints, nor to its historians. There was

3. See *Ibid.*, also 24, 25 July; 2, 4, 5, 9 August 1933; also S. Drescher, “The Historical Context of British Abolition,” in *Abolition and Its Aftermath: The Historical Context, 1790–1916*, ed. David Richardson (London, 1985), 3–24.

4. Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the Atlantic Slave-Trade by the British Parliament* [1808], 2 vols. (London, 1968), fold-out attached to p. 258.

5. W. E. H. Lecky, *A History of European Morals* [1869], 6th ed. (London, 1884), I, 153; also cited in Roger Anstey, “The Historical Debate on the Abolition of the British Slave Trade,” in *Liverpool, the African Slave Trade and Abolition*, ed. R. Anstey and P. E. H. Hair, *Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire Occasional Series* 2, (1976), 157–166.

6. Howard Temperley, “Eric Williams and Abolition: The Birth of a New Orthodoxy,” in *Caribbean Slavery and British Capitalism: The Legacy of Eric Williams*, ed. B. L. Solow and S. L. Engerman (forthcoming, Cambridge University Press, 1987).

no paper on Hull's own Wilberforce. One was reminded of William Cobbett's little list of things that would not be missed when he was forced to flee England in 1816. At least where he was going, he noted, there would be no Wilberforces: "No Wilberforces! Think of *that!* No Wilberforces!"⁷

What happened in the intervening fifty years between the two commemorations is in no small measure because of *Capitalism and Slavery*. When an international conference on British Capitalism and Caribbean slavery was convened at Bellagio, Italy on the 150th Anniversary of British slave emancipation, it was appropriately focused on Eric Williams, and his major scholarly legacy.⁸

Among other things, *Capitalism and Slavery* marked Williams's personal declaration of independence from imperial tradition. He was born in the capital of Trinidad in 1911, the firstborn and pride of a post-office official. He grew up under a government not responsible to its population, in an economy not owned by its natives, and among inhabitants who were considered "hewers of wood and drawers of water" for their foreign overlords.⁹

Because of his exceptional talents as a student, young Eric ascended rapidly through a very narrow Trinidadian educational channel which culminated in a scholarship to Oxford. To be groomed for such a rare and coveted opportunity was to be made continuously aware of the distance between one's formal training and one's colonial environment. Eric was given a thoroughly English education. As he later observed in his autobiography, "this was only another way of saying that it was un-West Indian. My training was divorced from anything remotely suggestive of Trinidad and the West Indies."¹⁰ Not until years after he left Trinidad was West Indian history included in the island's secondary school curriculum.

At Oxford he at first continued his upward trajectory, gaining a "first" in history and his doctorate in 1938. Yet he also experienced one supreme moment of disappointment, when he failed to win a prize Fellowship at All Souls College. Whether, as Williams himself noted, he had not qualified because of his ranking in the examinations, or because color or colonialism had some part in the rejection, he retrospectively concluded that no "native," however acculturated, could then fit into All Souls, or any other Oxford senior common room.

A number of Williams's most salient traits as an historian are evident from his account of these years. He already found Oxford's emphasis on political nar-

7. R. Coupland, *Wilberforce: A Narrative* [1923] (New York, 1968), 422. On the 1983 conference, see the three volumes in the *Legacies of West Indian Slavery* series, papers given during the "William Wilberforce 150th anniversary celebrations at the University of Hull, July, 1983"; *Abolition and its Aftermath: The Historical Context 1790-1916*, ed. David Richardson; *Dual Legacies in the Contemporary Caribbean: Continuing Aspects of British and French Dominion*, ed. Paul Sutton; *The Caribbean in Europe: Aspects of the West Indian Experience in Britain, France and the Netherlands*, ed. Colin Brock (all, London, 1985). A fourth volume, *Out of Slavery: Abolition and After*, ed. Jack Hayward, containing a series of lectures given at Hull during the winter and spring of 1983, includes three lectures dealing with Wilberforce, but the relative displacement of Wilberforce and the Saints by the West Indians at the climax of the commemoration is dramatically clear.

8. Solow and Engerman, *British Capitalism*.

9. Eric Williams, *Inward Hunger: The Education of a Prime Minister* (Chicago, 1969), 11.

10. *Ibid.*, 35.

rative far less interesting than glimpses of human development gleaned from the great creations of art and literature: "The suffering unleashed by the Industrial Revolution found poetic expression in Shelley's 'Song to the Men of England'" and "to see Versailles was to see *Le Roi Soleil*; it was also to feel the deluge which came after him."¹¹ Second, despite Williams's later immersion in political life, he retained a staunchly long-term perspective on the human condition. He saw humanity as having passed through a series of discrete stages. Each of its great cultural manifestations was symbolic of the age or stage in which it appeared. Hamlet's dilemma, for example, summed up the transition from feudalism to individualism. Williams shared this historical frame of reference with both his Whiggish and Marxian contemporaries.¹²

At Oxford he was also drawn to an aspect of British colonial history which was of enormous significance to his own people, West Indian slavery and its abolition. For Williams the traditional idealistic interpretation was doubly unsatisfactory. Historiographically, it minimized the role of slavery and of the Caribbean colonies in British economic history, especially the industrial revolution. It likewise minimized the role of British economic history in the abolition of plantation slavery and the slave trade. Politically, it allowed imperial historians to justify their twentieth-century empire in the afterglow of a nineteenth-century crusade. The British, wrote Coupland, the historian laureate of the centenary, would "do justice to Africa because they are heirs and guardians of a great tradition." To question this "great tradition" of antislavery was to undermine the moral legitimation of British imperial overlordship.¹³

Surprisingly, in view of his scathing remarks on Coupland's scholarship in *Capitalism and Slavery* and in his autobiographical reminiscence, Williams's 1938 thesis was couched as a very modest addition, rather than as a challenge, to the prevailing English interpretation. "The Economic Aspect of the Abolition of the West Indian Slave Trade and Slavery" was more limited in scope than was the later book. It dealt only with the abolitionist period, 1780–1833. More strikingly, it lacked those broad and incisive statements about the overriding importance of economic forces and motives which are the *leitmotif* of *Capitalism and Slavery*. Perhaps this was owing to the fact that Coupland was one of his thesis examiners. In any event, the dissertation explicitly cautioned against reading a preponderance of economic motives into the story of abolition. Williams supported the prevailing idealistic interpretation in accounting for the actions of the abolitionist leaders and of the British public. "In the humanitarian and religious excitement," he wrote, "there was nothing in any way savoring of economic considerations. The people were moved by the conviction that slavery was a disgusting and immoral system and had to go." According to Howard Temperley, there was virtually no hint of economic determinism in the 1938 thesis.¹⁴

11. *Ibid.*, 42–43.

12. *Ibid.*, chap. 4.

13. *Ibid.*, 49–50.

14. This paragraph is based on the research and analysis of Howard Temperley, who compares the 1938 thesis with the 1944 book in his essay "Eric Williams and Abolition."

Perhaps it was not his Oxford days but his subsequent period at Howard University and in the West Indies which stimulated him to break irrevocably with both the idealistic frame of reference and the narrative framework of the Clarkson-Coupland tradition and to follow the suggestive interpretation of his fellow Trinidadian C. L. R. James in the *Black Jacobins*, which also appeared in 1938. A comparison between Williams's thesis and his 1944 version might make a fascinating point of departure for a scholarly study on the sources of *Capitalism and Slavery*.

In any event, there is little doubt that the examiners would scarcely have recognized the book. Its first half was entirely new, tracing the rise and development of the British Atlantic slave system from the early seventeenth century through the American Revolutionary War, where the dissertation had begun.¹⁵ The second half also included a new chapter on the role of slaves and slavery, which had also not been in the dissertation. If the second half did not entail much new research, its format was transformed. It was not only a highly condensed version of the original thesis, but the narrative had given way to a structural reorganization. The period 1783–1833 was now treated as a single unit of time and divided into topical chapters: “The Development of British Capitalism,” “The New Industrial Order,” and so on. Within the age of abolition, the diachronic historian became a synchronic social scientist.

The author's attraction to the imagery of creative literature was also given freer stylistic rein in 1944. Historical figures were ushered onto the scene like characters from a novel: “Wilberforce with his effeminate face appears small in stature”; [he] was familiar with all that went on in the hold of a slave ship but ignored what went on at the bottom of the mineshaft.” Regions, too, were metaphorically personified. The sugar islands were alternatively a Rip Van Winkle drugged by mercantilism, a Humpty Dumpty falling irretrievably, or an Oliver Twist always asking for more. Williams clearly had more fun writing the book in Washington than he had writing the thesis in Oxford, and he considerably lightened the reader's burden by coining sentences as dramatic as his characters: “Slavery was not born of racism; rather, racism was the consequence of slavery.”¹⁶

Despite its focus on Britain and its Caribbean colonies, *Capitalism and Slavery* was initially more widely noticed in America than in Britain, where the *Times Literary Supplement* alone gave it a formal review. Almost all commentators recognized the study as a lively addition to the historiography of slavery and the empire. The enthusiasm of reviewers ranged from Elizabeth Donnan's guarded compliments in the *American Historical Review* to Henry Steele Commager's

15. *Idem*. Some of the concepts which were to appear in the first part of *Capitalism and Slavery* must have been formulated very soon after Williams wrote his thesis. See Williams, “The Golden Age of the Slave System in Britain,” awarded a prize by the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, in New Orleans (October, 1939), and published in the *Journal of Negro History* 25 (1940), 60–106. Williams's devaluation of the humanitarian factor in the abolition process began at least as early as 1942. See Williams, “The British West Indian Slave Trade after its Abolition in 1807,” *Journal of Negro History* 27 (1942), 175–191.

16. *Capitalism and Slavery*, 7, and *passim*.

hosanna to *Capitalism and Slavery* in the *New York Herald Tribune*, as the most lucid, penetrating and original work in its field.¹⁷

Most reviews began with a brief assenting summary of Williams's account of the contribution of slavery to early British capitalism, what Donnan called a "familiar story well told." Only William Gee, in the *American Sociological Review*, objected to Williams's effusive account of the contribution of coerced black labor to capitalism. Like other early commentators, Gee seemed as much disturbed by the tone as by the substance of the argument, and on moral rather than on statistical or logical grounds. It pained Gee that an "eternally wrong" institution such as slavery, which had left such poverty and degradation in its wake, should be raised to the rank of indispensable contributor to modern capitalism.

Others focused on the more novel and contentious part of the book, where the abolition process was presented as illustrative of raw economic determinism. Commager wholeheartedly endorsed Williams's assessment of the British abolitionists as the "unconscious mouthpiece" of the "new industrial interest." Denis Brogan, in the *TLS*, also accepted Williams's argument for the predominance of capitalist interests over moral indignation, although some (unidentified) parts of Williams's brief struck Brogan as being based on bold guesses rather than on demonstrated causal links.

Initially most reservations about *Capitalism and Slavery* stemmed from its unrelenting debunking of noneconomic factors and motives. Some commentators were puzzled by Williams's dismissal of the abolitionists as not only causally superfluous but as hypocritical. Donnan wondered why humanitarians should be treated as hypocrites just because economic interests happened to coincide with their moral perceptions. G. R. Mellor soon echoed this line of criticism, including Donnan's implicit acceptance of moral and economic conjuncture, in his *British Imperial Trusteeship, 1783–1850*.¹⁸

For Frank Tannenbaum in the *Political Science Quarterly*, however, *Capitalism and Slavery's* unrelenting economic determinism posed a much broader threat to the study of slavery in the Americas. He feared that Williams's acerbic and often cynical reductionism would divert scholarship from the whole range of racial, psychological, ideological, and moral variables which were significant in the history of New World slave societies and their very different paths to abolition. Although Williams had prefaced his monograph by pointedly emphasizing that it was not a study of the institution of slavery, Tannenbaum, like Donnan and Mellor, was more disturbed by what was left out of the study or implied by it than what was included. He took issue with Williams's assessment of the significance of race in the establishment of Caribbean slavery, but he offered no challenge to Williams's major theses, that slavery had risen to amazing impor-

17. See reviews by: Wilson Gee, *American Sociological Review* 10 (1945), 566–567; Elizabeth Donnan, *American Historical Review* 50 (1945), 782–783; H. S. Commager, *Weekly Book Review, New York Herald Tribune Books* (4 February 1945), 5; as well as in *Book Week, The Nation*, and *Commonweal* (February, 1945), *Booklist* (June, 1945), and by Denis Brogan, *Times Literary Supplement* (26 May 1945), 250.

18. G. R. Mellor, *British Imperial Trusteeship, 1783–1850* (London, 1951), 118–120.

tance under the aegis of a benign British mercantilism until the American Revolution, and had thereafter fallen even more dramatically under the hostile attacks of *laissez-faire* capitalists.¹⁹

The most widespread note of dissent therefore involved a defense of the humanitarian motives of the abolitionists, based on a rejection or devaluation of economic determinism as an adequate interpretative frame of reference. No initial reviewer seems to have questioned the empirical grounding of Williams's alignment of economic forces or his timing of the rise and fall of British slavery. In the absence of either sustained affirmation or systematic critique, Williams's theses percolated rather than flowed into historiographical discourse for reasons which would make an interesting study in its own right.²⁰

19. See Frank Tannenbaum, "A Note on the Economic Interpretation of History," *Political Science Quarterly* 61 (June, 1946), 247–253; and his "The Destiny of the Negro in the Western Hemisphere" *ibid.*, 1–41. Tannenbaum also chided Williams for extending his scorn for humanitarian sentimentality to the point of impugning the scholarship of his former teachers. For Williams's response see *British Historians*, 224–232. See also reviews in *Commonweal* and the *Nation*, and Eugene D. Genovese, "Materialism and Idealism in the History of Negro Slavery in the Americas," *Journal of Social History* 1 (1968), 371–394.

20. S. Drescher, "The Decline Thesis of British Slavery since *Econocide*," in *Slavery and Abolition* 6 (May, 1986), 3–24, esp. 4. After reading this essay Stanley Engerman wondered whether the impact of *Capitalism and Slavery* would have been as great had Williams published his study in 1904 instead of 1944. Without analyzing all the probable components of a reasonable guess, we actually have a bit of evidence of the response (or absence thereof) to a detailed 1905 economic interpretation of the abolition of the British slave trade: Frank Hochstetter's *Die wirtschaftlichen und politischen Motive für die Abschaffung des britischen Sklavenhandels im Jahre 1806–7* (Leipzig, 1905). *Die wirtschaftlichen . . . Motive* was dismissed by Coupland as a work of the "perfidious Albion" school of German historiography. Frank Klingberg was willing to accord a contingent role to economic conjuncture, and even praised Hochstetter's study, in a footnote, as "the best treatment of the economic motives for abolition." See *The Anti-Slavery Movement in England* (New Haven, 1926), 130 n. Hochstetter's study made so little general impression on Anglo-American historiography that Williams did not mention it in the bibliography of *Capitalism and Slavery*. For a brief reference to parallels between Hochstetter and Williams, see Roger Anstey, "The Historical Debate on the Abolition of the British Slave Trade," 159–160. Anstey acknowledged Hochstetter's interpretation in *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1767–1810* (London, 1975), xxi.

When the traditional school had something to say about the economics of the colonial slave system it usually followed its abolitionist predecessors in describing British slavery as risky, inefficient, and debt-ridden. It was a "lottery," constantly threatening its participants with bankruptcy. See W. L. Mathieson, *British Slavery and Its Abolition, 1823–1838* (London, 1926), 11. The trouble with this "perennial ruin" theme was that it was perennial. As a result, its precise causal role in the rise of slavery and the triumph of abolitionism could not be identified. This had not mattered very much to historians uninterested in the role of economic forces and motives. They readily admitted that there might have been economic reasons for abolition. Such an "appeal to expediency, however, was or *should have been* superfluous and irrelevant." See Mathieson, *England in Transition 1789–1832* (London, 1920), 7 (my emphasis). The question struck them as so inherently a moral one that the "appropriate" grounds of motivation could be read back into the narrative without the least professional discomfort.

Black scholarship was insufficiently institutionalized in 1904 to offer a perch for a book like *Capitalism and Slavery*. An outstanding scholar like W. E. B. DuBois might have saved Williams from Hochstetter's virtual oblivion, but it is dubious whether *Capitalism and Slavery* could have entered Anglo-American historiography as a dominant paradigm before the World Wars and the Great Depression had shattered the ideology of European moral progress. Fifty years before Williams, DuBois's own history of American slave trade suppression recognized the existence of strong economic motives but did not overtly challenge the Anglo-American tradition in the way Williams's did. The abolition

There was, however, a measurable impact. One has only to compare Coupland's account of the abolition of the slave trade in the *Cambridge History of the British Empire* in 1940 with J. D. Hargreaves's discussion of the subject in *The New Cambridge Modern History* in 1965. In Coupland's account all economic forces were aligned against abolition and only noneconomic forces took a part with it. Twenty-five years later, referring specifically to Williams, Hargreaves was content merely to affirm that "national virtue" had combined with and perhaps accelerated the underlying economic decline of the Afro-Caribbean complex. The idealism of Coupland was clearly in retreat from its historiographical monopoly. The obvious difference between the two versions lay less in the substantive assignment of causal weight to economic and noneconomic factors than in Hargreaves's assumption that contemporary economic trends, which clearly favored abolition, now had to be given more explicit recognition.²¹

It should be emphasized that the mere inclusion of economic forces and motives in the history of British abolition was no novelty in 1944. Abolitionist historiography had always incorporated the economic motives of the slave interests in discussing the legislative process, especially in the battle over the slave trade. For Frank Klingberg in the 1920s, as for Roger Anstey fifty years later, a peculiar economic conjuncture had played a role in the passage of British foreign slave trade abolition in 1806. This conjuncture was embedded in a context. "Without abolitionist leadership, however, there would have been failure."²² The humanitarians were the structural constant, and economic interests and motives were variables. Williams's innovation was to offer a history of abolition in which the structural and conjunctural roles of capitalism and humanitarianism were reversed.

The immediate response to *Capitalism and Slavery* among black and radical scholars was less muted. In the *Journal of Negro History* Carter G. Woodson drew attention to Williams's intense factuality and hailed the work as "the beginning of the scientific study of slavery" in international perspective. He rightly anticipated its strong appeal to those who were aligning themselves against British

of slavery was, after all, the peerless example of that ideology. See also David Brion Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress* (New York, 1984), especially part three, chapter 3.

21. Compare R. Coupland, "The Abolition of the Slave Trade," in *The Cambridge History of the British Empire*, II, *The Growth of the New Empire, 1783-1870*, ed. J. H. Rose, et al. (Cambridge, 1940, 1961, 1968), 188-216; with J. D. Hargreaves, "Relations with Africa," in *The New Cambridge Modern History*, VIII, *The American and French Revolutions, 1763-1793*, ed. A. Goodwin (Cambridge, Eng., 1965), 236-251. In his chronological sequel to Coupland's chapter on abolition in the *Cambridge British Empire*, W. L. Mathieson's chapter, "The Emancipation of the Slaves, 1807-1838" (309-336), made emancipation a question of the economic interests vs. the abolitionist passions. The same was true of Paul Knaplund's brief observations on the subject in his chapter on "Colonial Problems and Colonial Policy, 1815-1837," in the same volume (291). The limits of Williams's impact on the *New Cambridge Modern History*, however, can be seen in H. G. Schenk's chapter, "Revolutionary Influences and Conservatism in Literature and Thought" in vol. IX, *War and Peace in An Age of Upheaval, 1793-1830*, ed. C. W. Crawley, 91-117. Schenk's account of abolitionism was entirely within the Clarksonian-Coupland tradition.

22. Klingberg, *The Anti-Slavery Movement in England*, 129-130.

imperialism.²³ Marxists might have been more concerned than Woodson and the *TLS* reviewer that Williams's argument lacked an explicit Marxian formulation despite its unrelenting economic determinism. Nevertheless, *Capitalism and Slavery's* factual phalanx, its focus on the Caribbean, and its economic debunking quickly made it a bible among colonial students in Britain. By the 1950s Williams's theses were already "orthodox" at the University College of the West Indies. They became integral elements of the "Caribbean School" of social scientists and historians. They had an honored place in political discourse and touristic literature as well.²⁴

With the publication of *Capitalism and Slavery*, Williams's own intellectual perspective on the subject was set. His later major historical works, *British Historians and the West Indies* (1964) and *From Columbus to Castro: The History of the Caribbean 1492-1969* (1970), elaborated his criticisms of British historiography and extended the major theses of *Capitalism and Slavery* to Caribbean history as a whole.²⁵

II. THE ARGUMENT

Capitalism and Slavery is a study of the relationship between British economic development on the one hand and the British Afro-Caribbean slave system on the other. Williams leaves no doubt about the fundamental causal flow in that relationship. Down through the third quarter of the eighteenth century, capitalism and the capitalists uniformly supported their overseas creation and were supported by it. Following slavery's continuous decline in the wake of the American Revolution, the capitalists regrouped to destroy first the British slave trade and then British colonial slavery.²⁶ Moreover, these two phases of slavery, its rise and

23. Carter G. Woodson, review in the *Journal of Negro History* 30 (1945), 93-95. For a similar emphasis on the triumphant "factuality" of *Capitalism and Slavery*, see Johnson U. J. Asiegbu, *Slavery and the Politics of Liberation, 1787-1861: A Study of Liberated African Emigration and British Anti-Slavery Policy* (New York, 1969), 157.

24. See Hilary Beckles, "Down But Not Out: Eric Williams' 'Capitalism and Slavery' after Nearly 40 Years of Criticism," *Bulletin of Eastern Caribbean Affairs* (May/June, 1982); Temperley, "Eric Williams"; Elsa V. Goveia, "New Shibboleths for Old," *Social and Economic Studies* 10 (1964), 53; Williams, *Inward Hunger*, 93-94; C. Duncan Rice, "Humanity Sold for Sugar: The British Abolitionist Response to Free Trade in Slave-Grown Sugar," *Historical Journal* 13 (1970), 403. By the mid-1970s, two major bibliographical surveys regarded *Capitalism and Slavery* as the point of departure for modern historical scholarship on the British Caribbean. See W. K. Marshall, "Review of Historical Writing on the Commonwealth Caribbean since 1940," *Social and Economic Studies* 24 (1975), 271-307; W. A. Green, "Caribbean Historiography, 1600-1900," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 7 (1977) 509-530. For tourists, Air Jamaica makes Williams's point succinctly: "When the sugar industry began to decline, slavery was finally abolished." "Jamaica A to Z," in *Skywritings* (February, 1986), 42. David Brion Davis kindly pointed out this citation to me. For a survey of earlier criticism see the comments by Roger Anstey, John Hargreaves, and Duncan Rice in "The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade from West Africa" ed. Christopher Frye. Mimeographed proceedings of a seminar held in the Centre of African Studies, University of Edinburgh, 4 and 5 June 1965. For subsequent criticisms see S. Drescher, *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition* (Pittsburgh, 1977), 1-5, 226-227 and note 33.

25. *British Historians and the West Indies* [1964] (London, 1972); *From Columbus to Castro: The History of the Caribbean, 1492-1969* (New York, 1970).

26. *Capitalism and Slavery*, 120.

its fall, corresponded to two major phases of British political economy—mercantilism before 1776 and *laissez-faire* after.²⁷ Finally, postemancipation developments in British capitalism accounted for the diminution of sympathy for the freed blacks during the generation after the end of Negro Apprenticeship in 1838.

These were Williams's central and most revolutionary hypotheses. The historiographical mainstream had always considered each "stage" of the rise and fall of slavery to be dominated by different sets of forces and motives. It was universally acknowledged that slavery had been sustained by those seeking to maximize individual, class, and national wealth. But slavery, it was also believed, had been opposed and overthrown by precisely those who had been most detached from profit-maximizing interests: humanists, philosophers, and religious evangelicals. In the traditional account, abolition had marked a shift of political power from the interested to the disinterested. The two were deemed as different in their origins, motives, and prevailing ideologies as the second British empire was from the first.²⁸

Capitalism and Slavery, with its insistence on the priority of economic motives at every significant juncture, broke most decisively with the tradition which emphasized the primacy of the humanitarian tradition in the destruction of slavery. To disregard the humanitarian tradition completely, wrote Williams, "would be to commit a grave historical error and to ignore one of the greatest propaganda movements of all time."²⁹ But even the focus and intensity of this propaganda movement was dictated, he emphasized, by the contemporary balance of British investments in the East Indies and trade with the Americas. *Capitalism and Slavery* calibrated the economic basis of shifting abolitionist policy at the end of the eighteenth century as carefully as it calibrated the shift of British shipping interests from indentured British islanders to enslaved Africans in the mid-seventeenth century.³⁰

Armed with his paradigm, Williams came to some dramatic conclusions about the relationship of capitalism to both the rise and fall of slavery. In the first half of the book he argued that the West Indies became the hub of the British empire. The Afro-American economy was shifted to the center of world history. Slavery had provided nothing less than the export demand and trade network for the British industrial revolution.³¹ He statistically demonstrated the "amazing value" of the British Caribbean slave colonies by showing their rising share of total British overseas trade during the first three quarters of the eighteenth century. Even more boldly, Williams declared that British colonial slave production, fueled by the lucrative slave trade, "provided one of the main streams of that accumulation of capital in England which financed the Industrial Revolution." The same con-

27. *Ibid.*, chap. 7; *Columbus to Castro*, 280–285.

28. See above, notes 21–22, as well as Anstey, "Historical Debate," 157–159.

29. *Capitalism and Slavery*, 178.

30. *Ibid.*, chap. 1, 7–9.

31. *Ibid.*, chaps. 2–5. See also *Inward Hunger*, 94.

clusions about the slave trade and industrialization were reiterated twenty-five years later in *From Columbus to Castro*.³²

This first argument of *Capitalism and Slavery* ultimately triggered a flurry of investigations. To date, the overwhelming majority of recent scholars have challenged Williams's hypothesis on the centrality of the African slave trade to British industrialization. Insofar as one reads Williams strictly, the critics on statistical grounds seem to have had the better of the argument. These scholars have concluded that the slave trade was not inordinately profitable to imperial investors, and that its profits simply could not have been large enough to be considered the or even a "major contributing factor" in British capital formation. A few individuals in Lancashire might have funneled slave trade profits into the new manufacturing sectors, but they were no more than incidental in financing British economic growth. Second, the overall "profitability" of the slave system to Britain has been hotly disputed by economic historians, using neoclassical models of analysis. Some even conclude that the slave colonies were a net capital loss to the metropolis. Finally, as Hilary Beckles observes, in terms of general impact most historians of British industrialization from Eric Hobsbawm to Phyllis Deane have given no more than a passing glance to the slave trade hypothesis of *Capitalism and Slavery*.³³

A less controversial if less novel hypothesis of the first half of *Capitalism and Slavery* deals with motivations of the actors and the government rather than with the effects of slavery. Regarding motives, almost all historians before and after Williams have agreed that economic calculations were overriding in stimulating the creation and maintenance of the British Atlantic slave system. If anything, slavery scholarship after *Capitalism and Slavery* has added new strength to the role of economic variables and models. Beginning with the famous essay on the profitability of slavery by Conrad and Meyer in 1958, scholars developed ever more refined models to explain the economic mechanisms behind transitions and fluctuations of bound labor up and down the Americas. Gemery and Hogendorn's recent designation of the slave trade as an "uncommon market" is meant

32. *Capitalism and Slavery*, 52–55, and statistical tables, 225–226; *From Columbus*, 148.

33. Stanley L. Engerman, "The Slave Trade and British Capital Formation in the Eighteenth Century: A Comment on the Williams Thesis," *Business History Review* 46 (1972), quotation on 441. See also Roger T. Anstey, "Capitalism and Slavery: A Critique," *Economic History Review*, 2d ser. 21 (1968), 307–320; Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, chap. 2. Robert Paul Thomas and Richard Nelson Bean, "The Fishers of Men: The Profits of the Slave Trade," *Journal of Economic History* 34 (1974), 885–914; S. Drescher, "Le 'declin' du système esclavagiste britannique et l'abolition de la traite," transl. C. Carlier, *Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 31 (1976), 414–435; David Richardson, "Profitability in the Bristol-Liverpool Slave Trade," *Revue Française d'Histoire d'Outre-Mer* 62 (1975), 301–308; and Pierre H. Boulle, "Marchandises de traite et développement industriel dans la France et l'Angleterre du XVIIIème siècle," *ibid.*, 309–330. For recent nuanced defenses of Williams, see William A. Darity, Jr., "A General Equilibrium Model of the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic Slave Trade: A Least-Likely Test for the Caribbean School," *Research in Economic History* 7 (1982), 287–326. Barbara L. Solow, "Caribbean Slavery and British Growth: The Eric Williams Hypothesis," *Journal of Development Economics* 17 (1985), 99–115; and various essays in *British Capitalism*. For summary accounts of British economic history's reaction to Williams's industrialization hypothesis, see John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard, *The Economy of British America, 1607–1789* (Chapel Hill, 1985), 40–43, and Beckles, "Down But Not Out."

only to refer to the fact that the traded commodities were human beings, not that the buyers, sellers, or owners of slaves behaved differently from those in other markets or capitalist enterprises. As economic men, their actions as well as their profits were far more “normal” than postabolitionist generations cared to admit. Williams evidently was also accurate in stressing that coerced labor in the Caribbean had often been too narrowly identified with black slavery, which allowed too much weight to racial variables in what was basically an economic phenomenon.³⁴

The most revolutionary section of *Capitalism and Slavery* was its second half, dealing with the “fall” of British slavery. We have seen that the published version of Williams’s treatment of the abolition process was revolutionary even with regard to his own Oxford thesis. In 1944 Williams explained the destruction of slavery by the very economic groups, forces, and motives which had been developed by the system and finally turned against it. Here, Williams launched a two-pronged argument, linking the demolition of slavery to changes in the British imperial economy, and applicable to world capitalism as a whole.

The first prong stressed changes in the economic relationship between the British metropolis and the slave colonies after American independence. Until then, all vested interests on the metropolitan side had united in support of colonial slavery. After 1783, a “momentous year,” each of those interests successively came out against monopoly and the West Indian slave system. This was because henceforth the colonies simply failed to sustain their assigned role as producers and customers. On the colonial side the fatal year was 1776, the year of Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* and Thomas Jefferson’s *Declaration of Independence*: “Far from accentuating the value of the sugar islands, American independence marked the beginning of their uninterrupted decline. . . .” Moreover, even in terms of planter profits, “the West Indian economic system was also so unprofitable that for this reason alone its destruction was inevitable.”³⁵

The second prong of Williams’s “decline thesis” related to a rapid “shift” in British political economy. American independence undermined Britain’s “mercantilist” policy and the economic rationale that had sustained it. Since the slave colonies were imperial monopolies, the attack on monopoly became an attack on slavery and vice versa. Planters and mercantilists had ganged together and were hanged together. The demise of slavery went hand in hand with the rise

34. See, among others, D. W. Galenson’s survey of the literature in *White Servitude in Colonial America* (New York, 1981), 141–168; R. W. Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery* (forthcoming), Chapter VI: “Population and Politics,” (kindly sent by the author in typescript). On the timing of the switch to African slave labor, see R. N. Bean and R. P. Thomas, “The Fishers of Men: The Profits of the Slave Trade,” *Journal of Economic History* 34 (1974), 885–914; H. A. Gemery and J. S. Hogendorn, “The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Tentative Economic Model,” *Journal of African History* 15 (1974), 225; R. C. Batie, “Why Sugar? Economic Cycles and the Changing of Staples in the English and French Antilles, 1624–54,” *Journal of Caribbean History* 10 (1976), 8–9; H. McD. Beckles, “The Economic Origins of Black Slavery in the British West Indies, 1640–1680: A Tentative Analysis of the Barbados Model,” *Journal of Caribbean History* 16 (1982), 36–56; and *The Uncommon Market: Essays in Economic History of the Atlantic Slave Trade* ed. H. A. Gemery and J. S. Hogendorn (New York, 1979).

35. *Capitalism and Slavery*, *passim*, esp. 39, 120, 135, 154; S. Drescher, *Econocide*, chap. I.

of *laissez-faire*. Industrial capitalism which had been nurtured through the umbilical cord of colonial slavery therefore cut the constriction on its further growth.

At a less global and structural level *Capitalism and Slavery* offered a detailed recipe of economic motives and conjunctures for all major successes or setbacks in the abolition process. The American War, the apogee and revolution of slave St. Domingue, and the imperial “swing to the East” all had clearly allotted roles in the story. But the clinching argument culminated in the ultimate power of the marketplace: “Overproduction in 1807 demanded abolition; overproduction in 1833 demanded emancipation.”³⁶ Each and every tightening of the abolitionist noose could be traced, without any recourse to shilly-shallying idealism, to the interplay of economic forces and motives. The “brilliant band” which led one of the “greatest propaganda movements of all time” added sound and fury but, in the end, signified nothing in explaining the timing or direction of British policy.³⁷ The closing chapters, on the “Saints” and on the slaves, are codas to a symphony of economic determinism.

Although some objections on details or putative abolitionist motivation were periodically raised, Williams’s structural argument and its account of the major economic conjunctures corresponding to the dismantling of the slave trade and of slavery became deeply ingrained in British historiography. By 1964 the author of a foreword to a second edition of Coupland’s history of antislavery would assert only that Coupland and Williams were both right because each was writing about different things.³⁸ Both the “decline” of the West Indies and the “rise” of *laissez-faire* after 1776 were readily incorporated into the Anglo-American mainstream because each of these concepts was already accepted as a separate element of colonial history. Coupland and the Imperial School had made the American Revolutionary War the dividing line between the first “mercantilist” and the second “laissez-faire” British empire. Williams’s West Indian decline thesis relied on *The Fall of the Planter Class in the British West Indies*, a detailed account by Lowell Ragatz, to whom Williams dedicated his own study. Ragatz also placed his dividing line between the “rising” and “falling” planter class just prior to the American Revolution. Williams gave these two sequences of British historiography an ingenious twist.³⁹ The combined weight of periodization and trajectory seemed to have provided *Capitalism and Slavery* with a hard core of simple “facts.”

From the mid-1970s, however, a new generation of scholars began to undermine the major structural and empirical bases for the argument in the second half of *Capitalism and Slavery*. The late Roger Anstey’s study of the Atlantic slave trade took issue with Williams’s analysis of parliamentary motives. In *Economic I* offered a reinterpretation of the economic relationship between Britain and its slave colonies. Even using Williams’s own empirical measure of value, the timing of West Indian decline was erroneous. The West Indies’s significance

36. *Capitalism and Slavery*, 37.

37. *Ibid.*, 178.

38. R. Coupland, *The British Anti-Slavery Movement*, with new introduction by J. D. Fage (London, 1964), xix-xxi.

39. See the *Cambridge History of the British Empire*, II, v; *Capitalism and Slavery*, 124-145.

to imperial trade continued long after 1776. Other scholars challenged the Ragatz-Williams assertion of a dramatic decline in sugar plantation profitability in the period following American independence. The economic decline of the West Indies therefore followed rather than preceded the political measures which curtailed British slavery's capacity for expansion and competitiveness.⁴⁰

The second or ideological prong of Williams's account, the Coupland-Williams dating of the swing to the "new" political economy of *laissez-faire*, was also vigorously disputed. Anomalies abounded when one actually tested Williams's putative correlation between antislavery and antimonopoly. For almost a century, while Britons paid more for their colonial sugar than they would have in the international market, slavery remained secure. Between 1790 and 1833, precisely during the period when slavery came under attack, British sugar prices approached or were actually below foreign market prices. The biggest price gap between British and foreign sugars therefore occurred only *before* and *after* the attack on the slave system. Paradoxically, *emancipation* made the Caribbean colonies prime targets during the antimonopoly crusade of the 1840s. So none of the major premises in the Williams paradigm were performing their assigned roles during the abolitionist era.⁴¹

In a sense, the critiques of the second half of *Capitalism and Slavery* mirror those addressed to the first part. Just as Williams inflated the rising slave trade's direct weight in the industrial revolution, so he accelerated the fall of the West Indies in accounting for the demise of slavery. Neither in terms of profits, productivity, or political economy did the West Indies account for the timing and pace of abolition. As for the metropolis, "contrary to a long-standing belief, the slave trade was not overthrown by powerful industrial interests cramped by colonial restrictions. Manufacturers were neither influential enough to overthrow the trade nor driven by economic logic to make the attempt."⁴²

III. THE LEGACY

What then is the significance of *Capitalism and Slavery* in the perspective of more than forty years? One alternative always at hand is to treat *Capitalism and Slavery*, either inspirationally or patronizingly, as an exercise in history-as-rhetoric rather than history-as-scholarship. "Written in white-hot rage," wrote one scholar, "a capacity for which helps to explain its author's subsequent career in politics and statesmanship, *Capitalism and Slavery* is a classic of English political litera-

40. See Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, pt. I; Drescher, *Econocide*, *passim*.

41. Drescher, "Decline Thesis," 10–11, 22n., 26; Temperley, "Eric Williams," 18–20, 34 n. 27, 28.

42. P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, "The Political Economy of British Expansion Overseas, 1750–1914," *Economic History Review*, 2d. ser. 33 (1980), 463–490, 473 n. See also *Econocide*, chap. 10; S. Engerman, "Slavery and Emancipation in Comparative Perspective: A Look at Some Recent Debates" *Journal of Economic History* 46 (1986), 317–339, esp. 330–333; D. Eltis, *The Ending of the Atlantic Slave Trade: Economic Growth and Coercion* (forthcoming, New York, 1987).

ture and a remarkable achievement in the genre of the polemic.”⁴³ Attention is thereby directed towards Williams’s stature as a pioneer of “Third World” scholarship. *Capitalism and Slavery* was, after all, along with C. L. R. James’s *Black Jacobins*, one of the historiographical manifestoes of anti-imperialist scholarship on the eve of decolonization. This strategy takes advantage of Williams’s remarkable blend of colorful prose and cynical economic determinism which inspired a whole generation of West Indian social scientists and historians. It does show us why the book is more than a classic of scholarship.

At the same time it leaves open the strong suspicion that *Capitalism and Slavery* is something *less* than a classic of historical scholarship. There is perhaps a subtle implication in such praise that a “Third World” book need not or should not be judged by first-rate standards. This frame of reference undervalues the impact of *Capitalism and Slavery* in one world where Williams felt most proud to have it stand—the republic of letters.

Therefore one cannot overlook the fact that Williams’s ideological commitments and rhetorical devices complicated and weakened his historical interpretation of British abolition in ways that have been effectively analyzed by Howard Temperley.⁴⁴ To understand the wider impact of *Capitalism and Slavery*, however, one must look beyond those hypotheses and conclusions which have turned out to be untenable or dubious at best, and consider the new directions Williams charted for scholarly investigation. His insistent focus on the role of extra-European coercive labor and trade systems helped to inspire broader “dependency” and world-economy theories of economic development. If the Williams hypothesis about rising slavery and early British industrialization is quite vulnerable to statistical analyses, quantitative methods alone cannot address other potentially important questions about the strategic role of the eighteenth-century colonial trades in providing jobs for otherwise underemployed British workers. Overseas markets provided incentives towards cost-reducing technologies, and colonial trades stimulated certain institutional changes in capital mobilization. There were no lengthier or more complex chains of credit than those evolved in the Euro-Afro-Caribbean triangular exchanges. Jacob Price cautiously suggests that the colonial sector “may well have been the hothouse of the British economy, where progressive institutional innovations were forced decades or generations ahead of the times they ‘normally’ appeared elsewhere in the economy.”⁴⁵

43. P. E. H. Hair, review of *Econocide*, in *International History Review* 1 (1979), 567–569. Alan Bullock uses an analogous argument in his introduction to Williams’s *British Historians*.

44. Temperley, “Eric Williams,” 12–28.

45. Jacob Price, “Colonial Trade and British Economic Development, 1660–1775,” *Lex et Scientia* 14 (1978), 101–126. See also E. Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York, 1974); Wallerstein, *The Modern-World System, II: Mercantilism and the Consolidation of the European World-Economy 1600–1750* (New York, 1980); A. G. Frank, *World Accumulation, 1492–1789* (London, 1978); Frank, *Dependent Accumulation and Underdevelopment* (London, 1978); and S. Amin, *Accumulation on a World Scale: A Critique of the Theory of Underdevelopment*, transl. Brian Pearce (New York, 1974). For an incisive critique of this hypothesis see Patrick O’Brien, “European Economic Development: The Contribution of the Periphery,” *Economic History Review*, 2d. ser. 35 (1982), 1–18, as well as the discussion by Wallerstein and O’Brien in *ibid.*, 36 (1983), 580–585.

Thus slavery's contribution to capital accumulation may have been much less dramatic than Williams claimed but may have played a role nevertheless.

Capitalism and Slavery was even more directly responsible for pioneering the systematic investigation of the relation of slavery's fall to British industrialization. Even among those who accept the most far-reaching critiques of Williams's analysis remain attracted to the hypothesis that it is surely no accident that abolition occurred during a period of accelerated British economic development.⁴⁶ However, instead of emphasizing the interplay of capitalist high rollers in the manner of *Capitalism and Slavery*, some historians have been sifting through the sociocultural development of Britain in search of a new ideological base for antislavery. They now look for some *combination* of humanitarian ideology and political economy to explain the rise and triumph of abolitionism. Howard Temperley has extrapolated the victory of abolition from metropolitan capitalism's triumphant free labor ideology. David Brion Davis, viewing the same period, finds the source of abolitionism even more in the stresses than in the successes of industrial capitalism. During the "Age of Revolution" abolitionism presumably acted as a hegemonic "displacement" from metropolitan problems at home towards problems overseas. Thomas Haskell has attempted to locate the origins of antislavery in the expanding market relationships of the eighteenth century.⁴⁷

A second post-Williams school has concentrated on socioeconomic developments among the West Indian slaves themselves, especially in their evolving forms of resistance, although this approach seems to owe more to the inspiration of C. L. R. James than of Williams.⁴⁸ A third approach to abolition continues Williams's focus on the politicoeconomic evolution of the industrializing metropolis. This approach, however, is less concerned with Williams's captains of industry than with the most neglected sector in *Capitalism and Slavery*, the metropolitan masses.⁴⁹ They made the British abolition process distinctive from the ebbing of slavery in the ancient Mediterranean, in Medieval Europe or in early modern Russia.

46. Pieter C. Emmer, review of *Econocide*, in *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Filologie en Geschiedenis* 57 (1979).

47. Howard Temperley, "Capitalism, Slavery and Ideology," *Past and Present* 75 (1977), 94–118, and "Anti-Slavery as a Form of Cultural Imperialism," in *Anti-Slavery Religion and Reform: Essays in Memory of Roger Anstey*, ed. Christine Bolt and Seymour Drescher (Folkestone/Hamden, 1980), 335–350; David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (Ithaca, 1975), and *Slavery and Human Progress* (New York, 1984). Davis more clearly delimits his "hegemony" thesis in "Capitalism, Abolitionism, and Hegemony," forthcoming in *British Capitalism*. See also Thomas Haskell, "Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility," *American Historical Review* 90 (April, 1985), 339–361, and *ibid.* 90 (June, 1985) 547–566, and note 6, above.

48. See Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Slave Rebellions in the British West Indies* (Ithaca, 1982); Hilary Beckles, *Black Rebellion in Barbados: The Struggle against Slavery, 1627–1838* (Bridgetown, 1984); David Barry Gaspar, *Bondsmen and Rebels: A Case Study of Master Slave Relations in Antigua* (Baltimore, 1985).

49. See James Walvin, "The Public Campaign in England against Slavery," in *The Abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade*, ed. David Eltis and James Walvin (Madison, 1981); S. Drescher, "Public Opinion and the Destruction of British Colonial Slavery," in *Slavery and British Society*, ed. J. Walvin (London, 1982), 22–48; Drescher, *Capitalism and Anti-Slavery: British Mobilization in Comparative Perspective* (London and New York, 1987).

The achievement of *Capitalism and Slavery* is that Williams made it impossible for historians ever to return to the posture of splendid moral isolation which characterized the story of British slave emancipation for more than a century. Williams's foremost aim was to insist as never before on the *banality* of the history of slavery. Even Roger Anstey, the most outstanding laborer in the traditional vineyard, distilled a scenario for the abolition of the slave trade which involved a specific economic conjuncture to explain the passage of at least one portion of the legislation. Anstey's own detailed work on the slave trade reiterated that abolitionists could sometimes be as *ökonomistisch* and *realpolitisch* as their enemies.⁵⁰

As long as British abolition was regarded as *sui generis*, and part of the history of morals rather than a social institution and part of an evolving society, it was more likely to be treated commemoratively than analytically. *Capitalism and Slavery* is therefore a classical demonstration of the value of even deliberately simplistic history. It would be no gain whatever to the historiography of slavery if the apparent weakness of the economic links forged by Williams himself left slavery scholarship fragmented into clusters of specialists with no common framework. Williams cast his story in a global economic setting and that context must be retained and reworked.

Williams's most enduring message was that abolition could not have triumphed independently of economic developments linked to industrialization. This simple hypothesis has already proven to be more fruitful than those offered by historians in the century before him. Historians can never again suspend disbelief in the existence of three or four perfectly virtuous pages in the history of nations. They may indeed fall into the opposite trap and confuse the banality of most human actors, whether for evil or for good, with their collective human achievements.

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50. Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, chap. 15.