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BOOK REVIEW

Slavery, Capitalism and the Industrial Revolution, by Maxine Berg and Pat Hudson. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023. $35.00 Cdn, Hardcover. ISBN-13 978-1-5095-5267-9. Pages vi-ix, 1-288.

Reviewed by Robert Marshall[1]

In 1944 Eric Williams published *Capitalism and Slavery* with Andre Deutsch in Europe after initially being rejected by another publisher, Frederick Warburg, in London.[2] The book explicitly connected the slave trade and plantation economies as a significant factor in Britian's capitalist and industrial transformation. It was originally submitted as a dissertation to St Catherine's College, Oxford entitled *The Economic Aspects of the Abolition of the Slave Trade* where Williams had completed his DPhil in History in 1938.[3] His dissertation subsequently formed the foundation for the 1944 book when he was a professor at Howard University, a private, federally chartered historically black research university in Washington, D.C.[4] Over the years the book has been reprinted in various editions.

For example, in 2013 it was republished under the title *British Capitalism and British Slavery* by the Brooklyn-based Diasporic Africa Press to better reflect more accurately what the publishers saw as Williams' argument. The book, however, would not be published in the U. K. until 2022 when it was finally released as a Penguin Modern Classic. At the time of its original publication in 1944 *Capitalism and Slavery* had challenged the then dominantly held view that the abolition of slavery, on 25 March 1807 when King George III signed into law the Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade banning trading in enslaved people in the British Empire, had been for humanitarian reasons. Williams' counter argument about the root causes of slavery's abolition may well have contributed to it being overlooked by readers and academics, and even rejected for publication.[5]

Contra the humanitarian argument, Williams' *Capitalism and Slavery* presented two significant hypotheses: first, the institution of slavery and the trade flows it engendered were the catalyst of the Industrial Revolution in England. And second, that the British abolished the slave trade not for philanthropic reasons but more accurately because the slave colonies of the British West Indies had become less profitable. Williams rejected the argument that the half-

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[1] Robert Marshall is a Lecturer in the Department of Politics and Public Administration, Toronto Metropolitan University. Email: rmarshal@torontomu.ca

[2] In his forward to the 3rd edition of the book, William A. Darity Jr wrote that in fact the book had been rejected by 6 different British publishers. (Williams, 1994, x).

[3] It would be published belatedly in 2014.

[4] Williams (1943) had published an article a year earlier, which largely laid out the arguments of his forthcoming book.

[5] In his 1969 autobiography Willims wrote that "Warburg, Britain's most revolutionary publisher…told me: 'Mr. Williams, are you trying to tell me that the slave trade and slavery were abolished for economic and not humanitarian reasons? I would never publish such a book, for it would be contrary to the British tradition.'" (p. 52-53).

century of public campaigning by the anti-slavery movement had little to no effect on the abolition of slavery.[6] Williams argued that abolition had been due to changing economic policies in the U.K. imperial economy and he posited that the balance of British investments were being redirected to the East Indies sugar fields and trade with the Americas.

Slaves in the colonies (excluding areas ruled by the East India Company) were not freed until 1838, but only after slave-owners, rather than the slaves themselves, received compensation.[7] It has been suggested that the role of the slave trade to British industrialization had long been ignored by noted historians of the industrial revolution such as Eric Hobsbawn or Phyllis Dean.[8] What Berg and Hudson do suggest is that "…the role of slavery in the process of industrialization and economic transformation…has been generally underestimated by historians" (p. 7).[9] However, this argument was not unknown. As long ago as 1867, Karl Marx saw slavery as being the 'critical pillar' for the rise of British industry.[10]

At first glance this somewhat lengthy introduction may seem out of place, but it helps serve to pivot to the book under review as its authors engage with Williams' argument by updating and extending it. Williams' thesis has subsequently become known as the "Decline Thesis" (see for example Drescher, 2008). Both authors are Professors Emeritus of History. Berg at the University of Warwick, and Hudson at Cardiff University. Berg is very well known for her many works on the role of technology in the first industrial revolution (see for example 1980, 1994) whereas Hudson is best known for her work as an economic historian focusing on the economic, social, and cultural aspects of the industrialization process (see for example 1992, 2002) Both are Fellows of the British Academy.

The clearest expression of the book's thesis statement is: "This is an economic history of industrializing Britian with its slave roots examined and acknowledged. State policies, colonial ambitions and slavery brought Europe, the African continent, North America and a small group of islands in the West Indies into a dynamic of capitalist development that proved critical to the making of the industrial revolution, and that also influenced the nature of British capitalism in the longer term" (p. 12).

The argument they present, while largely in agreement with Williams, is at the same time somewhat more nuanced: "We do not argue that slavery *caused* the industrial revolution." (p. 7, emphasis added) But they do make several significant claims. Chiefly, that Britain was able to gain disproportionately from the slave trade and plantation colonies compared with her European rivals. So, at one level their thesis is quite straight forward: "Britian's early industrial revolution, which has defined her economic, political and cultural identity ever since, was

[6] Berg and Hudson would follow Williams' omission as well.
[7] The debts taken on by the British state to pay compensation to slave holders would not be paid off until 2015. Compensation of £20 million was paid by the British state to over 45,000 slave owners.
[8] A 2010 edited collection on 'reconceptualizing' the industrial revolution failed to make note of the Williams thesis. See Horn et al 2010.
[9] All citations with just a page number(s) are taken from Berg and Hudson.
[10] See Marx's Capital, vol 1. on the "Genesis of the Industrial Revolution."

inextricably *bound up* with the slave trade and colonial plantations" (p. 3 emphasis added). But at a deeper level they also set out to make an important corrective to the historical record of Britian's economic trajectory that has been largely hidden, or ignored, by mainstream orthodox interpretations: "The extent of British trade in enslaved people, her brutal exploitation of plantation labour and the wealth that these activities brought to British families and wider society have been obscured in favour of a more heroic island story of early economic improvement and cultural benevolence" (p. 3).

Importantly, the authors also argue that gains from slavery accrued not just to a small elite group of merchants, financiers or wealthy planation owners, but also to the larger British population by providing, amongst other things, employment income in many industries and their respective workforces throughout the nation which were dependent upon, or derived from, the products of the slave economy. And whose wages helped to facilitate a culture of consumerism amongst the working class, and eventually amongst an emerging middle class, contributing to the economic expansion of Britian. The livelihood of millions of Britons depended upon slavery in shipbuilding, manufacturing, retailing, military service (especially the Royal Navy) and finance. Further, benefits were accrued through "cheap" consumer goods that were the products of slave labour: sugar, tea, coffee, rice, tobacco, and raw cotton that found its way into mass-produced clothing. This point is in fact somewhat questionable but will be addressed later in the review.

In articulating such an argument, Berg and Hudson have joined the ranks of with those who have produced studies on the origins of British capitalism which gives greater awareness and significance to the impacts of slavery and race: "Historians are also now addressing this subject as part of fresh conceptual frameworks: new histories of consumption and commodity flows; new forms of global history; studies of globalized labour regimes, including modern slavery…to write new histories of capitalism that give central significance to slavery and race" (p. 5).

As a part of this 'fresh conceptual framework' the book's methodological scaffolding avails itself of new research tools which provided Berg and Hudson with an opportunity to access digitalized and searchable primary sources databases. For example, the Legacies of British Slavery Database (LBS, n.d.), which made it possible to trace the British owners of plantations and their linkages to other businesses, industries, and investments. The Transatlantic Slave Trade Database (TSTD, n.d.), which made it possible to record all slave ships and their human cargoes. Other online databases, such as the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure (CGHPS, n.d.), which documented occupational statistics, were employed making it possible for the authors to consider the impact of the slave-based Atlantic trade on many pioneering industrial cities and regions. They also used a wide range of literatures which by their own admission (p. 7). is not usually considered together. [11] For example, they

[11] Their bibliography is 34 pages in length.

included studies which documented consumption habits and tastes, changes to accounting and business management practices, and changes in national and international finance.

Slavery, Capitalism and the Industrial Revolution engages with a theoretical approach that has come to be known as the New Histories of Capitalism (NHC). It is the subject of the book's concluding chapter. Readers of this journal may well have some passing familiarity with the NHC approach if they have read books, for example, by either Charles Post (2012) or David McNally (2020). While not suggesting that either author consciously or knowingly engaged in a NHC approach, both books could easily be said to fall within that mold. Initially NHC has been responsible for a sizable body of research initially contending that the institution of slavery was a central building block of American capitalism, for example, Beeker and Rockman, 2018. But heterodox scholars of the British industrial revolution have started to avail themselves of this framework and have used it to explore and rewrite the nation's industrial historiography and slavery's place within it. Historians pursuing this approach connect the sources of modern economic growth in markets, property rights and money with the part played by violence, coercion and war; especially as these connect to slavery (p. 210).

If I had any substantial criticism of the book, it is one of chapter organization. I believe that this concluding chapter could in fact have better served its readers as an introductory chapter by setting up the theoretical framework before presenting the evidence used to support the book's thesis within this newer, larger debate on the origins of capitalism. A slightly different, but not insignificant critique, may be that the book's thesis could just as easily have been explained by employing a "varieties of capitalism" approach. Afterall, the book basically engages in a micro-economic analysis by focusing on the British experience and only briefly makes mention of other major European colonial holdings and slave trading nations such as France, Portugal or Spain. This raises the important historical question of why those nations did not industrialize around the same time as Britain or why their economies matured differently? What made Britain's trajectory of growth different in comparison? Did those nations not also accumulate profits from their slave holdings and to what purposes were they used? Berg and Hudson develop an argument that is very British-specific, but it might have been useful to ask the same questions of other nations to see if they too were characterized by the same variables and if not why? To achieve this, a more macro-economic analysis may have been warranted. Perhaps the subject of a follow-up companion volume?

Nevertheless, by employing an NHC approach, Berg and Hudson advance three arguments about the relationship between slavery and British industrialization. First, a dynamic was created by new consumer tastes and markets for what they call 'plantation groceries' – especially sugar but also tobacco, rum, molasses, coffee, and cacao alongside other staples. Employing a backwards and forwards linkages approach, they note how these products also affected an array of manufactured products from snuff boxes and pipes to sugar basins and tongs. Glassware, porcelain, silverware and ceramics could also be added to this list of goods contributing to this consumer revolution. The effect, they suggest, was to promote a shift from an economy based upon household self-sufficiency to one based upon wage labour resulting in changing household and consumer behaviour which became a significant part of the British industrialization process.

Second, they examine the 'ecological' relief provided by the food and raw materials produced by enslaved labour. "Britian's slave colonies in the America's contributed food calories that helped to maintain the nutrition of the rapidly expanding population at the end of the eighteenth century as domestic food supplies struggled to keep pace" (p. 217). But more than just providing necessary calories to the British labor force, Berg and Hudson also calculate how the contribution of imported colonial sugar and cotton alone, from what they label "highly productive colonial ghost acres", more than likely saved upwards of 8.1 million domestic acres which effectively doubled Britian's land resources by the 1830s allowing for that land to be used for other purposes (pp. 218-219). And third, they examine the role of the British state via its support of the expansion of transcontinental financial and military power through aggressive mercantilism and warfare which served to extend colonial holdings and trading influence. "Britian's trade was enforced by high tariffs and shipping restrictions backed up by naval power, colonial acquisition and warfare to thwart other European trading nations" (p. 221). The British state's actions also contributed to the transformation of financial, legal, and commercial practices resulting in changing public and private finances. At the same time, the authors note how the expectations, and then realizations, of profits from the slave trade 'underpinned' aspects of the 18th century evolution of the national debt, taxation, the formation of Bank of England policy and trade in government stock.

Financially the slave trade was a boon to the largely London-based financial sector and banks such as Barclays. But also, to the insurance sector as well as other shipping services. Historic venerable companies such as Lloyd's of London, founded in 1689, can trace its roots back to this period as it sold policies which provided maritime and slave trade insurance. Lloyd's had a monopoly on maritime insurance related to the slave trade and maintained it until the abolition of the slave trade in 1807. In his book Williams had noted that "Lloyd's, like other insurance companies, insured slaves and slave ships, and was vitally interested in legal decisions as to what constituted 'natural death' and 'perils of the sea'" (1944, p. 104-105).

Port cities such as Bristol, Liverpool,[12] and Glasgow as well as other industrial cities such as Manchester and Birmingham benefited, growing massively on the back of slave trade profits. Inikori (2002) has argued that before the advent of the slave trade, England's West Yorkshire, the West Midlands, and South Lancashire were poorer regions but buoyed by slavery's economic stimulus they became wealthy and industrialized. Notable manufacturers saw benefits from aspects of slavery. For example, Thomas Chippendale's London-based company produced highly polished rococo style furniture made from mahogany timber harvested by slaves. Other elite furniture makers in Lancaster also traded in slaves and imported large amounts of mahogany for their businesses (p. 218).

[12] Liverpool was called "the greatest slave-trading port in the Old World" by the end of the 18th century by Williams.

Williams' book largely focused on the role of the British establishment (such as the slave owing lobby group the West India Interest) and other key institutions of the British state such as the royal family and the Church of England who supported and financially benefited from slavery. As has been noted by historian Michael Taylor, the West India Interest was not simply supported by the establishment, it was the establishment (see Taylor 2020a, and 2020b). Anita Rupprecht has argued that "One of the most memorable aspects of *Capitalism and Slavery* is Williams's naming of prominent financiers, manufacturers and commercial merchants who profited from the Atlantic slave trade and plantation slavery and were also key mediators in the development of British industrialisation" (Rupprecht, 2007, p. 8). Berg and Hudson build upon Williams' argument and evidence by expanding upon the historical record to describe who benefited from the slave trade. Chapters 3 and 5, as well as throughout other parts in the larger book, document slavery's many beneficiaries not just the financiers, manufacturers, and commercial merchants who profited from the Atlantic slave trade and its plantation economy.

As they noted: "Over a period of three centuries, millions of British experienced the Atlantic slave system through running plantations, managing and working in shipping, dock yards, trading in plantation commodities and enslaved peoples, employment in commercial finance, processing and manufacturing with Atlantic raw materials and in consuming colonial produce" (p. 212). This ultimately allowed, they argue, for Britian to disproportionally gain from the slave trade and from plantation economies. Plantation output shifted consumer tastes and spurred on new manufacturers and methods of production. It was important to the transformation of manufacturers and technology that 'drove' the industrial revolution. And finally, the slave trade, colonialism and the plantation economy helped to bring about a revolution in financial services that the authors believe set the scene for Britian's future global role (p. 12).

Whie arguing that financial gain was made from the slave trade the authors stumble in my opinion when they do not seem to acknowledge the costs to the British state's fiscal position and by extension the impact on taxpayers. In other words, they only see the benefits which accrued to Britian and not the costs. So, while acknowledging that between 1606 and 1815 Britain was at war for 70 of the 155 years with most of those wars involving trading rights and colonial possessions there is no discussion asking whether or not that was necessarily been the economic stimulus they envision? Indeed, their own words may contradict their argument when they note that "…tax revenues rose making the British second only to the Dutch as the most heavily taxed population in Europe" (p. 21).

So, did the gains outweigh the costs? Again, I think they undercut their own argument by admitting that the compensation paid to former slave owners was really in fact a "…subsidy from British wage earners and consumers of basic commodities to ex-slave owners." (p. 195) But two pages later they suggest that the compensation money "…aided the mid-Victorian investment boom in British and overseas railways and public utilities. Some was invested in industry" (p. 197). Keynes before Keynes? They also do not seem to acknowledge that costs not only accrued generally to taxpayers but also to the very consumers of commodities such as sugar for which they paid above market prices because of a protected home market.

If the authors set out to reimagine slavery and the transformation of Britain in the book, Chapter 9 provided them with the opportunity to consider ‘slavery after slavery’ and the legacies of race and inequality. This chapter may very be the heart and soul of their amassed arguments and evidence as they examine the economic, social and political legacies of slavery that remain in Britain today: “Slavery thus had a long-term material influence on the British economy and a lasting social and cultural impact on the distribution of power and influence in British society. It also greatly affected inequalities of wealth and income based on class, geography and race” (p. 227). The few caveats aside, *Slavery, Capitalism and the Industrial Revolution* could very well serve to reignite a debate started many years ago by Eric Williams. And this unto itself is a good thing. Whether intentional or not, their book may also provide support for those making arguments in favour of reparation, compensation and restorative justice to the descendants of slaves.

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