

***Ending the “Inhuman Traffic”:
The Role of Humanitarianism in the British Abolition Movement***

The British Empire ended the slave trade in 1807 after over twenty years of bitter debate. In the 200 years since the Abolition Act, an equally heated debate has played out between historians attempting to interpret the motives of those who supported and those who opposed abolition. The main fracture in the historiography of the antislavery movement has developed between those who believe that humanitarian interests were responsible for abolition and those who believe that the slave trade was ended for the benefit of the British economy. This historiographical debate can be linked to the antislavery movement by looking at the relationship between economic and humanitarian arguments made by advocates of abolition. Abolitionists, who were committed to humanitarianism, used economic arguments to strengthen their own testimonies, and to facilitate legislation against the slave trade.

Economic and humanitarian concerns were both integral to the final decision to end the slave trade, but the early abolition movement was supported primarily by liberals and evangelicals who were interested in humanitarianism. Thomas Clarkson was an Anglican minister as well as the most active and recognizable advocate of British abolition. The position shared by Clarkson and his abolitionist colleagues was that the slave trade was morally reprehensible and had to be stopped at all costs. This predominantly humanitarian movement struck a chord with many Britons and caused a rapid increase in popular support for abolition. Despite growing discontent toward Britain's role in the slave trade, members of Parliament feared that abolition would be ruinous to the British economy. As antislavery legislation became a primary goal of abolitionist leaders like Clarkson, it became necessary to address the economic repercussions that abolition would inflict on the Empire. Clarkson's writings, which initially stressed the immorality of slavery, shifted to concentrate on economic issues regarding the slave

trade. This shift can also be seen in the arguments of other advocates of the abolition movement. Making abolition appear to be a desirable policy for the British government was necessary to convince parliamentary opposition that ending the slave trade would not profoundly injure Britain's dominant global position. Abolitionists were primarily motivated by humanitarianism, rather than economy, but they were forced to employ economic arguments to achieve their goal of ending the slave trade.

Historiography of Abolition

Within the field of British historiography there exist two distinct interpretations of the abolitionist movement. The traditional argument credits the humanitarian movement as the most important contributing factor to the end of the slave trade. This idea has been promoted by British scholars since 1807. The humanitarian influence on abolition was widely accepted by historians throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth. The concept of social change based on a Protestant religious movement fit well with the overarching theme of liberalism and tolerance that pervaded preexisting British historiography.

The second important interpretation was popularized in the mid twentieth century by historians who were discontented with such a simple explanation of abolition. If earlier historians, who established the Caribbean colonies as the most important part of the thriving British economy, were correct, then it seemed difficult to believe that the government would so readily end the profitable slave trade. This led many puzzled historians to ask why the preeminent slave trading power would make such a radical and rapid policy change if it stood to make no apparent material gain.

A controversial idea, which was referred to by some historians as the decline theory, was used to answer these questions regarding abolition. Lowell Joseph Ragatz was one of the first

historians to develop this theory.¹ Ragatz's *The Fall of the Planter Class in the British Caribbean* stated that the British economy was becoming less focused on West Indian trade, beginning in the late eighteenth century. The loss of the American colonies in 1783, combined with the increasingly industrialized British economy, caused a decline in the significance of the sugar trade. This decline made the perpetuation of the slave trade costly to the British Empire. The Empire used humanitarian interest as an easy way to end the trade. The theory formed by Ragatz gained greater popularity with the rise of Marxist history in the mid twentieth century. One of the most well known historical works in this model was Eric Williams' *Capitalism and Slavery*.² Williams used the same ideas as Ragatz to prove that abolition was achieved in the interest of economic prosperity rather than humanitarianism.

Slavery which was once the lynchpin for a prolific economy became a weak and broken system that had to be shed for the future global dominance of the British Empire. Historians who supported this theory saw the decline in the profitability of the slave trade and the West Indian economy as a transition from a monopoly based, mercantilist economy, into a more modern capitalist, free-trade system.

The wave of historical works that looked at abolition as a solely economically motivated decision was countered by a series of criticisms. A number of historians including Seymour Drescher, David Brion Davis, and Roger Anstey all published works that rejected the Marxist view of the abolition movement.³ Although the economy was important to the interests of the British parliament, it was impossible to completely rule out the importance of humanitarian

¹ Lowell Joseph Ragatz, *The Fall of the Planter Class in the British Caribbean, 1763-1833*, (New York: The Century Co., 1928).

² Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, (New York: Russell & Russell, 1961).

³ Roger Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition: 1760-1810*, (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1975). David Brion Davis, *The Problem With Slavery in Western Culture*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966). Seymour Drescher, *Capitalism and Anti-Slavery: British Mobilization in Comparative Perspective*, (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1986).

influence on an issue of social change. They argued that religious and humanitarian forces for abolition were important in gaining popular pressure against the slave trade. Humanitarian interests motivated members of parliament to push for abolition legislation.

Not only did these historians simply claim that abolitionists were motivated by humanitarianism, but many of them questioned the fact that the Caribbean sugar economy, at the time of abolition, was in decline at all. Seymour Drescher disputed this key aspect of the decline theory in his work *Econocide*.⁴ Drescher argued that decline theorists misunderstood the British economic indicators, and that the West Indian economy was actually in a state of growth when the slave trade was abolished.

Some of the most recent scholarship on abolitionism has tried to find a middle ground between these two interpretations. Christopher Leslie Brown recently wrote *Moral Capital*, which criticized the simplistic claim that the abolition movement derived from selfless evangelism, but also rejected the idea that abolition resulted only out of economic convenience. The antislavery movement could not have developed without a general belief that the slave trade was morally wrong, but this belief could not fully develop into an abolition movement until antislavery gained political significance. Brown cited the American Revolution as the defining moment that allowed this development. The American Revolution brought issues of individual political rights to the fore within the British Empire. It also separated the British from its important American colonies, which relied heavily on the slave trade, making abolition more politically feasible. This synthesis, combining economic viability with genuine humanitarian

⁴ Seymour Drescher, *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977).

concern, allowed the abolition movement to grow.⁵

The Early Humanitarian Movement

Early antislavery literature indicated that abolitionists were motivated primarily by humanitarianism. This literature was primarily aimed at the general population, with the goal of educating the masses on the horrors of slavery and the slave trade. As the movement grew and legislation against the slave trade became a primary goal, it became necessary for abolitionists to address political and economic issues that regarded the slave trade. Much of the later abolitionist literature appealed to the interests of the British government rather than the strictly moral interests of some of their popular supporters. Abolitionists often discussed the economy instead of the treatment of slaves, especially when it was likely that their words would be heard by Parliament, because politicians were more concerned with economic issues than humanitarian issues.

Early interest in abolition began in the Quaker communities of England and America. In 1783, British Quakers appointed a twenty-three member committee to consider issues regarding the slave trade. Six of the members broke off to form their own group separate from the original Quaker committee. This more radical group which included young Quaker activists, Joseph Woods, Samuel Hoare, and George Harrison, was discontented with the more conservative leadership of the Quaker society.⁶

Joseph Woods published *Thoughts on the Slavery of the Negroes* in 1783.⁷ This work criticized the British government for being exceptionally harsh on West Indian slaves. Woods claimed that the French treated their slave population with greater compassion by sponsoring

⁵ Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism*, (Chapel Hill, NC: North Carolina Press, 2006).

⁶ Judith Jennings, *The Business of Abolishing the British Slave Trade: 1783-1807* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass and Co. Ltd, 1997), 23.

⁷ Joseph Woods, *Thoughts on the Slavery of the Negroes*, (London: J. Phillips, 1785).

programs for gradual manumission and by allowing slaves to have days of rest aside from Sunday. They were also more diligent in Christianizing their slaves. Woods also attacked the generally accepted idea of African inferiority by presenting the eloquent prose of freed slaves like Ignatius Sancho and Phyllis Wheatly.⁸ The theme of compassion that was present in Woods' work was based on his strong religious convictions. He presented his evidence against the slave trade based on the foul treatment of slaves, rather than the economic issues that surrounded the abolition debate.

Thomas Clarkson, an Anglican reverend, gained recognition from other abolitionists due to his Cambridge dissertation, written in 1786.⁹ *An Essay on Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Particularly the African*, was a prize winning publication that helped unite him with leading Quaker abolitionists. The essay was one of Clarkson's first publications and it was clear that his intentions were to capitalize on the humanitarian, rather than the political, interests behind abolition.

In the preface to the essay, he praised the "exertions of the Quakers in the cause of humanity and virtue".¹⁰ Clarkson criticized those who supported the slave trade for putting personal interests above the basic rights of man. Clarkson outlined the horrors of the slave trade by calling on his readers to imagine themselves as potential slaves. He began his story by writing, "We shall suppose ourselves, in short, on the continent of Africa", and proceeded to paint a vivid picture of the experience of being captured by slave traders.¹¹ His story depicted the horrors of the middle passage, during which, slaves were subjected to deplorable conditions, and families were torn apart upon reaching their destination. Clarkson made sure to note that though

⁸ Woods, 14.

⁹ Thomas Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Particularly the African*, (London: 1786).

¹⁰ Clarkson, *Slavery and Commerce*, xii.

¹¹ Clarkson, *Slavery and Commerce*, 117-118.

the scene, “may be said to be imaginary, [it] is strictly consistent with fact.”¹² He then provided readers with factual information on the conditions of slavery and the slave trade. One fifth of the slaves captured died in the middle passage, and the slaves that did reach their destination typically worked sixteen hour days. Clarkson discussed the great frequency at which Caribbean slaves endured physical hardships, such as the loss of limbs or other critical injuries at the hands of their owners.¹³

Thomas Clarkson’s dissertation and Joseph Woods’ *Thoughts* were meant to describe the evils and injustices of the slave trade. Both of these men were inspired by a devout dedication to Christianity. They attacked the moral justifications of the slave trade, but both of them ignored the economic interests of the British government. Their writings grew in popularity amongst the religious and intellectual communities, but could not persuade the wealthiest members of society, who had a personal interest in the proliferation of the slave trade.

1787 was an important year in the abolition movement. Thomas Clarkson marked the importance of this year in his book, *The History of the Abolition of the Slave Trade*.¹⁴ Clarkson’s history was written after the slave trade had ended in 1808. 1787 was the integral year that Clarkson used as the starting point for his history of British abolition. The London Abolition Committee was formed in this year from a group of concerned London Quakers including Joseph Woods, and the Anglican Clarkson. The group drew support from powerful members of Parliament, including William Pitt and William Wilberforce. Abolition Committees were subsequently set up throughout Britain in the mold of the London Committee. The Committees were instrumental in forming popular opinion against the slave trade.

¹² Clarkson, *Slavery and Commerce*, 128.

¹³ Clarkson, *Slavery and Commerce*, 141-143.

¹⁴ Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament*, Vol. 1, (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1968).

In its first year, the London Abolition Committee released *A Summary View of the Slave Trade and the Probable Consequences of its Abolition*.¹⁵ One of the main goals of the group was to publish works on the slave trade and circulate petitions in an attempt to educate the public on the horrors of the “inhuman traffic”.¹⁶ Like much of the preexisting literature, this document included moral arguments against the slave trade, but it also differed from prior publications advocating abolition by including arguments that appealed to the political and economic interests of the British government. The committee proposed a variety of commodities that Africa offered that would accumulate revenue for the British. They also contested that the slave trade helped only a privileged few while being ruinous to the vast majority of Britons.¹⁷ The London Abolition Committee’s argument, that their goals would improve the state of the British economy, made abolition far more appealing and increased the possibility of reform.

By the fall of 1787, the work of the Abolition Committees had paid off with the possibility of real legislative action. The House of Commons, led by William Pitt’s support, was ready to debate the issues regarding the slave trade. The result of this parliamentary session was the proposal of an act that would impose new regulations on the trade. These provisions regulated the number of slaves that could be carried on a ship to five for every three tons of cargo on a vessel. This regulation applied until the weight of the cargo exceeded 201 tons. In this case one slave was allowed for every one ton of cargo. The act also required that a surgeon be present on board all slave ships.¹⁸ This Parliamentary action sparked heated debate. Although disaffected abolitionists believed the act was too soft, many who favored the slave trade saw it as a radical move toward complete abolition.

¹⁵ Thomas Clarkson, *A Summary View of the Slave Trade, and of the Probable Consequences of its Abolition*, (London: 1787).

¹⁶ Clarkson, *A Summary View...*, 3.

¹⁷ Clarkson, *A Summary View...*, 11-12.

¹⁸ Ragatz, 251.

The discussion between members of parliament, regarding this act, revealed the motivations of the supporters and detractors of abolition. Despite the assertions of some historians that economic decline was the motivating factor to end the slave trade, it is clear that the most vocal opposition to legislation came from those who claimed to be defending the British economy. Many believed that abolition would sound the death knell for Britain's increasing economic position among European colonial powers. Supporters of the slave trade believed that by imposing limits on the amount of slaves that a trading vessel could carry, the British were risking the encroachment of a rival power into the slave trading market which they dominated. Continental powers, especially the French, could exploit the limitations imposed on British slaving ships by flooding the market with their slaves, which would be shipped on unrestricted vessels. The possibility of France gaining any sort of power at sea, be it military or commercial, was too much for many Britons to stomach.¹⁹

In order to stop any further abolition legislation, members of Parliament (MPs) made outlandish claims in support of the slave trade. One advocate of slavery claimed that to put oneself in the shoes of a slave sounded horrible but that it was an unfair test of the experience. The voyage through the middle passage was actually quite enjoyable to Africans and consistent with the way they lived in their homeland.²⁰ One MP, Henry Beaufoy, claimed to have heard a supporter of the slave trade say that Africans viewed their voyage to the New World as the happiest time of their lives. Beaufoy was quoted to say sarcastically that, "the fetters on the hands of the Africans, and the irons on their feet, are intended to check the wild expressions of tumultuous and frantic joy, rather than to counteract the gloomy purposes of despair."²¹ Although it seemed preposterous that anyone would attempt to downplay the severity of the

¹⁹ John Ranby, *Doubts on the Abolition of the Slave Trade; by an old member of Parliament*, (London: 1790).

²⁰ *Speeches in Parliament, Respecting the Abolition of the African Slave Trade*, (Edinburgh: 1789), 14.

²¹ *Speeches*, 15.

slave trade, opponents of abolition did just that.

MP John Ranby claimed in 1790 that the stories about the middle passage were extremely exaggerated by abolitionists. He cited disease and foul weather as being the main source of suffering for slaves, rather than poor treatment.²² Furthermore, Ranby contested that it would make very little sense for slaves to be treated so poorly by traders and slave owners. Traders would want as many slaves as possible to make it to the Caribbean to maximize their profits, and planters would want their slaves to live long and healthy lives so they could work as long and as efficiently as possible.

These comments aside, it was difficult to dispute the terrible accounts of the treatment of slaves, so supporters of slavery largely ignored the humanitarian issues. If they did comment on them, they typically said that abolitionists hyperbolized the foul treatment of slaves for their own political interests. Supporters of the slave trade instead opted to play the economy card, due to the significance of the West Indian colonies to British trade revenues. Generally, supporters of the slave trade believed that abolition would diminish Britain's dominant position in all forms of trade. Declines in trade would not only mean losses for the British economy, but could also facilitate gains for rival powers that would fill the vacuum in the slave trade left by British abolition.²³

Beaufoy, an ardent supporter of abolition, rejected the idea that the British would lose economic supremacy to France if the slave trade was abolished. He unequivocally denied this idea, and he also claimed that if the British abolished the slave trade, the French would quickly do the same. The abolition movement in France had more support than in Britain, and Beaufoy believed that they were taking steps toward ending their involvement in the trade while Britain

²² Ranby, 25.

²³ Ranby.

was debating the issue.²⁴ He saw abolition as important to British ideals of liberalism and tolerance. Beaufoy believed it would be a sad day when France took the lead over Britain on such a progressive social issue.

Debates about the restrictions on trading vessels continued after the act passed in 1788. On May 13th, 1789 William Wilberforce spoke in parliament in defense of the act and in support of further legislation against the slave trade. He addressed the fears that large ports in Britain would be seriously hurt by abolition. Liverpool was viewed as the slave trading capital of England; therefore, it seemed to be an effective indicator of the importance of the slave trade. Wilberforce claimed that slave trading accounted for less than ten per cent of the tonnage shipped from Liverpool. Between 160,000 and 170,000 tons were exported annually from Liverpool and only about 12,000 tons were exported on slave ships.²⁵ He also claimed that merchants in Liverpool viewed the trade as detrimental. Wilberforce, much like his colleague Mr. Beaufoy, believed that the French were very close to abolishing the slave trade themselves, and the two agreed that it would be a travesty if the French abolished the slave trade while the British were still debating the issue.

When the issue of the slave trade was debated on the floor of the House of Commons, the complexion of the abolition movement fundamentally changed. Abolitionists, who primarily stressed humanitarian concerns, were being questioned by politicians who were not necessarily motivated solely by morality. Concerns over an economic decline caused by abolition became prevalent. Abolitionists in Parliament, like Wilberforce, were, for the most part inspired by religiously based humanitarianism, but they had to modify their arguments toward the economic concerns of their fellow MPs in order to gain their support.

²⁴ *Speeches*, 23.

²⁵ *Speeches*, 57.

Economic Arguments

The debates in Parliament showed that the government was concerned with the various effects that abolition would have on Britain's strong economy. Those who opposed abolition moved the argument away from the realm of humanitarianism, and abolitionists had to convince their opposition that ending the slave trade would not hurt British economic hegemony while staying true to their moral position. This shift can also be seen in the writings of abolitionists who did not sit in the House of Commons. Thomas Clarkson published works after 1787 that addressed the political concerns that were raised by Parliament.

In 1788, Clarkson wrote *An Essay on the Impolicy of the African Slave Trade*.²⁶ Clarkson's main source of evidence now came from intense research into the West Indian economy and global trade. Rather than continuing to stress the inhumanity of the slave trade and the horrors that blacks experienced, he addressed a variety of issues in the political realm.

Clarkson proposed a series of interesting points in *Impolicy*. In the beginning of his essay, Clarkson stated that the slave trade was purported by many to have "great value for the nation," but Clarkson confessed that he had, "never been able to comprehend their meaning."²⁷ He went further to explain that he believed that the slave trade was costly to the Empire. Clarkson began by stating that free men were more productive in comparison to slaves at a ratio of three to two.²⁸ He also claimed that by simply providing slaves with better conditions, they would work harder. The enterprise of shipping men from Africa to the Caribbean to do work was very costly and dangerous. This practice actually took revenues from the economy. Therefore, by freeing the slaves in the Caribbean or at least providing them with better working conditions, sugar could be cultivated more efficiently and the expenses of the

²⁶ Clarkson, Thomas, *An Essay on The Impolicy of the African Slave Trade*, (London: J. Phillips, 1788).

²⁷ Clarkson, *Impolicy*, 6.

²⁸ Clarkson, *Impolicy*, 10.

slave trade could be avoided. The main source of revenue in the Caribbean was sugar, and sugar could be cultivated by anyone, free or enslaved. Clarkson contradicted the beliefs of the opponents of abolition by claiming that ending the slave trade would help the West Indian sugar based economy.

Impolicy discussed many other reasons why the slave trade was a detriment to Britain. Clarkson divided the work into two parts, which were indicative of two broad categories. First, Clarkson proposed the positive advantages that the British would see if the slave trade was ended. In the second section of the essay, Clarkson refuted the negative consequences that his detractors foresaw in the event of abolition.

Clarkson believed that Africa had much to offer that was ignored because of the government's dedication to the slave trade. The British could focus on procuring these great treasures only if the trade was ended. The resources that Clarkson described ranged from luxury items to staple crops. One of the potential trades that would be beneficial to Britain was wood. There were many exotic woods in Africa but Clarkson stressed the importance of mahogany. This wood was a valuable commodity to Britain as well as to other European nations. If Britain could gain a foothold in this trade it would see great economic advances. Britain's exotic woods were often imported from South and Central America. Mahogany specifically came from Central America, and was shipped primarily out of the Bay of Honduras. The voyage to Central America was considerably longer and riskier than the voyage to Africa. These costs were also increased by the high insurances rates for shipping to Central America. The rates for ships traveling to Africa were significantly lower. The British could dominate the trade in mahogany, which was a viable commodity throughout Europe, if it shifted its focus from the trade of people

to the trade of materials.²⁹ It would be cheaper and more efficient to use free black labor in Africa rather than slave labor in the New World.

Another group of commodities, which Clarkson divided as “drugs, peppers, and spices”, was found throughout Africa. Clarkson was dismayed by the fact that these plants, especially those used for medicinal purposes, had been discovered long before but were neglected due to the slave trade. The British ignored these items and imported many of their drugs from Brazil, Turkey, and various Spanish colonies. These nations imposed high tariffs on these goods that could be avoided by trading with Africa.³⁰ This would allow the British to make a profit rather than lose money from importing drugs from rivals. It would also allow all Britons access to these materials, which were previously available only to wealthier citizens, at a much reduced price.

Spices and peppers, which could be very beneficial to the British, were discovered all throughout Africa. African spices were closer and more easily obtained than those of the East Indies, which was the main source of those products prior to abolition. Much of the East Indies was owned by the Dutch, which held exclusive trading rights to its colonies. Trading in African spices would break up the monopoly that the Dutch held on the market. Clarkson estimated that spices cultivated by free Africans would be available to Britons at one fifth of the price of spices that were grown and harvested by Dutch slaves.³¹

Clarkson believed that these commodities were extremely important. African free labor would be more efficient, and it would be less costly to trade with Africa than with other, more distant colonies. The increased trade with Africa would allow Britain to gain influence in many areas that were dominated by foreign rivals, while making commercial gains for itself. Despite

²⁹ Clarkson, *Impolicy*, 7-11.

³⁰ Clarkson, *Impolicy*, 13.

³¹ Clarkson, *Impolicy*, 14-15.

their apparent benefit, many detractors believed that these trade items were insignificant and would bring in only minimal gains for the British metropole. Opposition groups contested that these gains would be dwarfed by the damages the economy would incur if the slave trade was abolished. Clarkson countered by discussing the possibility of using African soil to cultivate staple crops. These crops were very important to the British and their potential profit was indisputable.

Key crops, including indigo, rice, and tobacco could be grown and imported from Africa instead of the West Indies or America. Tobacco, rice, and indigo were being imported, for the most part, from the United States. Trading with Africa would provide a new market for the British without aiding the U.S. economy. The cultivation of rice in America was costly and dangerous. American rice was grown in swampy conditions, while African rice could be grown in drier conditions with the same yield. The conditions of rice cultivation in America led to a high mortality rate, which would not occur in Africa.³² Once again Clarkson reminded his readers that rice cultivation in Africa would also provide a foothold for trade on the continent while providing stiff competition with rival economies.

Clarkson's extensive study of Africa and the bounties of its soil brought up intriguing perspectives on the possible economic gain of abolishing the slave trade. If the British concentrated on trading materials with Africa, rather than people, they could gain dominance in areas of trade that were once ruled by other countries, and they would reap the economic benefits. Clarkson also brought up the point that these products would be beneficial to all Britons in contrast to the slave trade, which benefited only a few wealthy planters and traders. Trade in these African resources would allow access to new and exciting commodities that were once just luxury items.

³² Clarkson, *Impolicy*, 16-17.

After addressing the riches that were available in Africa, Clarkson explained how the slave trade was hurting the British economy. He argued that the fair treatment of slaves was of the utmost importance. Fair treatment would make the African slave trade obsolete. If mortality rates were lowered, planters could replenish their stock of slaves without importing Africans. Clarkson believed that increasing the standard of living would make slaves more productive. If these two elements could be properly executed, the shipping of Africans to the West Indies would not only be pointless but it would be costly. By using specific examples, Clarkson outlined how better treatment of slaves was in the interest of the British economy.

One plantation on the island of St. Christopher was a particularly harsh place to work as a slave. Clarkson described the plantation owner as a “rigid and austere” man.³³ This owner consistently harassed his slaves, making them work seven days a week. Every year, he had to renew ten percent of his stock in slaves. After 1763, this owner left and was replaced by a very different man. This new owner made many changes, including a day of reprieve on the Sabbath. Within a few years, the plantation’s slave population began to grow and the purchase and importation of new slaves became an unnecessary cost. Very simple changes would allow planters to see the same kind of tangible financial benefits within a matter of years.³⁴

The poor treatment of new mothers and infants also contributed to the high mortality rate of West Indian slaves. A great number of infants died within their first few months of life. Clarkson described a disease called “locked jaw” which was one of the main killers of infants in slavery. It developed due to the poor treatment of babies and their mothers. The mothers were forced to work shortly after giving birth and the infant was usually carried on the mothers back or left somewhere in the fields during the day. Leaving a newborn in these conditions gave it

³³ Clarkson, *Impolicy*, 86.

³⁴ Clarkson, *Impolicy*, 86.

little chance for survival. A change in policy regarding the treatment of infants and mothers would allow for the population to increase and lead to the obsolescence of the slave trade.³⁵

Clarkson also cited poor provisions and food, unnecessary labor, and torture as influencing the high mortality rates of slaves. Simple regulations could increase the number of slaves to the degree that planters could expand and cultivate new lands without utilizing the slave trade.

The benefits of higher slave survival rates were appealing to slave owners, as well as humanitarians. The process of bringing in new slaves to the West Indies was very costly, and inconvenient to the planters who bought them. One plantation owner identified as Mr. Long was quoted by Clarkson as saying, “The purchase of new negroes, is the most chargeable article attending these estates, and the true source of the distresses, under which their owners suffer.”³⁶ Constantly purchasing new slaves was extremely expensive for slave owners. By decreasing the mortality rate, it would become less necessary to buy new slaves. Abolition would help planters by making slaves more valuable. Slave owners could sell their slaves to others for greater returns than before. Slaves would increase in value in another sense after abolition. In the event of abolition, all West Indian slaves would be Creoles after one generation. According to Clarkson, these slaves were heartier and more willing to do slave work. Their familiarity with the crops and the type of work made them more efficient than newly imported slaves. Clarkson believed that Creole slaves were twice as valuable to planters as African slaves.³⁷ These possible profits could be fully utilized only if the slave trade were ended.

Clarkson waited until the end of his essay to directly refute the argument that ending the slave trade would cut off a massive source of wealth from the British Empire. The supporters of the trade suggested many reasons why slavery was profitable for the Empire. One important

³⁵ Clarkson, *Impolicy*, 91.

³⁶ Clarkson, *Impolicy*, 95.

³⁷ Clarkson, *Impolicy*, 95-97.

source of revenue was the payment of duties by Africans. These duties were paid on manufactured goods that were exchanged for slaves. Unfortunately to slave trade supporters, duties did not bring in much money at all. Duties could not be charged on items that were manufactured in Britain. These products included guns, gunpowder, and metal items. Other products that came originally from the West Indies or other parts of the world were subject to duty but the drawback costs were nearly as much as the payment received. The perceived profitability of trade duties was shown by Clarkson to be misguided.³⁸ Other anti-abolitionists claimed that many African commodities that Clarkson expressed were already imported because of British presence due to the slave trade. Clarkson pointed out that most of the trade goods from Africa were brought from non-slave ships. If the trade were ended, more ships could be concentrated on the trade of products with Africa and therefore, more raw materials would be imported into Britain.³⁹

Clarkson strengthened his assertions with definitive figures from an important slave trading city. He noted that during the War for American Independence, the slave trade was restricted a great deal. The drastic decrease in the slave trade could be used as an analogy of how British trade would be affected by abolition. Figures from Liverpool, the capital of the slave trade in Britain, show that in 1774 there were 167 ships that were outfitted and registered as slave trading vessels. In 1779, at the height of the war, there were only twenty-eight. By the end of the war the slave trade was seriously restricted and three quarters of West Indian slaves were Creole. This was in large part due to the fairer treatment of slaves that Clarkson earlier proposed. Most importantly, the figures showed that the amount of sugar imports did decrease but only by a figure of approximately twenty-five percent. These losses were explained by

³⁸ Clarkson, *Impolicy*, 104.

³⁹ Clarkson, *Impolicy*, 105.

interference from enemy raids, not by restrictions on the slave trade. These figures showed that fairer treatment of slaves did succeed in lowering the mortality rate while not affecting the production of sugar. Other telling statistics from Liverpool showed the costliness of the slave trade. In 1773, when there were 105 slave ships docked in Liverpool, the city gained £4725 pounds in duties from all trade. In 1779, there were only eleven slave ships trading with Liverpool and the city took in £4957 in duties.⁴⁰

Clarkson's *Impolicy* reflected his shift from the humanitarian realm into politics. It presented convincing arguments regarding the economic interests behind abolition by providing a plethora of money making opportunities for the British government as alternatives to the slave trade. Clarkson believed that trading goods with Africa would be more beneficial to the economy than trading human beings. One argument that was left out of the essay was humanitarian reasons for abolition. Arguing the inhumane nature of the slave trade without giving Parliament other options to make money would have been unproductive. Much like his fellow abolitionists Wilberforce and Beaufoy, Clarkson had to address the economic issues not because he had lost interest in humanitarianism but because the economy was the contentious subject in the abolition debate. Concerns about the negative economic effects of abolition continued to inspire debate despite Clarkson's work.

John Ranby wrote *Doubts on the Abolition of the Slave Trade, by an Old Member of Parliament* in 1790 in response to Clarkson's *Impolicy*. Ranby argued that Clarkson misinterpreted facts regarding the slave trade. He contested Clarkson's assertions in regards to the wartime economy. Clarkson did not use sufficient evidence to prove that the drop in sugar imports was due to enemy raids on British vessels. Instead, Ranby attributed the wartime decrease in sugar production directly to the decline in the slave trade. He believed that Clarkson

⁴⁰ Clarkson, *Impolicy*, 125-128.

manipulated the numbers of ships that were engaged in the slave trade during the war. Ranby explained that there were more ships trading slaves than Clarkson claimed, yet the decline in sugar imports were still seen. The effects could have been more dramatic, but the British stopped trading slaves with France and Spain during the war and focused entirely on their own colonies.⁴¹ Slave traders tried to compensate for the loss in slave ships, but sugar production still dropped by one quarter. This showed, in the eyes of slavery supporters, that the British economy was still dependent on the slave trade.

Doubts on the Abolition of the Slave Trade addressed the main arguments of Clarkson's *Impolicy*. Ranby, like his colleagues, concentrated on the economic importance of the slave trade. Ranby claimed that he could not bring himself, "to think this a fit time, or that the country is in a fit situation to engage in an experiment, which offers a prospect of certain loss, and no probability of gain."⁴² Ranby made it clear that he opposed legislation against the slave trade, but his words also indicated a feeling of inevitability regarding abolition. Rather than claiming that abolition was wrong, Ranby stated that it would be dangerous to "engage in an experiment" at that time. This left the possibility for abolition in the future. Perhaps Ranby was recognizing the inhumane treatment of slaves as a negative, but was still unsure about the impact of ending such a lucrative financial element of the British economy.

The humanitarian issue became less important in the discussion because the slave trade was generally accepted to be morally indefensible. Even supporters of the slave trade recognized its injustices, but they were still hesitant about abolition for economic reasons. On the eve of the passage of the abolition act, Lord Castlereagh said, "on the common feeling of humanity, indeed, there can be no difficulty in forming an opinion. If that were all that was to be considered, a

⁴¹ Ranby, 64-65.

⁴² Ranby, 88.

Resolution for the Abolition of the African Slave Trade might easily be voted.”⁴³ Castlereagh recognized the moral dilemma of supporting a trade that he thought was wrong. He still voted against abolition. Castlereagh echoed the fears of earlier supporters of the slave trade. The possibility of the foreign countries increasing their own involvement in the slave trade was the paramount fear in his mind.⁴⁴

Other supporters of the slave trade agreed with Lord Castlereagh’s assessment. Anti-abolitionists frequently expressed their abhorrence of the slave trade. Often times, these statements were followed by reminders of the great monetary gains that the British made every year from the slave trade. One MP claimed in 1806 that the slave trade produced six million pounds sterling every year. He demanded that any resolution that ended the slave trade must guarantee compensation to planters that suffered losses.⁴⁵ By the early part of the nineteenth century economic factors remained the only source of opposition for abolitionists. This did not mean that humanitarianism no longer mattered; it simply indicated that the humanitarian argument against the slave trade was widely accepted and no longer contentious. Opposition existed only because the British still believed that the slave trade was an essential element to their economic success.

Conclusion

The decline theory proposed by Lowell Ragatz and Eric Williams assumed that the slave trade was an anachronistic vestige of Britain’s mercantilist past, but if the slave trade was no longer important, then why did concerns about the economy continue to motivate opposition to the cessation of the slave trade? The main humanitarian arguments against slavery had been

⁴³ *Substance of the Debates on a Resolution for Abolishing the Slave Trade, which was moved in the House of Commons on the 10th June, 1806 and in the House of Lords on the 24th June, 1806*, (London: 1806), 14.

⁴⁴ *Substance*, 15-17.

⁴⁵ *Substance*, 63.

accepted, but opposition still existed. This was because supporters of the slave trade strongly believed, despite what abolitionists told them, that the economy would be seriously hurt by putting an end to the slave trade. Those who opposed abolition were in large part correct about its effects on the economy.

The Caribbean was still a source of great wealth up to 1807. Decline theorists agreed that the West Indian economy was strong before the 1770s but claimed that it declined after that. In actuality, trade with the West Indies was growing at an unprecedented rate through the beginning of the nineteenth century. In the 1760s, the revenues from exports to the West Indies topped out at around £1 million, but by 1800, this number had shot up to £5 million. The numbers for imports were similarly striking. The British averaged around £2.5 million in the 1760s in imports from the West Indies. By 1800, these gains were averaging at a staggering £6 million annually.⁴⁶ Figures also indicated that abolition negatively impacted the thriving West Indian economy of the early nineteenth century. In the period immediately before abolition, the West Indies accounted for 30.5 percent of all British imports and 13.1 percent of its exports. These numbers steadily declined after abolition. In the period of 1828-1832, the West Indies accounted for 20.1 percent of imports to and only seven percent of exports from Britain.⁴⁷ Supporters of the slave trade rightly believed that abolition would hurt the British economy. The assumption that economic decline preceded abolition is false.

There were two different stages of the abolition movement. Each stage was marked with an argument in favor of abolition with a particular focus. The first argument was made predominantly in the earlier years of the movement and was meant to inform the British

⁴⁶ Seymour Drescher, *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977), 18.

⁴⁷ Drescher, *Econocide*, 19.

population of the horrors of the slave trade. These early humanitarian sentiments thrived in the middle class, intellectual, and religious populations, but when support grew and legislation against the slave trade became a primary goal of abolitionists, the arguments switched to cater to political and economic interests. The humanitarian base was still present in their arguments, but abolitionists had to make a change to appeal to Parliament. They had to convince the powers that be that the trade based economy of Britain could actually gain from the end of the slave trade.

Abolitionists were successful in convincing a population of liberal and progressively minded Britons that the slave trade was morally wrong, but their main stumbling block was the Empire's reliance on trade with the West Indies. The issue of the economy was important to the abolition debate, not because the West Indian economy was failing, but for the opposite reason. The sugar economy in the Caribbean was thriving during the end of the eighteenth century. Politicians that opposed abolition knew this and forced the argument to move into the realm of economics. The humanitarian outcry against the slave trade was not simply a sideshow that was facilitated by the economic decline of the British colonies in the New World. It was, in fact, the main motivation for abolishing the slave trade, which was still extremely beneficial to the British economy.

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