

Slavery, Coercion and Empire

(In response to essay question "Examining the importance of un-freedom, coercion and enslavement in British Atlantic Trade between 1750 and 1850.").

The British Atlantic Trade most of us would associate the term with the Triangular Trade – which consisted of three legs. The first leg would be out of Britain, with ships filled with exports, which would then be exchanged at a profit on the Coast of Africa for enslaved peoples, who were later traded on the plantations of the Caribbean and North America, as enslaved labour, at a profit for the colonial produce. Eric Williams, in his book *Slavery and Capitalism*, wrote, "Strange that an article like sugar, so sweet and necessary to human existence, should have occasioned such crimes and bloodshed!"¹ Sugar was one of the primary products of the British Atlantic Trade, bringing in huge profits for the empire and it even prompted Adam Smith to write, "Our tobacco colonies, send us home no such wealthy planters as we see frequently arrive from our sugar islands".² David Eltis and Stanley L. Engerman – historians who deal with the Atlantic world and slave trade – write, "In 1788, after the initial attack on the British slave trade, Parliament held hearings on and collected information about all aspects of the trade in Africa, the West Indies, and Great Britain. Among those testifying or writing letters to Parliament were merchants in the trade, whose arguments against abolition included claims of overall importance to the British economy."³

¹ Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (London, 2022), p. 24.

² Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations Books I-III* (London, 1999) p. 262.

³ David Eltis and Stanley L. Engerman, 'The Importance of Slavery and the Slave Trade to Industrialising Britain', *The Journal of Economic History*, 60:1 (March 2000), p. 123-144.

We can see the importance of enslavement and coercion in British Atlantic Trade and the British economy in general in this period. We shall now delve further into this argument.

When we think of unfree or coerced labour or of slavery, we tend to think purely of enslaved Africans; while it did constitute a major part of the slave population, we need to take note of other unfree labourers and servants. In the British Atlantic World, it started with the 'Indians', although not to that great of an extent, this was just the beginning. Indian slavery, according to the colonists, was not very profitable.⁴

It was not the Africans who instantly replaced the 'Indians', instead it was the impoverished whites. Initially, the characteristics of this form of labour did not mirror slavery, rather, it was done mostly by those who were in search of a better life, but later on the abuses began. The kidnapping of adults and children took place and convicts were now being sent abroad for labour⁵, there was a significant rise of white servants between 1640 and 1740, we can see the Irish from Cromwell's campaigns being sent to Barbados⁶ and the Scots meeting a similar fate later on.⁷ We can start to see the development of what we now know as the slave trade here, the conditions of the transport of the white servants were noted by a

⁴ Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (London, 2022), pp. 1-25.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Oliver Cromwell, 'For the Honourable William Lenthall Esquire, Speaker of the Parliament of England: These.' in Thomas Carlyle (ed.), *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches: with Elucidations*, Vol. II (New York, 1871), pp. 149-156.

⁷ 'America and West Indies: September 1667' in W Noel Sainsbury (ed.), *Calendar of State Papers Colonial, America and West Indies: Volume 5, 1661-1668* (London, 1880), pp. 494-502.

woman on her journey, she writes, “It is hardly possible, to believe that human nature could be so depraved, as to treat fellow creatures in such a manner for so little gain”.⁸

White servants posed significant disadvantages for planters, but the biggest one was the expense. Thus, came in the enslaved Africans. Consequently, they were eventually preferred and thus began the epoch of African slavery; they were far more economically valuable to planters.⁹ From this gradual development, it is noticeable that the commerce of the Atlantic world heavily depended upon various methods of un-free, coerced and enslaved labour of the ‘others’ of society or the world. The sheer extent of this dependence would be pointed out by Walter Rodney, as he writes, “The records show direct correlations between levels of exports from Africa and European demand for slave labour in this or that part of the American plantation economy”¹⁰ and would follow up writing “Even medium and short-run fluctuations in the volume of African trade were usually reflections of European conditions”.¹¹

All of this labour was used for a variety of purposes and a prime use was for the cultivation of one of the most valuable commodities of the 18th century, sugar. Sugar itself was an important commodity, but it also had molasses as a by-product which was used to produce rum. Slavery was extremely important to the cultivation of sugar, as it followed the model of economies of scale, the cost of production overall begins to marginally fall when more is

⁸ *Journal of a Lady of Quality; Being the Narrative of a Journey from Scotland to the West Indies, North Carolina and Portugal, in the years 1774 to 1776*, ed. Evangeline Walker Andrews (New Haven, 1923), p. 53.

⁹ Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (London, 2022), pp. 1-25.

¹⁰ Walter Rodney, ‘The Historical Roots of African Underdevelopment’, in *Decolonial Marxism* (London, 2022), p. 100.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

produced; thus, large slave gangs led to the best results for plantation owners. We can look at the British Caribbean Islands' slave population in 1680, it was a mere – in comparison – 64,000¹², but by 1805, the slave population had shot up to a massive 5,85,000.¹³ The British Caribbean colonies exported 1,06,000 tonnes of sugar in 1787 – this was only rivalled by French holdings – thus making them extremely important to the empire.¹⁴ As Eric Williams wrote, “The West Indian Islands became the hub of the British Empire, of immense importance to the grandeur and prosperity of England”.¹⁵



Figure 1 – Photograph of Cane Cutters on a Jamaican Plantation¹⁶

The sugar industry – with emphasis on the planters – in Britain had immense amounts of power; while the price of sugar was falling in the rest of the world, in Britain, it remained high due to the mercantilist policies adopted. Obviously, there was protest, but one must

¹² Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern, 1492-1800* (London, 2010), p. 404.

¹³ Seymour Drescher, *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition* (Chapel Hill, 2010), p. 34.

¹⁴ Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern, 1492-1800* (London, 2010), p. 403.

¹⁵ Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (London, 2022), p. 48.

¹⁶ Unknown Artist, 'Cane Cutters', ca. 1890-1896, photograph, Jamaica, Southern Methodist University Library, <<https://digitalcollections.smu.edu/digital/collection/lat/id/186>> [accessed 01 February 2023]

understand the sheer power they held over British society.¹⁷ It was even reflected in the culture at the time, from a contemporary play, we can see the line “They say, he has rum and sugar enough belonging to him, to make all the water in the Thames into punch”¹⁸ referring to a sugar planter.

From sugar came the by-product of molasses thus, from sugar, two off-shoot industries came into play, sugar refining and rum distilling. Sugar refiners, although at odds with the planters due to the monopoly of the production of sugar laid out by the mercantilist policy, still benefited from the institution of slavery as the raw material was imported from the Caribbean plantations. Two major towns for sugar refining were Glasgow – whose development was heavily linked to the sugar refining industry – and Bristol.¹⁹ In the latter, the refiners petitioned against the abolition of the slave trade. In the petition, they write, “Setting forth, that the Petitioners learn with serious Alarm that, on the proposed Investigation in the Committee of the House of Commons of the Petitions against the Slave Trade, a Motion will be made for its entire Abolition, on which Trade, the Petitioners conceive, the Welfare and Prosperity, if not the actual Existence, of the West India Islands depend”.²⁰

When the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 was passed, the sugar industry was forced to find an alternative method of labour, and that was found with indentured labourers from Asia. This,

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 70-72.

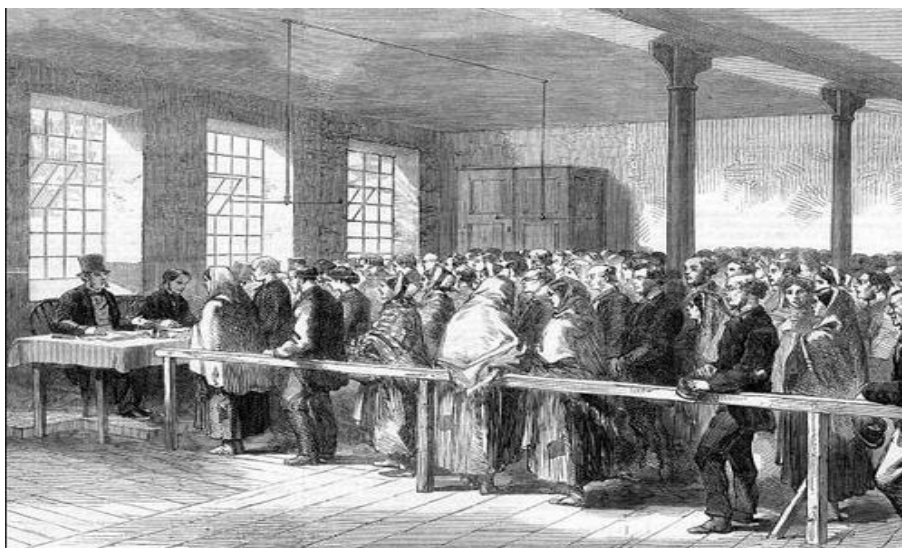
¹⁸ Richard Cumberland, *The West Indian; A Comedy in Five Acts* (Boston, 1809) p. 11.

¹⁹ Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (London, 2022), pp. 68-73.

²⁰ ‘Petitions to the House of Commons’, in Elizabeth Donnan (ed.), *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America*, Vol. 2 (Washington, D.C, 1931), p. 602.

too, was a coercive system; there was an illusion of choice in which the labourer was offered a contract, but many would sign (some recruited on false information²¹). The primary reason would be to escape the oppressive British rule in India which, due to deliberate British policy, famines were frequent and poverty was widespread²², but in many cases they were also kidnapped.²³ This system of indenture did not only replace slavery; it was a system that co-existed with it, too, and it became more prominent after the abolition of slavery.²⁴

Sugar, a commodity whose value even overtook that of gold the in the mid-18th century, heavily depended upon the use of indentured and enslaved labour. Enslaved labour was also used to produce other goods, such as cotton and tobacco, two very labour-intensive crops. Thus, sugar was not the only commodity trade in which coerced and enslaved labour was important to Britain's Atlantic Trade.



²¹ Kamala Kempadoo, 'Bound Coolies' and Other Indentured Workers in the Caribbean: Implications for debates about human trafficking and modern slavery', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, 9 (2017), pp. 48-63.

²² Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Nino Famines and the Making of the Third World* (London, 2017), pp. 32-45, 55-59.

²³ Abigail Ward, 'Indian-Caribbean Trauma: Indian Indenture and its Legacies in Harold Sonny Ladoo's *No Pain Like This Body*' in Abigail Ward (ed.), *Postcolonial Traumas: Memory, Narrative, Resistance* (London, 2015), p. 127.

²⁴ Kamala Kempadoo, 'Bound Coolies' and Other Indentured Workers in the Caribbean: Implications for debates about human trafficking and modern slavery', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, 9 (2017), pp. 48-63.

Figure 2 – Illustration showing people in line for food and coal tickets during the cotton famine²⁵

While Britain formally abolished slavery in 1833, trade conducted still had the blood of the institution all over it. We know that after the American Revolution, Britain still conducted trade with the United States and significantly depended on its cotton supply. The United States supplied 80% of Britain's raw cotton.²⁶ The dependence of Britain on this cotton trade can be seen when the U.S. Civil War broke out and mass unemployment and poverty spread due to the closure of mills caused by the lack of raw materials.²⁷ Thus, Britain still profited from slavery through the cotton trade, although slavery had been formally abolished in the empire. As Williams would write, "British capitalism had destroyed West Indian slavery, but it continued to thrive on Brazilian, Cuban and American slavery".²⁸

From the evidence provided, we can clearly see that Britain heavily depended upon enslaved and coerced labour for its trade in the Atlantic. Whether it be when slavery was legal in the empire, and subjects were allowed to engage in the slave trade or even post-abolishment, un-free, coerced, and enslaved labour were cornerstones of the British Atlantic Trade, the most profitable, and some of the most critical industries in Britain depended upon slavery in the Atlantic, whether it be sugar or cotton. It would be hard to imagine the British empire being as powerful without the institution of slavery.

²⁵ Unknown Artist, 'Illustration from newspaper of people in line for food and coal tickets at a district Provident Society office during the cotton famine', illustration, 1862, Manchester, Life Magazine, <<http://images.google.com/hosted/life/3edb4daacd67638f.html>> [accessed 01 February 2023]

²⁶ Christopher Williams, Jim Powell and Joseph Kelly, 'Impact on the British Cotton Trade', *Lowcountry Digital History Initiative*, <<https://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/liverpools-abercromby-square/britain-and-us-civil-war/impact-cotton-trade>> [accessed 21 October 2022].

²⁷ Ben Johnson, 'The Lancashire Cotton Famine', *Historic UK*, <<https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofEngland/Lancashire-Cotton-Famine/>> [accessed 21 October 2022]

²⁸ Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (London, 2022), p. 168.

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