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Caribbean Slavery, British Capitalism and the Industrial Revolution(s)?

Stephen Mullen

In the remarkable *Slavery, Capitalism and the Industrial Revolution*, Maxine Berg and Pat Hudson provide a wide-ranging historiographical synthesis that persuasively argues ‘slavery certainly was formative in the timing and nature of Britain’s industrial transition’.¹ This book represents strong endorsement of the main thesis advanced by Trinidadian historian Eric Williams in *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944), in which he argued that British involvement with the slave trade and plantation slavery were central to Britain’s industrial revolution (c.1760–1830).² Given that many British historians dismissed aspects of his famous thesis after publication, Berg and Hudson’s embracement of all things Williams is an important development in the historiographical reckoning of Atlantic slavery and the British industrial revolution. The authors outline Williams’ background and main arguments, including the important yet often ignored qualifier that the slave trade and Atlantic slavery was not the monocausal factor in the industrial revolution (pp. 37–38). The title *Slavery, Capitalism and the Industrial Revolution*, of course, pays homage, and Berg and Hudson chose Williams’ alma mater, St. Catherine’s College, Oxford, as the venue to host their book launch in July 2023.

As hinted in the introduction that traces contested histories and statutory controversies, an accessible yet rigorous scholarly work on this theme was much needed, especially to inform today’s ‘culture war’ debates and agendas. The authors note that this type of synthesis is now possible due to the explosion of academic interest in Britain and Atlantic slavery as well as high-profile digital humanities projects. The book is developed mainly in an Atlantic, especially Caribbean rather than global framework, although the authors take a ‘broad and multilateral view of the many connections created by slavery’ (p.54). Given Maxine Berg’s expertise in the Global histories of trade between Europe and Asia, explanations are offered about the significance of the ‘diamond shaped global trade flows that linked the Indian and Atlantic oceans’ (p.54), and the conclusion ‘Britain’s early success ... [arose] from slave-based global trade and investment’ (pp. 208–209).

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The main thesis advanced by Williams in *Capitalism and Slavery* is under-going a renaissance although the authors' endorsement is not simply hitching onto a fast-moving historiographical bandwagon. Pat Hudson was a pioneer in situating *The Industrial Revolution* (first published in 1992 and republished since) in the Williams school, later acknowledging the influence of works by Inikori, Solow, Engerman and others.³ This was a rare approach in that era for a British historian of the industrial revolution (p.5, pp. 39–40). But this was qualified: Hudson was sceptical that direct investments made by West India merchants and planters were of much significance to industrial development (agreeing with Richard Pares' claims they were more inclined to invest in apparently less productive landed estates). Nevertheless, in 1992, Hudson maintained that the Atlantic slavery system (that is, slave trade and plantation slavery) *was* significant since this generated demand for British manufactured goods and helped develop and stimulate an efficient 'commercial, financial and credit infrastructure'.⁴ The authors acknowledge here that the West India interest's personal investments had a major effect upon landownership and agricultural improvement across Britain but were also more important to industrial and commercial development than previously considered; in the process they nod to the wealth of evidence provided by *The Legacies of British Slave-ownership* projects (pp.44–5).

The book, however, is more concerned with the entirety of the Atlantic slavery system than slavery-derived investments. The structure – focusing on slave trade and plantation slavery, historiographical positions, consumption, plantation innovation, British slave ports, iron and copper, textiles, financial capitalism, legacies – provides interconnected conclusions in each chapter. *The Transatlantic Slave Trade Database* provides the data to conclude that Britain (largely England) was at the pinnacle of the African slave trade from 1740 to 1807, an era that coincided with expansion of British territory in the West Indies after 1763 and later industrial take-off (p.13). The authors note the importance of commodities, especially sugar which transformed 'consumer culture' and fuelled the 'industrious revolution' in Britain (pp. 73–75). The authors also acknowledge the critical importance of technological innovations and enslaved labour in the English/British sugar islands to industrialization in the metropole (p.77).

One of the book's central claims is that Atlantic slavery's effects was initially a regional phenomenon. Port cities, Bristol, Glasgow, London and Liverpool, being centres of merchant capital, production and finance, served as 'causal connections' diffusing the multiplier effects of slavery and its commerce – via employment in adjacent industries, extraction and development of new industries – into wider hinterlands (p.118). Whilst the authors acknowledge that not all of slavery's effects are quantifiable, accessible statistical tables demonstrate the often-decisive effects of Atlantic commerce (in terms of supply or demand) in chapters focusing on key sectors: iron and copper, textiles, and financial capitalism.

The authors invite us to consider in depth three key points which set Britain's rise to capitalism via slavery distinct from America: 'consumer tastes and markets', 'ecological relief provided by both food and raw materials produced by enslaved labour', and 'the role of the [British] state' (p.211). It feels like a seminal moment when two distinguished British historians of the industrial revolution in imperial contexts end a scholarly book discussing racial discrimination and restorative justice and the underdevelopment of Africa and the Caribbean, whilst highlighting the role of the British state in expanding Atlantic slavery (pp. 201–207), although this approach has attracted accusations of political advocacy from a minority group.

Some historical accounts of Great Britain (whether focused on industrial or imperial experiences) claim a British scope yet are largely Anglocentric, with only tokenistic treatment of Scotland in particular.⁵ By analysing the effects of British colonial slavery via the prism of different port cities, *Slavery, Capitalism and the Industrial Revolution* develops a more comprehensive picture and its key strength is the truly British scope.⁶ Since 2002, historians have developed clearer assessments of the distinctive effects of the slave trade and Atlantic slavery upon regional development. Joseph Inikori (although focusing on the wider Atlantic rather than just British slave societies), Chris Evans and T.M. Devine all concluded that Atlantic slavery and its commerce shaped the respective developments of England, Wales and Scotland to a greater or lesser extent, with the latter apparently the most conclusive example.⁷

The broad conclusion and monolithic treatment of a 'British industrial revolution' was overdue yet also has limitations. Approaching this work from the position of 'Slavery, Capitalism and Britain's Industrial Revolutions' would have enabled a clearer, comparative restatement about the significance of Atlantic slavery to the respective accelerations of each nation. Even so, this book will set the terms of a newly resurgent debate for some time to come. I suspect that 'British slavery, capitalism and the *English* industrial revolution' will become a major historiographical battleground in future years with those scholars and historians opposed to Williams rushing to qualify that England had a much larger and more varied economy than Scotland or Wales and that British colonial slavery (a narrowing of the wider Atlantic focus adopted by Inikori) was therefore less important in relative terms to English development.

No one seriously claims that Atlantic slavery and its commerce had *no* influence upon the British industrial revolution in some form; rather, the debate concerns how significant the processes actually were. *Slavery, Capitalism and the Industrial Revolution* claims a formative role, albeit with conservative qualifiers: 'slavery certainly was formative in the timing and nature of Britain's industrial transition'. The authors further conclude that 'state policy, colonial ambitions and slavery' created a 'dynamic of capitalist ambition that proved crucial to the making of the industrial revolution'. Yet there are qualifiers: 'we do not argue that slavery caused the industrial revolution. Neither do we

suggest that slavery was necessary for the development of industrial capitalism in Britain' (p.7, p.12).⁸ This is broadly consistent with what Barbara Solow and Stanley Engerman would have described as a 'weaker' or perhaps 'very weak' version of the main Williams thesis (that is, that Atlantic slavery 'contributed greatly' to the industrial revolution).⁹

This approach, providing a strong argument with conservative qualifiers, creates a historiographical inconsistency with a less restrained position advanced by the same authors in a recent journal article. Responding to Joel Mokyr in 2021, Berg and Hudson noted in the abstract: 'Skills were vital to the industrial revolution but the timing of change and its regional concentration suggest that Britain's rise to dominance in Atlantic trade was *the major causal factor* [my italics]'. The general tone of the article is consistent with the book's content here, yet arrived at a more radical conclusion: that Atlantic commerce, and by extension slavery, was 'the major causal factor'.¹⁰ Solow and Engerman would have described this claim as a 'strong version' of the main Williams thesis.¹¹ Thus, there are apparently conflicting Berg and Hudson positions that Atlantic commerce was 'the major causal factor' in the industrial revolution, which was later refined to Atlantic slavery, alongside state policy, as 'formative' and 'crucial' albeit not 'causal' nor even 'necessary'.

Even with slightly disparate conclusion(s), I am impressed with this book and the range of historiography analysed as well the bold framing. Berg and Hudson have developed a robust neo-Williamsonian model of the British industrial revolution that will be difficult for detractors to dismiss. The Caribbean's 'sugar revolution' (1640s–70s) and all that followed – chattel slavery, plantation management techniques, commodity production, efficient record keeping, knowledge production, labour intensification and ruthless drive to extract profit from fixed and human capital – are situated as key predecessors influencing subsequent revolutions and innovations in Britain in iron and copper production, textiles and finance. Atlantic commerce and slavery underpinned a British industrial revolution, which was regional in nature and integral to the development of industrial capitalism. This shaped modern Britain, leaving longer-term legacies including racial inequality and underdevelopment elsewhere. These claims won't persuade everyone, and this book is not the final word on these themes (nor is it intended to be). *Slavery, Capitalism and the Industrial Revolution's* greatest achievement is explaining the complexities of the economic history of Atlantic slavery and the British industrial revolution to a wider audience. With increasing public and political interest in chattel slavery and its legacies, we now have an accessible book which contends that Atlantic slavery and its commerce was a formative influence upon the economic and societal development of Great Britain.

Notes

1. Maxine Berg and Pat Hudson, *Slavery, Capitalism and the Industrial Revolution*, (Cambridge, U.K: Polity Press, 2023), 7.
2. Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1944).
3. Pat Hudson, *The Industrial Revolution* (London: Edward Arnold, 1992), 194–9. Pat Hudson, 'Roundtable: Reviews of Joseph Inikori, *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England: A Study in International Trade and Economic Development* with a response by Joseph Inikori', *Journal of International Maritime History* 15 (2003): 312.
4. Hudson, *Industrial Revolution*, 196.
5. See, for example, one recent working paper that explicitly excluded Scotland yet concluded 'Britain would have been substantially poorer and more agricultural in the absence of overseas slave wealth'. See Stephan Hebllich, Stephen J. Redding and Hans-Joachim Voth, 'Slavery and the British Industrial Revolution', *National Bureau of Economic Research*, Working Paper 34051, (2022). <https://www.nber.org/papers/w30451>.
6. In adopting such a framework, this book provides a similar yet more ambitious, model to that established by Kenneth Morgan's, *Slavery, Atlantic Trade and the British Economy, 1660–1800* (2000).
7. Joseph E. Inikori, *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England: A Study in International Trade and Economic Development* (Cambridge, U.K: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Chris Evans, *Slaves Wales: The Welsh and Atlantic Slavery, 1660–1850* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010); T.M. Devine, 'Did Slavery Made Scotia Great', *Britain and the World* 4, no. 1 (2011). T.M. Devine, 'Did Slavery make Scotia Great?: A Question Revisited', in *Recovering Scotland's Slavery Past: The Caribbean Connection*, ed. T.M. Devine (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).
8. Mark Harvey and Nicholas Draper have noted that whilst Berg and Hudson claim that slavery was not 'necessary' to the British Industrial Revolution, 'in fact, the whole book argues exactly that' (that is, that it *was* necessary). Mark Harvey and Nicholas Draper, 'Britain's Debt to Slavery: A Critical Review', *History Workshop Journal* (April 2024): 6.
9. Barbara L. Solow and Stanley L. Engerman, 'British Capitalism and Caribbean Slavery: The Legacy of Eric Williams: An Introduction', in *British Capitalism and Caribbean Slavery: The Legacy of Eric Williams*, eds. Solow and Engerman (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 1.
10. M. Berg, and P. Hudson, 'Slavery, Atlantic Trade and Skills: A Response to Mokyr's 'Holy Land Of Industrialism'', *Journal of the British Academy* 9 (2021): 259–81.
11. Solow and Engerman, 'British Capitalism and Caribbean Slavery', 1.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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