

Economic not
humanitarian factors
history essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The economic reasons posited for the abolition of slavery centre around the system not being as profitable as it used to be to the British economy. The leading decline thesis historian, Eric Williams, argued that the abolition of slavery came about because the system of slavery no longer had the significance it used to for the British economy.[5] This is evident from Britain's declining exports to its West Indian colonies in the years leading up to emancipation. From 1821 to 1832, the year before the emancipation act, British exports to its West Indian colonies declined by a quarter.[6] This resulted in a declining importance of the West Indian colonies to Britain. This declining importance made it easier to abolish slavery in the empire.

Of the economic factors, the main reason for the abolition of slavery was its declining profitability. Just prior to emancipation, production in the British West Indies was either stagnant or decreasing.[7] There is ample evidence that shows that in the industries where the slaves were the labour force, production was indeed in decline. For example, production of rum and cotton in the British West Indies declined 25 and 88 per cent respectively in the years between 1815 and 1833.[8] Even the most prominent anti-decline theorist, Seymour Drescher, noted that in the first half of the nineteenth century, British colonial sugar production dropped.[9] The greatest employer of Negro slaves in the British West Indies, sugar production, was no longer profitable. According to Williams: "In 1806 the price of sugar was less than the cost of production, and in 1807 the planter made no profit at all." [10] This declining profitability resulted in planters looking for a way out of a system that was no longer profitable for them. This way out would be abolition.

In addition to the British colonies declining, competition from rival colonies, especially from St Domingue played a role in ending slavery in the British West Indies. The French produced more efficiently and sold their sugar for less. Of the French colonies, St Domingue alone exported in 1789, a full third more than all the other British colonies combined.[11] French sugar cost a fifth less than British sugar.[12] This meant that French sugar was outselling British sugar on the European market. In order to deal with the French competition, British Prime Minister William Pitt sought to abolish the slave trade to deprive the French colonies of a labour force.[13]

Pitt's attempt to sabotage French sugar production is another example of how little humanitarian factors played in the abolition of slavery. In fact, many abolitionists, after the abolition of the slave trade supported the continuation of slavery.[14] For example, one of the leading abolitionists, William Wilberforce, vehemently opposed any emancipation effort after the end of the slave trade.[15] The very humanitarians who had championed the causes of abolition, opposed emancipation.

Like Wilberforce, British leadership was also not willing to take further steps toward emancipation after abolishing the slave trade. The British Prime Minister William Pitt did not attempt to stop the slave trade in recently acquired British colonies and permitted the planters to accumulate slaves as a safeguard against abolition.[16] His actions were economically motivated as he allowed the colonies to stock themselves with slaves prior to emancipation.

William Cunningham also noted the fact that despite any humanitarian efforts, economics was the driving force behind abolition. He states that: "Comparative little progress was made till the philanthropic agitation was reinforced by...economic reasons for abandoning the trade as detrimental." [17] This shows that even with humanitarian sentiment, Britain only abolished slavery and the slave trade when the economic reasons for doing so were strong enough.

The slave trade was an important source of wealth for Britain when it was at its most prosperous. This contributed to the reluctance to abolish it at that time. The response of the Prime Minister of Great Britain at a time when the trade, and slavery as a whole, was at the peak of its profitability for the British shows this clearly. According to Eric Williams: "Two petitions were presented to Parliament, in 1774 and 1776, for the abolition of the slave trade. A third, more important, was presented in 1783 by the Quakers. The Prime Minister, Lord North, complimented them on their humanity, but regretted that abolition was impossibility as the slave trade had become necessary to every nation in Europe." [18]

These words of the then British prime minister show that at least the motives of the Quakers were humanitarian but Britain could not have abolished the slave trade because of its necessity. This necessity referred to by the then prime minister was an economic necessity. This economic necessity arose as: "The triangular trade provided a market in West Africa and the West Indies for metropolitan products, thereby increasing metropolitan and contributing to full employment at home." [19] Even the English Parliament recognized the importance of the slave trade to British industry in a

committee report.[20]Because of this necessity, Britain would only abolish the slave trade if it were no longer profitable.

Those involved in the slave trade were keen to show how beneficial it was to the British. In 1662 (long before any anti-slavery movement started in England) the Company of Royal Adventurers Trading to Africa “ pointed to the ‘ profit and honour’ that had accrued to British subjects from the slave trade”[21]and the king of the time also described it as a:” beneficial trade... enriching of this our Kingdom.”[22]Those who profited for the slave trade and the sugar industry supported by it secured their position by controlling Parliament. The financed the campaigns of Members of Parliament and many planters held seats in the House of Commons.[23]This same Parliament defeated motion after motion to abolish slavery during the height of sugar’s profitability, and eventually did when the financial situation in the colonies deteriorated.

During the time of prosperity for the British planters, there were no anti-slavery societies. This shows that the movement for abolition only began when slavery begun to be unprofitable. A sugar plantation could be a highly enterprise for the English planter. According to the English historian Sir Dalby Thomas, the typical plantation in the British West Indian colonies yielded an annual profit of £540 or 10%.[24]Historian Robert C. Batie writes:” sugar cane cultivation was exceptionally profitable and economic growth unusually rapid during the 1660s.”[25]During this time, there was virtually no opposition to the slave trade or slavery. This further undermines the argument that humanitarian reasons were responsible for the end of the slave trade.

When slavery was profitable, the planters used their influence to oppose abolition of either the slave trade or slavery. The labour force for the growing of sugar was, of course, African slaves supplied by the slave trade. Labour is usually the most costly factor of production. Despite the planters having to pay for the slaves' upkeep, the mere fact that the slaves were paid no wages and that the slave trade provided this ready supply wage-free labour, meant that the planters enjoyed immense savings in labour costs. Many planters in the British West Indies were absentees.[26] Back in England, they would use their influence to get favourable measures passed for them.[27] With so much influence in Parliament, they did not seek abolition when conditions were favourable, only when the profitability was in decline did movements for abolition gather strength.

The American Revolution also played a role in the economic decline of the British West Indian colonies, and thus hastened the end of slavery there. From 1776, the declaration of American Independence, to the end of slavery, the British West Indies production and the amount they imported from Britain declined.[28] This came about because the Americans readily supplied the West Indies with food for the slaves and other products that sustained plantation life. Upon American independence, the U. S became a foreign country outside the British Empire, subject to the Navigation Laws.[29] This made it harder, if not impossible, for the West Indian colonies to obtain vital American supplies. This hastened the downfall of the slave system. American independence also reduced the number of slaves in the British Empire, making it easier to abolish slavery.

While humanitarian motives were present, and no doubt served as the impetus for some to advocate the abolition of slavery, it is clear that economic factors were responsible for the end of slavery in the British West Indies. When the slave trade and slavery were profitable for Britain, there was little opposition to it. Vested planter interests crushed the little opposition that did exist. The decline in profitability of the West Indian colonies, sparked by, among other things, the American Revolution, necessitated the abolition of the slave trade and slavery in the British West Indies.