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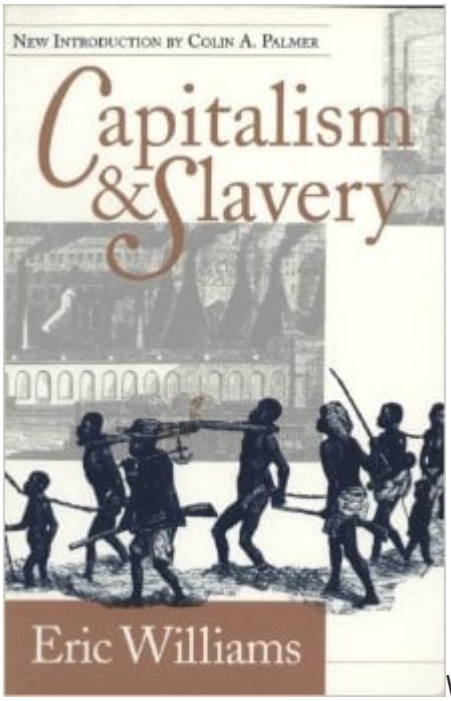
# « Capitalism and Slavery »

## A Review of Eric Williams' Book

Par Hugo Turner
Mondialisation.ca, 08 février 2016

*In his classic work « Capitalism and Slavery » Eric Williams exposed in vivid detail a fact that the west would like to forget. The west owes it's wealth in large part to slavery (and genocide of course). It was slavery that funded the industrial revolution. Not in some abstract way but quite literally the famous Watt engine (The first steam engine) was funded with money from the West Indian sugar plantations.*

*Many of Europe's great fortunes owe themselves to slavery. Williams wrote his book long ago in 1942 but the facts he revealed have been intentionally ignored ever since. Thus only recently historians have rediscovered what Williams wrote about back then.*




Williams work is a classic of both Marxist analysis and black history. Actually Marx himself had noted the role of Slavery in fueling the rise of Capitalism. Williams focuses his work on the relationship between British capitalism and slavery, but he also deals with the role slavery played in funding the rise of France and the US. Those interested in the role of slavery in fueling France should read C. L. R. James classic « Black Jacobins » which I discussed in my August 2015 article « Revolution in Haiti ».

Williams charts the economic history of slavery fueling the expansion of commercial capitalism, leading to the rise of Industrial Capitalism. Lavery Williams argues was abolished in England not purely for the moral reasons cited at the time but simply as part of the triumph of free trade over mercantilism. Slavery was abolished in the British empire but ended up being « outsourced » to Latin America and the United States. Slave grown cotton

would fuel the industrial revolution of the 19th century just as the profits from slave grown sugar had fueled the 18th century.

Anti-Slavery would become a cover for British Imperialism as it expanded in India, and would serve as the excuse for the conquest of Africa later in the century. Actually I'm currently reading Gerald Horne's « Negro Comrades of The Crown » which deals with the great use England made of the slavery issue against it's american rivals mobilizing slaves to rise up against their masters during the war of 1812 or using black troops (former slaves) to defend Canada. It's another masterpiece but lets return to Eric Williams Classic work which has inspired (and doubtless been plagiarized by) so many recent historians.

I should mention that Eric Williams later became the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago an important biographical detail.

« Capitalism and Slavery » begins by examining the origins of slavery. Slavery arose out of the economic necessity for labor. First to be enslaved were the Natives but they died quickly, or knowing the local territory often escaped. Ironically next it would be the turn of the whites who were forced into servitude. In a detail especially relevant today with the rise of mass incarceration state as Glen Ford calls it was the way the legal system was used to force the whites into servitude for a variety of petty crimes.

They were given the choice of deportation and servitude or a hanging. However servitude was temporary not permanent. In addition the english poor mounted violent resistance against the « spirits » as they called those who kidnapped people into servitude anyone they suspected could easily be killed by an angry mob. In the colonies it was much easier for a white in servitude to run away and pass for free. Williams offers a vivid picture of the terrible conditions faced by those in servitude who were also packed into ships in only slightly better conditions then the slaves, and reminds his readers that it was perfectly legal for masters to beat their white servants both in England and it's colonies. Africa became the new source for forced labor and their slavery was usually permanent.

I should explain There were two types of colonies. First Those with poor soils and little resources like the northern US or Canada. Ironically this would later be to their advantage as they were forced to become diversified self sufficient economies. However the second type colonies with rich soils or natural resources could be used for quick and easy profits by producing a single crop. In the 17th and 18th centuries one extremely valuable cash crop was sugar cane. Sugar was the Oil of it's day with the introduction of tea and coffee back in Europe there was ever growing demand for sugar.

The most efficient way to cultivate it was on large plantations. Since it was so valuable it was cheaper to just import food with the profits so as much land as possible could be dedicated to sugar cultivation. It was the islands of the west indies like Jamaica, Haiti, Cuba, and Barbados that were ideal for growing it. Sugar Cane exhausted the soil which would be an important factor in the future. The British West Indies were far more valuable then the mainland in the amount of profits it generated. The British West Indies were at one point 4 times as valuable as all the other British colonies combined. The Growth of the still colonial future northern united states was fueled by providing the food and supplies for these islands which generated enormous fortunes. Those plantation owners who got rich in the sugar returned to England where they formed the powerful « West Indian Interest » as Williams called it which bought a number of famous english politicians like Gladstone and the famous conservative Burke. They used their political muscle to enforce a sugar monopoly forcing

England to buy it's more expensive west indian sugar instead of the cheaper sugar from France's newer and hence more fertile Caribbean colonies. This would later be their downfall but for a time they would rule England and their enormous fortunes would fund the industrialization of England.

But it was not merely the wealthy plantation owners of the colonies that made their fortunes off of slavery. The economic growth of the English cities was closely tied to slavery as Williams documents in extensive detail. Liverpool owed it's fortune in the slave trade.

They supplied not just english colonies with slaves but their Spanish and French competitors. It was well known at the time and once when a visiting (and intoxicated) actor was being heckled he shouted back that he refused to be insulted in a town built entirely on the blood of slaves. From it's humble beginnings with a single slave ship stetting sail in 1709 by 1795 Liverpool controlled 5/8 of the British Slave Trade and 3/7 of the whole european slave trade. Bristol had begun as the dominant slave trading city but was forced by Liverpool's competition into the equally slavery related sugar refining interest.

The Growth of Manchester was driven by the cotton manufacturing Cotton supplied by slave labor in America's south. Birmingham sold Guns that were traded for African slaves (1 gun for 1 slave) fueling the massive but forgotten slave catching wars that would destabilize much of the continent spreading chaos, horror and murder across Africa. Incidentally as Gerald Horne points out once Britain abolished the slave trade in 1807 the United States would take over, Brazil for example owes it's massive black population to the energetic efforts of the american slave traders.

In addition to fueling the growth of some of Britain's most important cities. Williams points out the many sectors of the english economy whose growth was fueled by the profits of slavery and slave trade. The growth of Iron industry was fueled by the demands for chains, swords, guns used in the slave trade. Slavery Financed the growth of the commercial Insurance industry a vital element in the growth of capitalism allowing for the « management of risk » the slave Trade was a risky business with the constant threat of shipwreck, disease, and of course uprisings among the captured slaves. Each slave, a valuable piece of merchandise was insured for the voyage.

The Banking industry also owed it's growth to the massive profits generated by slavery. In fact many bankers began as slave traders. Captain on a slave ship was the first step on the ladder that lead ultimately to the Merchant-Banker as Williams points out. One famous bank that made it's fortune off slavery is Barclays for example. The rich West Indies Planters often became bankers on their return to England. Actually they were so rich that even the King was annoyed and envious of their opulence and they quickly married into the highest ranks of the nobility. Of course even the monarchs of Europe got rich off the slave trade. In fact one major reason for the « Glorious Revolution » as Williams points out was to destroy the lucrative royal monopoly on the slave trade opening the doors to the « Free Trade in Slaves » which would fuel England's economic growth during the 18th century. England and France fought wars over the « Asiento » the right to sell slaves to Spain's colonies.

To return to the industries fueled by slavery and the slave trade, there was shipping. Slavery contributed to a huge growth in shipbuilding and paid for the construction of the ports and docks in Liverpool Bristol, and other cities. Textile manufacturing was fueled by the need to provide clothes for the millions of slaves. Wool for example was used to clothe the slaves even though it was completely inappropriate for the tropics. The raw materials for cotton

came from slavery and the finished goods were traded in Africa for more slaves. The dye industry developed to provide colorful patterns to trade for slaves. There was a whole industry that produced useless trinkets to trade for slaves. The Iron industry itself produced bars of iron which were used as currency on the coast to pay for slaves. The wealthy west indian interests funded the invention of the steam engine as Williams describes in detail. They also invested heavily in building England's railroads the Industrial revolution was thus fueled by slavery. Cotton would drive the massive growth of industry in 19th century England. Cotton mills were the biggest factories in England and their raw material was grown by slaves in the US south, Latin America, and the supposedly « free » semi-slave labour of their Indian empire.

Even England's great philanthropists had been enriched by the slave trade. The various Churches were also involved. In America slave traders would found famous universities like Brown. Some of the most powerful politicians in England were in the west indian interests pockets. Slavery was perfectly respectable. As Williams points out it was only changing economic circumstances that forced a change in attitude although there were important geopolitical reasons as well. For example the victory of the Haitian revolution and the inability of the British to conquer the island where they suffered disastrous defeat at the hands of the former slaves who were masters of guerrilla and conventional war and beat the British, the Spanish and the French.

Williams devotes the last two chapters of his book to examining the abolition of slavery. First he deals with the efforts of reformers who were backed by powerful new economic interests intent on destroying the west indian sugar monopoly. They wanted cheaper food so they could pay their workers less and so wanted to institute free trade in food. England had become the most powerful economy in the world and it was cheaper to rely on the slave labor of the United States and Latin America, as well as the cheap labor of feudal India. Free markets became the key to english economic dominance and the West Indian interest were standing in their way. The abolitionists were the tools of a new East India interest.

These were the economic motives behind the abolition movement. Of course as the system of slavery was a nightmare of barbarous cruelty (again I recommend C. L. R. James who provides a full account of the horrors of slavery where a hundred different forms of torture and grisly murder became part of everyday slang) Thus it was easy to whip up a massive public relations campaign simply by describing the everyday conditions of slavery.

A powerful mass movement against slavery was built up. To break the power of the west indian lobby democratic reforms were carried out to redistrict parliament. Politicians debated endlessly in parliament. However as Williams points out there was a certain unavoidable hypocrisy in all this as it was still to profitable to trade with the slave societies like the US and Latin America for Capitalism to actually break it's ties with slavery. In fact until 1823 the english abolitionists didn't seek to end slavery which they claimed would die out naturally. They were only trying to end the slave trade.

Williams attributes the real cause of the abolition of Slavery to the resistance of the Slaves themselves. In the wake of the Haitian revolution the West Indies was rocked by waves of slave insurrections. British Guyana, Jamaica and Barbados all had nearly successful slave revolts. Upon learning of the outlawing of the slave trade in 1807 they misinterpreted it as being a Royal decree ending Slavery itself and began to refuse to work and to constantly petition the authorities. While the politicians debated back in London the Caribbean had become a powder keg and Britain was faced with the choice of either ending slavery or

loosing control of their colonies altogether as France had lost control of Haiti.

Finally in 1833 Slavery was abolished in the English empire although it secretly continued in India. Of course as Williams pointed out in 1942 this history of slave rebellion is constantly being suppressed just as more then 70 years later the same is equally true. This is of course no accident our present day masters want us to forget that we have the power not only to resist but to overturn their entire fragile system based on the exploitation of the many by the few. A friend in Academia tells me that research along these lines is actively discouraged. Thus we are continually forced to discover anew our history. Brilliant works like « Black Jacobins » and « Capitalism & Slavery » are suppressed forgotten and then rediscovered again and again.

To conclude the wealth of the western powers like France, America, and Great Britain was based on slavery and genocide. Today this same process continues and Ironically as the UN revealed recently slavery is on the rise worldwide. Meanwhile with the end of the civil war in the United States they put an important loophole in the abolition of slavery allowing it for prisoners. Prison Labor is a massively growing sector of the american economy and just as the great fortunes of the 18th and 19th century were tied to slavery todays multinational corporations are deeply invested in the growth of the mass incarceration state. Of course it would take a whole new article to describe the companies involved big names like McDonalds and Goldman Sachs. Slavery didn't end like they told us in school. Slavery is on the rise! Latin American workers in the US have become major new victims. There is no crime that capitalism will not commit if it creates a few percentage points of profit. Until Capitalism is abolished the world will never know an end to war, slavery, genocide, imperialism, exploitation and poverty.

Sources

A Special Thank You to @Zaganashikwe for suggesting I read this book.

You should definitely read Eric Williams « Capitalism and Slavery » for yourself as I've only offered a brief outline. It is written with a delightful irony. I also recommend C. L. R. James « Black Jacobins » which does a great job of showing how slavery fueled french economic growth and unlike Williams who deliberately avoids the topic, gives a nightmarish picture of what life was like for the slaves on the sugar plantations. I've just begun reading Gerald Horne's « Negro Comrades of the Crown » and I highly recommend it as well. Horne is a master at bringing suppressed history vividly to life and I'll smile whenever I hear the year 1812 I'll imagine angry slaves burning the white house and stealing president Madison's silver ware.

Since it is Black History Month I direct you to Abayomi Azikwe's podcast where I have learned a great deal of black history from listening too. It was from Azikwe that I learned about Williams, James and Horne.

http://www.blogtalkradio.com/panafricanjournal

And Check out The Black Agenda Report which created the term « mass incarceration state » and does a great job of exposing the crimes of capitalism.

http://blackagendareport.com

And Check out my friend @arghshell who has a blog and a podcast that did a great expose of the US military role in Sex Trafficking another continuation of slavery

http://n0p3.net

Here is the third episode which describes the lives of enslaved women in the US

http://n0p3.net/2015/10/01/us-military-trade-in-trafficked-persons-and-sexual-servitude-part-3/

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