



BOOK REVIEW

## M. Berg and P. Hudson, *Slavery, Capitalism and the Industrial Revolution*

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‘The profits [of Atlantic slavery],’ Eric Williams boldly wrote in his seminal 1944 work *Capitalism and Slavery*, ‘provided one of the main streams of that accumulation of capital in England which financed the industrial revolution.’ Historians have spent the eighty years since *Capitalism & Slavery’s* publication fiercely debating Williams’s provocative thesis. One school, which held sway for much of the twentieth century, held that the Atlantic slave economy was too peripheral to power industrialization. The population of the West Indian colonies, these scholars note, was no larger than that of a single large English county; the profits deriving from the plantations and the slave trade were not particularly great; and Atlantic slavery contributed little to overall GDP. Another school has argued that a narrow focus on numbers, such as profits and population, obscures the flows of slave-derived capital into a remarkably broad array of economic sectors, especially key industrial areas such as cotton spinning. While Williams’s supporters are currently rising in prominence, the debate rages on, especially as the Black Lives Matter protests have shifted increasing focus onto slavery’s role in the making of the modern world.

Maxine Berg’s and Pat Hudson’s new book *Slavery, Capitalism and the Industrial Revolution* is therefore a timely contribution to an important debate. Whereas Williams sought to make a sweeping argument about the rise and fall of British Atlantic slavery, this volume has a narrower aim: to explore the ‘degree to which’ the industrial revolution and the rise of Britain as ‘the world’s primary slave trader’ were ‘connected’ (pp. 6–7). They analyze this connection by drawing on their considerable expertise as ‘historians of Britain’s industrial revolution and her longer trajectory as an economic power.’ (p. 6) Berg and Hudson’s previous experience particularly equips them to explore the revolutions in consumption, textile making, and finance that were crucial to the industrial revolution, but that have previously been seen as being connected to factors internal to Britain. The authors’ expertise in employing quantitative data and mapping is also put to good effect. This is not, however, a purely data-driven study because, as they note, ‘many aspects of the impact of slavery are not measurable in quantitative terms.’ (p. 7) Given that neither author is a historian of Atlantic slavery by training, they also synthesize large volumes of secondary works

by specialists in slavery and the slave trade. Unlike Joseph Inikori's 2002 study of this same subject, which was based on deep primary research and quantitative methods, *Slavery, Capitalism and the Industrial Revolution* thus principally seeks to synthesize existing scholarship to offer new perspectives on the Williams thesis.

By focusing each chapter on a different sector of the economy, Berg and Hudson make a series of new claims about the centrality of Atlantic slavery to Britain's industrial revolution. First, they argue that Atlantic slavery was exceptionally dynamic and productive: the slave economy grew rapidly across the eighteenth century; produced healthy returns for its investors; and was equally as innovative as British agriculture. Second, those vibrant plantation trades were strongly connected to sectors of the economy that drove growth in Britain's economy. Expanding sugar output in the Caribbean helped power the consumer revolution and the East India trades, for example, and the Atlantic demand for exports also stimulated finance, shipping, and manufacturing. Third, slavery was particularly important for developing the hinterlands of Atlantic ports such as Liverpool and Glasgow, which would, post-abolition, become key innovation zones in Britain's industrial economy. Finally, Atlantic slavery was the crucial driver of the mining, metallurgical, and textile industries that were the foundations of Britain's industrial revolution. 'The slave and plantation trades were,' Berg and Hudson argue, 'the hub around which many other dynamic and innovatory sectors of the economy pivoted.' (p. 7) Berg and Hudson therefore convincingly conclude that 'Slavery was one of the sparks that set the industrial revolution alight.' (p. 228).

The challenge for scholars working in the wake of this important new volume will be to determine the extent to which slavery's spark was primarily responsible for lighting the industrial revolution's flame. As the data within this volume notes, Atlantic slavery was just one of many factors driving British industrialization. We learn at this book's conclusion, for example, that cotton was the only major British economic sector by value added in 1800 that was strongly linked to Atlantic slavery (the other three were wool, building and leather). The figures for slavery's overall contribution to economic activity are also unimpressive, with the entire plantation sector and its associated industries accounting for just eleven percent of GDP by the end of the eighteenth century. These data are perhaps the reason why Berg and Hudson are at pains to note that slavery did not 'caus[e] the industrial revolution.' Instead, they argue that slavery was 'formative in the timing and nature' of that revolution, and 'crucial' to its 'making.' (p. 12).

*Slavery, Capitalism, and the Industrial Revolution* thus helps to substantiate Williams' thesis and, in so doing, will force scholars to take seriously slavery's importance for driving Britain's industrial revolution. It might, therefore, move the debate away from polarized positions that argue either wholly for or against slavery being the primary driver of industrialization, and towards a more nuanced discussion that acknowledges slavery's role, while also paying due regard to the important factors that were not linked to the Atlantic, such as domestic demand for manufactures, increasing agricultural productivity, population growth, the use of steam power, and urbanization, to name but a few. By adopting this more capacious and balanced view, we may finally grasp slavery's role in igniting the world-changing industrial revolution eighty years after Eric Williams first posited it.