Why was the British slave trade abolished in 1807?

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On 25th March 1807 the Slavery Abolition Act was passed in Parliament, ending the legal trade in slaves throughout the British Empire. Only fifty years prior to the passing of the act, abolishing the slave trade would have been inconceivable—slavery had been central to the British economy for over 200 years, and had served as an important means of employment for Britons.¹ Moreover, it had been enthusiastically ‘endorsed, supported and profitably enjoyed by the royal family, as well as by the families of sundry courtiers, financiers, landowners and merchants.’² If the slave trade had been such a success for Britain, why was the decision made to abolish it?

The reason for the abolition of the slave trade has been a subject of contention amongst historians. Broadly, the debate has split into those who argue that abolition was an economically rational decision, and those who argue that abolition was economically irrational, and therefore other social, political, ideological or moral factors played a more important role. However, this essay will argue that this presents an unnecessary dichotomy created by scholars with an overly-rigid interpretation of proponents of the economic argument, represented in particular by the historian Eric Williams. Rather, it will be argued that the central tenets of the economic argument contribute to validating the ideological explanations of the ending of the slave trade.

The Imperial School

Until the publication of Williams’ seminal book Capitalism and Slavery in 1944, scholarly work on abolition was dominated by the ‘imperial school’. This is also sometimes referred to as the ‘Manichean’ or ‘Clarksonian’ model, after abolitionist Thomas Clarkson, whose 1808 work The

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² Gott, Britain’s Empire, 147.
Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament promoted his belief that Christian morality was the leading cause of abolition. Clarkson’s narration presents a progressive battle between the ‘good’ in human nature, guided by the ‘Divine Spirit’, and the ‘propensity to do that which is wrong’. Abolition was the culmination of a dialectical process of good versus evil, and the convergence of various ‘streams’ of intellectual and religious thought throughout history. Ultimately, Clarkson argues, abolition was not simply a triumph against suffering, but a improvement in the ‘moral condition’ of humanity.

Sir Reginald Coupland followed in the Clarksonian historiographical tradition with his biography of abolitionist William Wilberforce, published in 1923. However, as David Beck Ryden highlights, Coupland’s approach was slightly more sophisticated, viewing the struggle as ‘not between good and evil but between morality and national self-interest.’ In Catherine Hall’s words, this portrait of abolition helped to contribute to a ‘vision of Britain’s pride in having led the world’.

**Eric Williams and the Economic Argument**

It was in the context of this dominant narrative of abolition that Williams wrote *Capitalism and Slavery*. Williams described the moralistic argument as ‘poetic sentimentality translated into modern history’. This echoed fellow Trinidadian C. L. R. James, who in his book *The Black Jacobins*

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criticised this literature for its ‘smug sentimentality, characteristic of the official approach of Oxford scholarship to abolition.’

Instead, Williams sought a more structural, material explanation for the ending of the slave trade. For this he drew on the work of Lowell J. Ragatz, who in his book *The Fall of the Planter Class in the British Caribbean, 1763–1833* (1928) first brought to light evidence of declining profits in the sugar industry, especially following the American War of Independence. As Selwyn H. H. Carrington more recently noted, the war prompted the passing of the Prohibitory Act in December 1775, which meant the termination of American commerce with the West Indian colonies. The colonies had concentrated on sugar production in the expectation of plentiful supplies of food and other materials from the mainland. The resulting shortages of foodstuffs in the colonies, writes Carrington, ‘contributed significantly to increased death rates among the black population mainly from malnutrition.’

Williams argues that American independence thus marked the beginning of the ‘uninterrupted decline’ in the value of the sugar islands. And this was simply the short-term trigger of a long-term disintegration of the mercantilist system and a move towards laissez-faire capitalism. Williams draws on a wealth of writings of contemporaries, as well as parliamentary reports and debates, to support his case. For example, he highlights the writings of Arthur Young, who was the champion of the English agricultural revolution, and


drew important lessons from the American revolt and called the colonies nuisances. “That great lesson of modern politicks,” he wrote with asperity, “the independancy of North America ought

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10 Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, 120.
to enlarge the horizon of our commercial policy.” It was not that the sugar islands were not of consequence; “they have been mischievously made of great consequence: but they are not of the importance their advocates falsely contend for.”

The pressure of American independence was compounded by soil exhaustion in the British West Indies, and competition from the French colonies. While British West Indian planters faced mounting debts, by 1789 Saint Domingue’s exports ‘were valued at over one-third more than those of all the British West Indies combined.’ Meanwhile, British manufacturing was expanding ‘to the point where it required more markets than the slave colonies could prove and … was no longer dependent on profits from the slave system for its capital needs.’ West Indian planters became ideologically and economically isolated.

Overproduction was a key problem that drove abolition, Williams claimed. West Indian produce exceeded home consumption, creating a surplus of approximately twenty-five per cent. But this needed to be sold competitively on the European market, up against the cheaper Brazilian and Cuban sugar, which meant Britain had to provide subsidies and bounties. “The West Indian planters were being paid, in fact, to enable them to compete with people who, as we have seen, were some of Britain's best customers,’ wrote Williams. “To the capitalists this was intolerable. Overproduction … demanded abolition.”

Revisionism

11 ibid.

12 ibid., 123.


15 Williams, Capitalism and Slavery, 152.
Williams’ thesis always remained controversial, only receiving mainstream acceptance amongst West Indian and ‘Third World’ scholars. Emphasis has focused on the aspect of the Williams’ thesis relating to the declining profitability of the slave trade, based on Ragatz’s research. Roger Anstey in 1975 was among the first to cast doubt on Williams’ short-term interpretation of the decline of the trade, arguing that, in terms of national economic interest, 1807 was perhaps the worst possible time to abolish the slave trade. As David B. Davis has summarised, particularly in the midst of the Napoleonic Wars, ‘Britain needed every export market outside of enemy control,’ and at the time the British West Indies’ share of Britain’s total oceanic trade was higher than at any time in the eighteenth century. Rather than being in decline, Anstey assessed that the British West Indies and the sugar industry were actually flourishing. Moreover, Anstey argued that abolitionists were simply using the economic argument for abolition as a mask for their humanitarian concerns in order to drive their campaign forward.

Seymour Drescher has become the most prominent scholar to dispute both Williams’ short- and long-term interpretations. In his book 1977 Econocide, he asserts that it was ‘economic suicide’ for Britain to abolish the slave trade. The slave trade was ‘a vibrant institution that produced large financial returns to individual planters on the very eve of abolition’. Britain was in a position where it could nearly monopolise the slave trade and gain ‘a preponderant share of the growing world market for sugar and coffee.’ Decline, he argues, did not begin until after abolition.

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19 Davis, Inhuman bondage, 231-2.

20 ibid., 242.
But a fundamental issue with Drescher’s argument is that the British Empire continued to thrive and rapidly expand after the abolition of slavery—if it was ‘economic suicide’, surely this would not have been the case.\(^{21}\) This also confirms Williams’ thesis that free trade was necessary in order to allow for industrialisation and the expansion of the economy.

David Eltis expanded on Drescher’s work to show the ‘profound incompatibility’ between the abolitionism and economic self-interest.\(^ {22}\) He stressed that slavery became more valuable due to economic growth which in turn sparked an increase in demand for consumer goods such as sugar, tobacco and cotton, which were produced cheaply by slaves.\(^ {23}\) The slump in the market of goods produced by slaves that was identified by Williams, therefore, was ‘artificial and temporary’.\(^ {24}\)

### The Role of Ideology

In rejecting the decline thesis, scholars were tasked with making sense of why the trade was abolished if it was such an economically irrational decision. One approach was to stress the role of ideology. As Drescher has written, a ‘bourgeois industrial mentality’ was emerging at the end of the eighteenth century which was notably hostile towards slavery.\(^ {25}\)

Roger Anstey was among the first to offer an assessment of the role of ideology in the abolition of the slave trade. He stressed that ‘the initial impulse for the abolition of the slave trade came from newly-awaked Christian conviction strengthened by the ‘reasonableness’ and philanthropy of the Enlightenment.\(^ {26}\) The developing economic forces, Anstey insisted, were irrelevant to the question

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\(^{22}\) *ibid.*, 15.


\(^{24}\) *ibid.*, 243.


of abolition, and had no influence on the political process.\textsuperscript{27} What mattered was ‘the high moral purpose, daunting perseverance and political skill, and for the most part warmly Christian inspiration of the abolitionists.’\textsuperscript{28}

Unsurprisingly, many were unconvinced by Ansley’s neo-Clarksonian explanation. It has been argued by Emilia Viotti da Costa that Anstey employs a kind of circular reasoning in his link between anti-slavery and evangelical Protestantism, falling into a trap of defining causation by concomitance. ‘[I]f there is no doubt that most abolitionists belonged to evangelical denominations this does not mean necessarily that they \textit{became} abolitionists \textit{because of} their religious beliefs,’ writes da Costa. She continues:

\begin{quote}
when Anstey says that Grenville Sharp was stirred to action by the spectacle of an ill-treated black and James Stephen became an abolitionist because he was shocked by the mockery of a slave trial in Barbados, … one cannot avoid thinking that before Sharp or Stephen many men had watched the tortures of slaves or witnessed mock slave trials without being driven to abolitionism.\textsuperscript{29}
\end{quote}

Walter E. Minchinton has added that it is evident that a significant number of evangelical Christians in Britain ‘remained indifferent to, or tolerant of, slavery,’ while at the same time, Protestant theology did not result in mass abolitionism in other parts of northern Europe. Furthermore, there were plenty of non-evangelical proponents of the abolition movement in Britain.\textsuperscript{30}

\begin{flushright}
\footnotesize\textsuperscript{27} ibid. \\
\footnotesize\textsuperscript{28} ibid. \\
\footnotesize\textsuperscript{29} da Costa, E. V. ‘Slavery and the Protestant Ethic: Commentary One’, in Michael Craton (ed.) \textit{Roots and Branches: Current Directions in Slave Studies} (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1979) 175. \\
\footnotesize\textsuperscript{30} Minchinton, ‘Abolition and Emancipation’, in McDonald (ed.) \textit{West Indies Accounts}, 256.
\end{flushright}
Davis is a leading critic of Anstey, and stresses the role of secular, rather than religious, ideology in the success of abolitionism. One of Davis’ main arguments is that a growing free labour ideology was emerging, which was increasingly at odds with slavery. Towards the end of the eighteenth century liberal, progressive ideas were gaining momentum, and one of the fundamental aspects of this was the notion of free, waged labor, to which slavery was the antithesis. Davis also draws on Dreschers’ work stressing the role of ‘the new allure of science—the belief in rational planning, social engineering, and controlled change’. This meant that Britain could ‘launch optimistic “experiments,” initially based on a commitment to extremely gradual progress and increasingly grounded in a faith in the ultimate economic superiority of free wage labor.\(^{31}\)

Drawing on the work of Eltis, Davis writes that by the end of the eighteenth century there was an increased feeling from both workers and employers that wage labour should be dignified and ennobled. Though interpreted in differing ways between worker and employer, free labour ideology could ‘even provide a sense of equality between the man who pays wages and the man who receives them.\(^{32}\) The ‘common crusade against slavery’ was thus seen by workers and employers alike as part of a wider campaign for what they viewed labour should be.\(^{33}\)

As such, Drescher has asserted that ‘[t]he substitution of an intangible capitalist spirit or ideology for tangible capitalist interests’ has driven the economic argument of *Capitalism and Slavery* to the ‘historiographic periphery’.\(^{34}\) Yet, while attempting to stress the primacy of ideology, Davis only reaffirms the importance of the economic argument. In his own words, ‘by defining slavery as a unique moral aberration, the ideology tended to give sanction to the prevailing economic order’, and

\(^{31}\) Davis, *Inhuman bondage*, 245.

\(^{32}\) ibid., 248.

\(^{33}\) ibid., 248.

\(^{34}\) Drescher, ‘Capitalism and slavery after fifty years’, 217.
the antislavery movement ‘helped to reshape attitudes toward work, liberty, exploitation, and proper discipline.’

Davis also wrote how

[those attuned to the new liberal political economy pioneered by Adam Smith could condemn slavery as less efficient and more expensive than a free labor system. It was also more costly for society as a whole because it inhibited the growth of population, industry, and national wealth.]

He even highlights that ‘British leaders became committed to colonial labor reforms … when they became convinced that free labor would be less dangerous than slavery and more beneficial for the imperial economy as a whole.’ Drescher too has inadvertently undermined the ideological argument when he notes that this ideology was grounded in ‘a faith in the ultimate economic superiority of free wage labor.’

Davis at the same time asserted that ‘like other ideologies, the commitment to free wage labor could be felt on a “gut level,” apart from any explicit rational thinking.’ Indeed, almost by definition, ideology is not made consciously. But likewise it does not appear spontaneously out of thin air. It is fair to say that ideology was key in the decision to finally abolish the slave trade. But fundamentally, underlying capitalist ideology is of course capitalism, which is undoubtedly an economic phenomenon. When Davis talks about the ideology of free labor, he implies that free labor is not intrinsically economic. Rather, labour is the essence of the given mode of production, and its nature changes alongside transformations in such modes of production. Though perhaps not consciously

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38 ibid., 245.

39 ibid., 248.
economically rational, the ideology went hand in hand with with the wider transformation of society.

**Revival of the decline thesis**

Though Drescher’s *Econocide* has been largely accepted by many scholars, there are a number who have questioned Drescher’s interpretation of the evidence. They have instead suggested that the West Indies plantations were in fact in decline, and the decision to abolish the trade therefore was a conscious, economically rational decision. Carrington and Minchinton in particular have been prominent critics of the work of Drescher, Davis and Eltis. Carrington accuses Drescher in particular of confusing the issue, and using ‘only a part of the information available to him, in order to arrive at the conclusion he desired.’

Carrington has insisted that the West Indies were clearly in a trend of decline, which had in fact begun by the time of the War of American Independence. Moreover, the apparent growth throughout the French Revolution and the Napoleonic War ‘was not even a full return to pre-1776 conditions of profitability.’ Despite the increased value of West Indian goods after the Haitian Revolution, ‘British policy and increased costs of production led to diminishing profits.’ Sugar prices were rising, but production costs were rising more rapidly. High local taxes and rising marketing costs, freight rates and insurance rates all exacerbated the issues facing West Indies planters.

Ryden has also been a leading proponent in the revival of the decline thesis. Though he claims that Williams dated the beginning of this decline too early, in the years immediately preceding abolition

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41 ibid.
42 ibid.
he argues that there was ‘clearly … a decline in the rate of profit.’
Decline resulted in changes in management, with the aim of reducing the mounting costs of plantation supplies and low commodity prices on the global market. This meant that planters were compelled to improve the conditions of slaves in order to increase productivity and profitability. These concessions resulted in the ‘formation of more independent economic activities and brought changes in their relationships with the plantation managers, overseers, and the white lower class.

Ryden also linked this decline to the transition from mercantilism to the free-market capitalism: the inefficient plantations which could profit under the former mode of production ‘could barely withstand’ the conditions of the latter.

Ryden also backed up Williams’ assertion that there was a crisis of overproduction in sugar, with production outstripping demand. The impact of the soaring production rate of sugar barely made a dent in revenue.

Ryden shows that Parliamentarians were well aware of the problem of overproduction, and this would have impacted their political decisions. Many pro-abolitionist parliamentarians indeed stressed that the ending of the slave trade could be advantageous for planters, envisioning ‘estates free from costly African diseases and … a less recalcitrant workforce’, and ending the sugar estates’ ‘cycle of debt’.

The revival of the decline thesis has simply added more fuel to the economic argument; a short term economic downturn in the profitability could have acted as the final nail in the coffin of a

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46 Ryden, ‘Does Decline Make Sense?’, 370.

47 ibid., 374.


49 Ryden, ‘Does Decline Make Sense?’, 371.
system that was already threatened by a long-term economic transformation in society. But even without this short-term decline in profitability, the slave trade was already under threat.

**Role of Abolitionists**

Recent historiography has used the role of abolitionists in the decline of the slave trade as a means to dismiss Williams’ thesis. What is more important, however, is to understand the development of the anti-slavery campaign in the context of broader societal changes.

Robin Blackburn in particular emphasises that the impetus for abolition came ‘from below’, rather than being simply ‘a vindication of capitalist advance’ as Williams would supposedly have it. He suggests that it was the much-ignored class struggle both in Britain and on the plantations that played a key role in the drive towards abolition. Blackburn’s position dovetails with that of Drescher, who also stresses the role of grassroots anti-slavery campaigns dominated by the working class, particularly artisans, in influencing policy-makers and eventually abolishing the trading of slaves. Workers were guided by their ‘genuine empathy’ for West Indian slaves, formed out of their own experiences as wage labourers. Their campaign was not intended to endorse capitalism, but to resist it.

Drescher highlights the growing significance of new modes of communication in developing dialogue between people and legislators, such as provincial newspapers, letters, adverts for gatherings and meetings, and pamphlets, as well as libraries. These enabled public engagement with

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51 *ibid.*, 28.


53 *ibid.*
the abolition debate.\textsuperscript{54} It is in this sense that scholars such as Drescher and Blackburn regard the abolition movement as a ‘pioneer’ in mobilisation and philanthropic organisation.\textsuperscript{55}

Like Drescher, Adam Hochschild has also written on the impact of this grassroots campaigning on elections. It was the 1806 election in which the slave trade ‘for the first time became a major election issue in some constituencies’, and several candidates changed their allegiance to the abolitionist side in their pursuit to be elected. ‘Perhaps the best tribute to the strength of public feeling’, wrote Hochschild, ‘came from a proslavery Liverpool M.P. who complained bitterly of the “popular clamour . . . resorted to on this occasion. The church, the theatre, and the press . . . laboured to create a prejudice against the Slave Trade.”\textsuperscript{56}

Abolitionists in parliament were increasing in numbers, and ‘[a]s it became apparent which way the wind was blowing, many pro-slave trade M.P.s, preferring to appear enlightened, jumped to the winning side.’ By 1807, ‘the momentum was unstoppable.’\textsuperscript{57} Hochschild thus declares that abolition was not a top-down policy imposed by the government, but one where ‘the sense of the nation has pressed abolition upon our rulers’, as the \textit{Edinburgh Review} reported at the time.\textsuperscript{58} It might, however, be that the abolitionist campaign only gained momentum when the capitalists entered the scene and began their brilliantly successful propaganda campaign.

Furthermore, Patricia Hollis has insisted that, although there was ‘an early sympathy for the anti-slavery cause amongst Jacobins and reformers like Thomas Hardy and John Cartwright,’ working-

\textsuperscript{55} \textit{ibid.}
\textsuperscript{56} Hochschild, A. \textit{Bury the Chains: The British Struggle to Abolish Slavery} (London: Pan Books, 2006) 305.
\textsuperscript{57} \textit{ibid.}, 307.
\textsuperscript{58} \textit{ibid.}
class radicals in the early 1800s were often relatively hostile to abolitionism based on ‘its indifference
to poverty and suffering at home.’\textsuperscript{59} This perception of the abolitionist campaign is more
understandable when the background of prominent abolitionists is taken into account. Catherine
Hall has discussed the close ideological links between planters, pro-slavers and abolitionists,
highlighting the shared ‘commitment to property rights and profit, alongside a fear of subalterns,
whether black or white, and a conviction that with education levels of civilisation could eventually
be achieved by ‘others’ less advanced than ourselves.’\textsuperscript{60} Abolition was merely a minor
disagreement—on the exploitation and conditions of workers at home, both slavers and abolitionists
of the upper echelons of society had little to say. This is perfectly summarised by Williams in his
description of Wilberforce:

\begin{quote}
Wilberforce was familiar with all that went on in the hold of a slave ship but ignored what
went on at the bottom of a mineshaft. He supported the Corn Laws, was a member of the
secret committee which investigated and repressed working class discontent in 1817,
opposed feminine anti-slavery associations, and thought the First Reform Bill was too
radical.\textsuperscript{61}
\end{quote}

While there is evidence to show that politicians felt under pressure from the popular movement for
abolition, they remained constrained by the political and economic possibilities of the period. This
supports the argument that the abolition of the slave trade was a way of granting a popular demand
which ‘threatened them far less than reforming gross inequalities at home.’\textsuperscript{62} As the anti-slavery
campaign attracted supporters from across the class spectrum,\textsuperscript{63} it could be used to appeal to a sense

\textsuperscript{59} Minchinton, ‘Abolition and Emancipation’, in McDonald (ed.) \textit{West Indies Accounts}, 257.
\textsuperscript{60} Hall, ‘Troubling Memories’, 150.
\textsuperscript{61} Williams, \textit{Capitalism and Slavery}, 182.
\textsuperscript{62} Hochschild, \textit{Bury the Chains}, 307.
\textsuperscript{63} Blackburn, \textit{The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery}, 295.
of nationalism while the country was in the midst of a war which was ‘straining the social fabric’.

Abolitionism particularly appealed to the middle-classes as it ‘promised to tame and reshape the rampant force of commercialism and industrialism, the arrogance of the ruling class and perhaps even the waywardness of the labouring classes’. Overall, as Blackburn puts it,

in a deeply conservative political system abolition of the slave trade became not so much the most urgent, as the least controversial, reform that could be undertaken … a seemingly peripheral issue raised by colonial slavery acted as a lightning conductor for struggles over peace and war, empire, national destiny, the formation of class blocs and the nature of the domestic political regime.

Blackburn’s analysis of abolitionism as ‘the least controversial reform’ is compatible with the general image of the slave trade as losing its economic importance.

**The Role of Slave Rebellions**

Finally, another dimension of the abolition campaign can be seen through analysing the consequences of slave rebellions. There had been a proliferation in revolts in the latter half of the eighteenth century—most notably beginning in 1760 with Tacky’s rebellion in Jamaica, followed by the rebellion in St Vincent led by Joseph Chattier, lasting from 1772 to 1795. There was also the 1791 Haitian Revolution led by Toussaint L’Ouverture, which successfully abolished slavery and established the very first black Republic in the Americas. As Williams has summarised, Britain’s attempts to seize revolutionary Saint Domingue whilst at war with France was a disaster:

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66 *ibid.*
67 Gott, *Britain’s Empire*, 147.
Expedition after expedition was sent unsuccessfully to capture the precious colony, first from the French, then from the Negroes. It was not, Parliament was assured, “a war for riches or local aggrandisement but a war for security. The allied cause in Europe was weakened in the interests of British imperialism. “the secret of England’s impotence for the first six years of the war,” writes Fortescue, historian of the British army, “may be said to lie in the two fatal words, St. Domingo.” Britain lost thousands of men and spent thousands of pounds in the attempt to capture Saint Domingue. She failed, but the world's sugar bowl was destroyed in the process and French colonial superiority smashed forever. “For this,” writes Fortescue, “England’s soldiers had been sacrificed, her treasure squandered, her influence weakened, her arm for six fateful years fettered, numbered and paralysed.”

The devastating impact of these revolts was more than apparent in Parliament, where military figures such as Lieutenant General Vyse turned their allegiance to the abolitionist cause after seeing the result of the rebellion on the British military. But, as Minchinton has put it, it was the action taken by the black slaves that put this dent in the profitably and sustainability of slave trade—they were ‘not passive beneficiaries of white benevolence, but were important agents of their own emancipation’ by creating ‘both a climate of opinion and an actual situation which made abolition and emancipation probably at some time.’

However, Minchinton has stressed that the rebellions’ impact is mitigated by the fact that the trade still continued, and in the 1790s more slaves were transported than had been in the history of the trade. Yet the indisputable strain of dealing with rebellions will have added to the immediacy of the abolitionist cause. And as Hochschild has highlighted, an independent Haiti—once the largest

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68 Williams, Capitalism and Slavery, 147.
69 Hochschild, Bury the Chains, 306.
71 ibid.
sugar producer in the Caribbean—meant that there was no risk of France dominating the sugar market once the Napoleonic Wars were over. This long-running argument of pro-slave traders could no longer hold sway.

Conclusion

This essay has explored the historiographical debates on the reasons for the abolition of the slave trade, focusing in particular on the response to Williams’ *Capitalism and Slavery*. Much of this debate has centred on whether the profits for the planters were in decline at the time of abolition, and what was the cost to the British economy. While Drescher’s statistical work on this has been influential, as this essay has shown, it has not gone unchallenged.

Above all, the debate on the causes of the abolition of the slave trade is not one that can be simply dichotomised as ideology versus materialism, though it has often been portrayed as such. The two are inextricably connected through Williams’ fundamental theory of the transition from mercantilism to industrial capitalism. And with this transition of the means of production comes ‘new psychology, new social relations, new institutions,’ and new ideology which would provide far more fertile ground for the abolitionist cause.72

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