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Capitalism and Abolition

The abolition of slavery is one of Great Britain’s proudest achievements. However, there is some controversy as to what triggered abolition. In his article *Capitalism and Slavery*, Eric Williams transcribes that capitalism played a large rule in bringing slavery to an end in the British Empire. In response to this, Seymour Drescher argued that capitalism did not play a role in abolition, and that abolition was a result from the hard work from abolitionists. Both bring up thought-provoking arguments that rely on data and statistics from the slave trade of 19th century Britain.

Starting with Williams’ arguments, we immediately notice how he believes that the rise and fall of capitalism was based off the British economy. When the slave trade was doing well, there was a demand for slaves to work the plantation as cheap labor. When the slave trade appeared to be unprofitable, that is when there was a push for abolition. Eric Williams bases his arguments from the actions of British Prime Minister William Pitt. In Williams’ opinion, as soon as the sugar trade went from the control of England to France, Pitt decided to promote abolition. To cripple France, Pitt planned to abolish slavery in England, because French sugar trade relied heavily on the slave trade of England. To help confirm this, Williams indicates how Pitt stopped his push for abolition when France turned over their most profitable sugar trade island over to England. Williams provides evidence of how dozens of British plantations were closing and how this encouraged Parliament to push for abolition. Williams’ main arguments links capitalism to the pressure for abolition.

Seymour Drescher believes that capitalism would’ve fueled the slave trade and that the real reason slavery was eradicated was because of humanitarian reasons. He argues in his writing that sugar was still in fact profitable in Britain and that a demand for the sugar led for a demand in slavery. To fulfil this demand, Britain would not have pushed for abolition, if it was focusing on an economic standpoint. The only reason Britain would push for abolition, would be for moral reasons. Drescher brings up the question as to why the United States and France would also abolish slavery, if in those circumstances it was clearly profitable. Drescher believes that the abolition of slavery was not merely a conspiracy of the British Parliament to get rid of an unprofitable business fragment but was in fact the work of religious people pushing for the rights of life.

Since both historians are presenting two opposite views, there is bound to be some holes in their arguments. Starting with Williams, it is odd that he completely ignores the fact that sugar could have been unprofitable because thousands of abolitionists were boycotting it. Drescher doesn’t provide as clear of evidence as Williams does for his claim that sugar was profitable in England. With these gaps, it makes it difficult to formulate a clear cause for abolition.

The real question of these interpretations of abolition, is which is supported by concrete evidence? At first glance it may seem intuitive to agree with Drescher and that abolitionist helped in the abolition of slavery. Williams’ view seemed unclear as to why a country based heavily on the slave trade would want to abolish it for economic reasons. But after deeply evaluating his views, it is clear from Pitt’s actions and the data on the closing of plantations, that England would have motive to end the slave trade for economic reasons. These statements seem plausible and have evidence to support them. Drescher’s views seem to make since but aren’t supported with the evidence that Williams provides. In a controversial topic such as this, evidence can be the difference maker. To really know what caused abolition, I would need to know if the sugar trade was profitable in the 1800’s. Williams seems to provide the most evidence that it wasn’t so its appears that he is correct.

The end of slavery was a new step for the world. However, there is controversy, as to whether it was the cause of abolitionist or the greed of British politicians. Williams argues that capitalism drove Britain to push to end the slave trade, because it was unsuccessful. Seymour Drescher argues the reverse side, stating that the slave trade was in fact profitable. Having read the arguments, it seems to me that Williams seems the most plausible. However, to truly know one would need unobtainable data from the 19th century.