Noah Edward Hall

History, Tuesday 4-7pm

Midterm Essay: *Capitalism & Slavery, the Zeitgeist*

# Introduction

Capitalism and Slavery was written by Eric Eustace Williams. It details, from an economic perspective, the dynamic between the European war and imprisonment of Africans known globally as the Maafa - but in this essay referred to as slavery - and the establishment and development of England’s industrial revolution and subsequently industrial capitalism. With a focus on England, through the lens of economic strategy and political force Mr. Williams argues the economics of slavery was in direct conflict with the economics of laissez faire capitalism and thus was the major impetus for the abolishment movement that contributed to the end of slavery.

What distinguishes Mr. William’s monumental book, Capitalism and Slavery, is the thesis that humanitarianism played an insignificant role in ending the institution of slavery. Convincingly, Mr. Williams proposes the economic mindset of the day, geared toward greater profits and trade with regions that increased said profits, was the impetus behind policies and governmental actions to end slavery after the American Revolution. The American Revolution put the new nation of America on the wrong side of England’s monopoly on trade, as supported by the laws and legislation that supported England’s monopoly, was now the corner stone on which economic thought laid its foundation to support free-trade among nations and to break the England’s monopoly.

England’s monopoly was supported by the multitude of laws and legislation the empire passed, like embargoes, import duties, rules and regulations stipulating all sea-trade must be performed solely by English employees and English supplies. These laws and regulations guaranteed all money that flowed from slavery and the triangular triad in to the confers of England’s ruling class, and stimulated England’s economy by providing jobs and industry for it’s citizens. Not only did the triangle trade provide jobs within England, but also established employment for Englanders in faraway lands where the poor, indentured servants, criminals, and the like could find work.

Williams claims the institution of slavery permeated every aspect of the England economy. Thus, the majority of the laws passed sought to funnel all profits from slavery into the hands of England. This affected all dimensions of England society: political, social, culture, and economics. However, after the American Revolution forced the American industries on the wrong side of English law, the political leaders began to interpret slavery as a harmful decision for continued economic advancement. This put the so-called abolitionists and economic leaders on the same team, and together they forced Laws of the land and seas to realign to the new economic forces of the day.

In the end, Williams forcefully claims that there would be no England without commercial profits attained from the war and genocide of African Women, African Children, and African Men.

# The Historical Period

Williams begins the book with the infamous story of Columbus “discovering” the new world for the Spanish Monarchy (William, 2) 1492. This so-called discovery has caused conflict amongst the great warriors of European lineage, Portugal, Spain, France, Britain and the Catholic institution, among others. Interestingly the papal bull of 1455 gave Portugal the authority to “reduce to servitude all infidel peoples” (William, 3). These military powerhouses sought to dominate the new lands via war, economics, legislation, religion, and slavery.

Adam Smith claimed “the prosperity of a new colony depends upon one simple economic factor – plenty of good land” (William 2), and that is what the colonial powers found in the land across the ocean; what they lacked was the bodies to work the land. For even when the landlords brought their own kind to work the land, on arrival, the laborors found the “land too plentiful – the laborers preferred to work for themselves as small proprietors, rather than under the capitalist for wages” (William 3).

This is where slavery enters the picture; the capitalist unable to attain the low-cost labor in their own indentured servants for long periods of time, relied on capturing prisoners from Africa. Slavery supplied the labor needed for the “cultivation of crops like sugar, cotton and tobacco” (William, 6) at a cost for less than those of indentured servants. However, once the crop industries has climaxed, and capitalists begin to diversify their economics, slavery is no longer relevant. Williams calls this the stage at which “importation of new recruits and breeding, and the population has reached the point of density and the land available for appropriate has been apportioned” (Williams, 7) the cost of slavery exceeds the cost of hired laborers. At this crucial juncture is when the war-traders begin to look beyond slavery and seek its abolition.

Mature Industrial capitalism destroyed the institution of slavery (William, preface). Industrial capitalism waged war on three fronts: The attack on the slave trade, the attack on slvery, and the attack on preferential sugar duties (William, 136). Thus, the fall of slavery came hand-in-hand with the fall of mercantilism. Williams states that slavery was unprofitable in the eyes of capitalism in “1828 it was estimated that it cost the british people more than one and a half million pounds, in 1844 70,000 a week” (William, 138). England’s monopoly on the slave trade, supported by the laws and regulations to reinforce their grip on the triangular trade, was in direct conflict in the capitalists of the day who sought to trade beyond the scope of England. Largely based on the realization, for example, that what they paid to England for sugar and coffee they could half more “if carried to Cuba and Brazil” (William, 138).

Wiliams continues his analysis from the Columbian voyage to the Bristol historian in 1939, that proved “awkward to sensitive and patriotic historians” who saw the “spoliation of Ethiopia, the brutal dismemberment of China and the rape of Czechoslovakie” (Williams 64).

# Important Events

America plays a profound role in the storyline of Williams. For instance, American Capital brough brought-forth the “transformation of Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic into huge sugar factories” (William 26). These huge sugar factories required immense labor, namely in the supply of African prisoners wrought from the land of Africa to toil the earth for the British empire. Williams claims that this is need created slaver as an economic engine, a “code of written lawns enacted for that purpose” (William 27). In fact, “where the plantation did not develop, Negro labor was rare”, and instead “white labor predominated” (William 27). The liberals of England sought to promote this fact; in the words of Saco (labeled the mouthpiece of liberals), “called for all parts of the world, of all races, provided thay have a white face and can do honest labor” (William 27).

However, Saco was put-down by the profits of slavery. Slavery profits “provided one of the main streams of accumulation of capital in England which financed the Industrial Revolution” (William 52). Postlethway goes on to say that the British Empire was “a magnificent superstructure of the American commerce and naval power on an African foundation” (William 52). It is clear that African imprisonment was the core British economics: its rise can be attributed solely to the imprisonment of Black woman and men.

The American Revolution also had a profound impact on the triangular trade. For example, cotton exports to Africa totaled $214,000 in 1751, and by 1772 they were four times as great; however by the end of the American Revolutin, they declined to 195,900 (William 69). This can be attributed to America being outside of the English trade laws, as well as the new inventions like the Cotton Gin. In addition to cotton, sugar imports declined by one-third between 1774 and 1780. This stimulated the conflict between the sugar refiner and the sugar planter (William 78).

The American Revolution was the final blow to English mercantilism and monopoly. Books like the ‘Wealth of Nations’ laid a philosophical foundation for the Americans, asserting that “mercantile system was the brake applied to the productive power of England and her Colonies” (William 106). The Americans now provisioned the sugar planters with their supplies, and the “New Englanders came to be regarded as the Dutchmen” (William 110).

# Challenges for Africans in America

To begin this section, we’ll start with William’s assertion that slavery in its beginnings did not carry the face of Africans, nor was it born of racism: “unfree labor in the New World was brown, white, black, and yellow, catholic, protestant and pagan (William 7). However, the impact on the African was much more established due to the Triangular trade. For example, British Indian slavery was purely colonial, while African imprisonment “involved vital imperial interests” (William 8). In addition, with the profound strength and survivalism embedded within the African culture, the “Spaniards discovered that one Negro was worth four Indians” -thus, “Negroes were stolen in Africa tow ork the lands stolen from the Indians in America” (William 9). However, the Negroes were smart, and “had been stimulated to freedom by the development of the very wealth which their labor had created” (William 208).

Once the word spread of emancipation, African prisoners continued their struggle for freedom in all corners of the earth. Even the governor of British Guiana stated that the “negro mind although giving forth no marked indication of mischief to those not accustomed to observe it, is still agitated” (William 206). There were many slave revolts, a common strategy to combat their unjust imprisonment. From the “drivers, tradesmens, and other sensible slaves” to the field hands, slave revolts were common. For example, in Barbados over “fifty plantations revolted, embracing a population of 12,000” (William 205). This culture of revolt continued in the “Maroons of Jamica and the Bush Negroes of British Guinana” (William 202). The most famous was the 1804 independent republic of Haiti, which caused “every white slae-owner, in Jaimica, Cuba, or Texas, lived in dread of another Toussaint L’Ouverture” (William 202).

The long-lasting challenge for Africans in America today, is the legacy of slavery. The “ideas” borne of the slave trade have continued in stereotypes like the “unfitness of the white man for labor in the tropics and the inferiority of the negro” (William 212). This can be readily seen in the media, in employment, in treatment by police, in the continued miseducation of the Negro in America.

Bibliography

Williams, Eric Eustace. Capitalism & Slavery. New York: Russell & Russell, 1961. Print.