Britain's Role in the Demise of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade

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For nearly three centuries, slavery was the driving force of the world economy. The slave trade and the market it supported were among the most dominant economic institutions the world had ever known. During this period, ships brought three times as many enslaved Blacks as they did free Whites to the new world. Over three-quarters of the world population was in some form of bondage. Slavery represented an institution so large and encompassing that many people failed to comprehend it for what it truly was.

In 1770, Britain, France, Spain and Portugal possessed flourishing slave colonies in the Americas. However, by the mid-nineteenth century, colonial rule was ended in most of the Western Hemisphere and the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade was illegal and largely suppressed. Chattel slavery, itself, was outlawed in the remaining British and French Caribbean basin colonies, although it continued in Spanish Cuba, a semi-independent Brazil, and in the United States until the conclusion of the American Civil War in 1865. During a period of approximately one hundred years, a three-hundred-year old slave system that made possible the European conquest and settlement of the Americas, a global trade network, the financing of the industrial revolution, and the emergence of modern nation-states, came to an end.

For as long as the slave system existed, it had its ideological supporters. For almost as long, there also existed an abolitionist movement that was determined to put an end to the slave trade and to slavery. This raises the question why, after hundreds of years of failures, the abolitionist movement was able to end the slave trade in the early 19th century.

Different Explanations for the End of Slavery

Historians offer different explanations for this change. Adam Hochschild in *Bury the Chains, Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves* (Boston, MS: Houghton Mifflin, 2005) highlights the role of anti-slavery advocates in Great Britain. He credits a small group of Quakers who met in a printing shop in London in May 1787 and their Black and White allies with being the force behind the abolition of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and the eventual end to slavery. Leading figures in this movement eventually included Thomas Clarkson, Granville Sharp, John Newton, William Wilberforce and Olaudah Equiano. David Brion Davis, in his *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution 1776-1823 (1975),* provides a similar focus while including abolitionists in the United States.

The abolitionists highlighted by Hochschild undertook a campaign that sparked outrage from British citizens. This marked the first time that popular opinion in Britain moved steadily into the abolitionist camp. The abolitionists used methods that while common today were unfamiliar to people in the eighteenth century, including printed pamphlets and fliers that were distributed to the masses. Their philosophy was that, generally speaking, people care about the suffering of other people, and that all they needed to do was expose the evils of slavery and the truth would drive people to action. Within a few years, the abolition movement grew substantially. In 1789, nearly 800 workers petitioned Parliament to end the slave trade. In 1792, Parliament passed the first law banning slavery and people all over Britain refused to eat slave grown sugar. In 1838, full emancipation arrived in Britain.

In *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC, 1944/1994), Eric Williams argues that chattel slavery in the Americas and the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade were part of an out-dated colonial mercantilist system that was replaced by more efficient wage labor with the maturity of the industrial revolution. According to Williams, "The commercial capitalism of the eighteenth century developed the wealth of Europe by means of slavery and monopoly. But in so doing it helped to create the industrial capitalism of the nineteenth century, which turned round and destroyed the power of commercial capitalism, slavery, and all its works" (210). Even though slavery had produced capitalism, it eventually became an unnecessary drag on profits and was discarded.

Other historians have emphasized the additional economic factor of the disruption of the triangular trade in the Atlantic. The American Revolution produced a new power in the Western Hemisphere that was bound no longer by the old economic system forced on them by the British. The United States understood that an extremely profitable trade could be developed by exchanging goods directly with the Caribbean islands rather than going through Great

Britain. Also of significance to the disruption of the triangular trade were the ecological issues surrounding the slave economy. It has been argued that slave labor is not an economically efficient as free labor, and therefore requires very high production levels in order to overcome inefficiencies and turn a profit. Furthermore, without fertile soil, the system simply is not economically viable. The soil in much of the Caribbean was extremely fertile and thus allowed slavery to prosper. However, after 150 years of constant use, the soil was becoming exhausted. With production levels decreasing, the continued viability of the institution was in jeopardy.

The Role of Rebellion

Eugene Genovese, in *From Rebellion to Revolution* (Baton Rouge: LSU, 1979) argues that anti-slavery actions by enslaved Africans played a crucial role in redirecting national revolutions at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries so that they at least questioned the slave system.

C.L.R. James, in *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (NY: Vintage, 1938/1989) focuses on the role of enslaved Africans in the Caribbean with bringing down slavery and the slave trade. Considered the economic 'boom' island of the era, St. Domingue was controlled by the French until a slave rebellion in the 1790s took control out of the hands of the Europeans. Preoccupied with revolution in their own country, the French made only a modest effort to reclaim the Island. The newly freed slaves resisted the French counterattack. They proved even more resilient when only a few years later they soundly defeated an army of 40,000 British soldiers sent to re-establish European control over the colony. French difficulties in St. Domique played a key role in the sale of the Louisiana Territory to the United States. The completion of the sale in 1807 meant that as of 1808, when the US banned the importation of new slaves, a vast area of land was now off limits to the importation of slaves. With this turn of events, the British economic stake in the region diminished even further.

Some have suggested that abolitionist sentiment increased when British merchants recognized the increasing importance of India as a major sugar producing colony. A steady supply of sugar from India reduced the need to maintain production levels in their Caribbean colonies. The increasing reliance upon palm oil also played a role. Palm oil was already used heavily in Europe at this time, as a key ingredient in soaps and as a lubricant for heavy machinery. It was produced most efficiently in Africa. The British quickly realized that Africans were of more use producing palm oil in Africa than as slaves in the new world working on plantations for ever-diminishing returns.

In *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery 1776-1848*, Robin Blackburn (NY: Verso, 1988) argues that the slave system was not overthrown primarily for economic reasons, but because it became politically untenable. He believes it was eliminated, even in areas where it remained profitable, because of broader conflicts in transforming societies. Political and military struggles created conditions in which slavery could be successfully challenged. Napoleonic Wars between France and Britain created conditions for American, Haitian and Latin American revolutions. Initial beneficiaries of the overthrow of the slave system were not industrialists but other slave societies, such as when Cuba replaced Haiti. Slavery ended when it was politically vulnerable rather than economically unprofitable (520).

For Blackburn, three factors were crucial in these developments. First, he points to the role of political crisis or war in marginalizing the influence of slaveholders. This included the cost of warfare by mercenary armies, but also national independence. Once the American colonies were independent of Great Britain, slaveholders no longer had as much influence in British society. Rebellions in Haiti and Jamaica were costly in money and troops and suggested the potential for other rebellions. They also established the humanity of enslaved Africans. The last factor that seemed to tip the balance was the development of social movements calling for reform and revolution, such as the British Jacobins, American abolitionists, and British anti-slavery advocates. The reformers identified anti-slavery agitation with broader demands for natural rights.

Blackburn's explanation avoids single-cause determinism and helps students discover both multiple-causality and the importance of historical explanation. Part of its strength is that it shows the relationship between seemingly unrelated events in different parts of the world. Slave rebellions and white abolitionists play an important role in his explanation, but Blackburn puts the abolition of slavery into the context of industrialization in the 19th century.

British Abolitionists Battle to End the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and Slavery

Margaret Mead was a path-breaking American anthropologist and social commentator who is credited with the statement, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever does." In *Bury the Chains, Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves* (2005), Adam Hochschild argues that the founders of the British anti-slavery society were a small group that transformed the world. Read the biographical statements below and answer the questions.

1. What was the major contribution of each abolitionist to the anti-slavery campaign?
2. How were these people similar to each other and how were they different?
3. In your opinion, can a small group of committed citizens such as these people really change the world? Explain.

A. Granville Sharp (Spartucus encyclopedia)

Granville Sharp was born in Durham, England in 1735. He was the son of an archdeacon and the grandson of the Archbishop of York. In 1765, Sharp was living with his brother, a surgeon in East London. An enslaved African named Jonathan Strong appeared at the house. Strong had been so badly beaten by his master, a man named David Lisle, that he was close to death. Sharp took Strong to a hospital where he spent four months recovering from his injuries. After Jonathan Strong regained his health, David Lisle paid two men to recapture him. When Sharp heard the news he took Lisle to court claiming that as Strong was in England he was no longer a slave. The case received national publicity and in 1768 the courts ruled in Strong's favor.

In 1787, Granville Sharp and Thomas Clarkson formed the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. Although Sharp and Clarkson were both members of the Church of England, nine of the twelve members on the original committee were Quakers. Influential figures such as John Wesley, a Methodist, and Josiah Wedgwood, who owned a ceramics company, gave their support to the campaign. Later they persuaded William Wilberforce to be their spokesman in the British Parliament. After passage of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 1807, Sharp joined with Thomas Clarkson and Thomas Fowell Buxton to form the Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery. He died on July 6, 1813.

B. Thomas Clarkson (Spartucus encyclopedia)

Thomas Clarkson was born in 1760 and educated at Cambridge University where he was ordained as a deacon in the Church of England. In 1785, Clarkson entered an essay contest on the question, "Is it right to make men slaves against their wills?" He won the first prize and was asked to read his essay to the Cambridge University Senate. This experience stimulated what Clarkson believed was "a direct revelation from God ordering me to devote my life to abolishing the trade." He contacted Granville Sharp and in 1787 Clarkson and Sharp formed the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade.

Clarkson was responsible for collecting information to support the abolition of the slave trade. This included interviewing 20,000 sailors and obtaining equipment used on the slave ships such as iron handcuffs, leg-shackles, thumb screws, instruments for forcing open slave's jaws and branding irons. In 1787 he published a pamphlet, "A Summary View of the Slave Trade and of the Probable Consequences of Its Abolition." After the passing of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 1807, Clarkson helped found the Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery. In 1833, Parliament passed the Slavery Abolition Act that gave all enslaved Africans in the British Empire their freedom.

C. Elizabeth Coltman Heyrick **(Spartucus encyclopedia)**

Elizabeth Coltman was born in 1769. Her father held progressive political views and as a young woman she was introduced to the ideas of Tom Paine. In 1787, Elizabeth married John Heyrick, who died eight years later. Elizabeth became a member of the Society of Friends (Quakers) and decided to devote herself to social reform. Her main concern was the campaign against slavery. Heyrick organized a sugar boycott and with Lucy Townsend, Mary Lloyd, Sarah Wedgwood and Sophia Sturge helped to form the Birmingham Ladies

Society for the Relief of Negro Slaves.

In 1824, Elizabeth Heyrick published a pamphlet titled "Immediate Not Gradual Abolition." She argued passionately in favor of the immediate emancipation of the slaves in the British colonies. Heyrick's views differed from the official policy of the Anti-Slavery Society that believed in gradual abolition. In 1825, Elizabeth Heyrick and other women began forming women's Anti-Slavery Societies in Great Britain. The Female Society for Birmingham established a network of women's anti-slavery groups to distribute Heyrick's pamphlet. In 1827, the Sheffield Female Society became the first anti-slavery society in Britain to call for the immediate emancipation of slaves. While other women's groups quickly followed, the leadership of the national Anti-Slavery Society refused to endorse this position.

In 1830, the Female Society for Birmingham submitted a resolution to the National Conference of the Anti-Slavery Society calling for an immediate end to slavery in the British colonies. The women threatened to withdraw funding of the organization if it did not approve the resolution. In response, the Anti-Slavery Society agreed to drop the words "gradual abolition" from its title. It also agreed to support a new campaign to bring about immediate abolition. The following year the Anti-Slavery Society presented a petition to the House of Commons calling for the "immediate freeing of newborn children of slaves."

D. John Newton **(http://www.gospelcom.net/chi/GLIMPSEF/Glimpses/glmps028.shtml)**

John Newton was a sailor on the Greyhound, a vessel involved in the Atlantic Slave trade. He had been a sailor from the age of eleven. In March, 1748, the Greyhound was caught in a north Atlantic storm off of the coast of Sierra Leone. The storm ripped its sails and splintered and tore away one side of the ship. The sailors had little hope of survival but they continued to pump out water in an effort to trying to keep the boat afloat. March 21, 1748 was the eleventh day of the storm. Newton, who was too exhausted to pump water, was tied to the helm where he tried to hold the ship to its course. He remained there from one o'clock in the afternoon until midnight.

While waiting for death, John Newton underwent a religious awakening and believed he had experienced God's grace. Although Newton continued as a slave-trader, his life was transformed. He eventually abandoned the sea and became a Protestant minister. As part of his duties, he composed hymns, including one that described his experience as a slave trader and his eventual redemption. It was called "Amazing Grace." John Newton also became an activist in the campaigns to end the slave trade and abolish slavery.

E. Olaudah Equiano **(http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/equiano_olaudah.shtml)**

Olaudah Equiano is best known for his autobiography, "The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African." Around the age of eleven, Equiano and his sister were kidnapped and shipped through the notorious middle passage. A British naval officer bought Equiano and introduced him to the naval way of life. He also renamed Equiano "Gustavus Vassa" after a 16th-century Swedish king.

Equiano was brought to England where he learned to read and write. He saw action in major naval battles during the Seven Years War in the 1750s and traveled to Canada and the Mediterranean. He felt entitled to freedom and some of the prize money handed out to sailors, but was cheated of this income and sold to another sea-captain who took him to the Caribbean where he was sold again. During this time, Equiano was exposed to the horrors of slavery. However, he was more fortunate than most of his peers. After three years of saving his income, Equiano was able to buy his freedom in 1766 for £40.

In 1775, Equiano became involved in a project to set up a new plantation on the Caribbean coast of Central America. During this time Equiano and his associates bought people, but he wrote in his autobiography that he did "every thing I could to comfort the

poor creatures." Equiano later protest against slavery and worked with Granville Sharpe, a prominent British abolitionist. He appealed to Sharpe to save his friend, John Annis, a former slave who had been illegally kidnapped by his prior owner.

Equiano's book appeared in the spring of 1789 and was favorably reviewed. He went on lecture tours and sold the book across Great Britain while campaigning to abolish the slave trade. In 1792, Equiano married an Englishwoman named Susanna Cullen. They had two daughters, one of whom inherited a sizeable estate from her father when he died in 1797.