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**LAISSEZ FAIRE, SUGAR AND SLAVERY**

**BY**

**ERIC WILLIAMS**

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## LAISSEZ FAIRE, SUGAR AND SLAVERY<sup>1</sup>

**I**N the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Britain's sugar colonies were the favored plantations of the Empire. By the middle of the nineteenth century they had become nuisances. The history of that decline has been written, too narrowly, from the standpoint of the humanitarian attack on Negro slavery. The weakness of the West Indian system was less that it was immoral than that it was unprofitable.<sup>2</sup> The attack on West Indian slavery was in a larger sense only a part of the general attack on monopoly and imperialism which characterized the transition of English economy from mercantilism to laissez faire. The rise and fall of slavery was a phase of the rise and fall of mercantilism.

### *India and Brazil*

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the West Indian colonies had a practical monopoly of sugar cultivation. The golden age came to an end in the nineteenth century. *Ersatz*, in the form of beet sugar, gained its first great victory as a result of the British blockade of France during the Napoleonic War. Brazil, India, Mauritius, Cuba forged ahead, and sugar cultivation was later extended to Louisiana, Australia, Hawaii, the Philippines and Java. Overproduction, the curse of the twentieth century, had arrived.

The British sugar planters succumbed to this competition. In 1788 they were outdistanced by Saint-Domingue (Haiti); in 1820 by Mauritius; in 1830 by Brazil. Within the Empire itself Barbados had yielded to Jamaica in the eighteenth century, and Jamaica to Trinidad and British Guiana in the early

<sup>1</sup> This essay is part of a general thesis, to be published shortly, on "Capitalism and Slavery". Much of the research involved was facilitated by a Julius Rosenwald Fellowship, 1940-1941.

<sup>2</sup> Liverpool Papers (British Museum), Add. Mss. 38295, f. 102. An anonymous writer to Lord Bexley, July 1823.

nineteenth. The fortunes of the British West Indies illustrated the law of slave production, namely, that slavery, granted a paucity of labor and an unlimited extent of fertile soil, was cheaper than free labor—on one condition: the slave power required ever fresh conquests. For this reason slavery continued to be profitable and cheaper than free labor, in a large island like Cuba or in an empire like Brazil, long after the “land-killer”, as the planter was called in the picturesque nomenclature of the South, had exhausted its possibilities in Barbados or Jamaica.

As markets the British West Indies had declined. In 1814 they took one sixth of all British exports, in 1833 only one fourteenth.<sup>3</sup> British exports to India and China, on the other hand, quadrupled between 1814 and 1832;<sup>4</sup> those to Brazil increased nearly three times between 1821 and 1833, and more than doubled again between 1835 and 1854.<sup>5</sup> Only one obstacle stood in the way of the increase of this trade with these two important markets—the returns they could make. British tariff legislation had banned India's exports of cotton goods to England and made the Indian market safe for Lancashire goods. India could not compete with the United States as a supplier of raw cotton. The Indian traders had therefore to choose between sugar and the sands of the Ganges for return cargoes. They chose sugar, to which Prime Minister Pitt had turned his attention as early as 1790 in an attempt to capture the European sugar market from France.<sup>6</sup>

A similar difficulty faced British capitalists in their relations with Brazil. Approximately three eighths of the sugar, one half of the coffee, and five eighths of the cotton exports from Pernambuco, Rio de Janeiro and Bahia were shipped on British

<sup>3</sup> W. L. Burn, *Emancipation and Apprenticeship in the British West Indies* (London, 1937), p. 100.

<sup>4</sup> *Customs &* (Public Record Office), vols. 2 and 35.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, vols. 14 and 38; A. K. Manchester, *British Preeminence in Brazil* (Chapel Hill, 1933), p. 322.

<sup>6</sup> L. J. Ragatz, *The Fall of the Planter Class in the British Caribbean* (New York, 1928), pp. 211, 213-214.

accounts, but, except for cotton, very little of these products was annually landed in England.<sup>7</sup>

In both cases the obstacle was the British West Indian monopoly of the British sugar market. The interests of British capitalism inexorably demanded the abolition of the West Indian monopoly. What of the interests of British humanitarianism? They just as inexorably demanded the perpetuation of that monopoly. For, after 1833, the stigma of slavery had been removed from British West Indian production. Brazil and Cuba were clearly slave communities which, in addition to employing slave labor, still conducted the slave trade. Any equalization of the sugar duties would therefore be a stimulus to slavery in those countries.

What, then, of India? The act emancipating the slaves in the British West Indies passed its third reading on August 7, 1833. Forty-eight hours before, the East India Charter had come up for renewal in the House of Lords. The bill included a clause which declared that slavery "should be abolished" in India. Lord Ellenborough expressed his astonishment that such a proposition should ever have entered the head of any statesman. Lord Auckland defended the bill: "it had been framed with the utmost caution consistent with the destruction of an odious system; as well as the utmost care not to interfere with the domestic manners of the natives." The Duke of Wellington called it a violent innovation, altogether uncalled for, which would produce the greatest dissatisfaction, if not absolute insurrection.<sup>8</sup>

Repeated declarations were later made in Parliament on behalf of the government that the East India Company was preparing legislation with a view to the "amelioration" of slavery and that such legislation would be tabled in Parliament. But the promised legislation never was tabled. In defense of the East Indians it was pleaded, in 1842, that they had prohibited the selling of children into slavery in periods of

<sup>7</sup> Manchester, *op. cit.*, p. 315.

<sup>8</sup> Hansard, *Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, XX, 315, 323, 324, August 5, 1833; p. 446, August 9, 1833.

scarcity.<sup>9</sup> Ten years after Britain's "great atonement" the Earl of Auckland would not deny that "some condition of servitude, more or less painful, might not still exist";<sup>10</sup> and Peel considered that such measures as had been adopted "appeared well calculated to arrest the progress of slavery, and check abuses, and when carried out in all parts of India under our control, or which we could influence, would go a long way to suppress slavery."<sup>11</sup>

### *The Capitalists*

In the front ranks of the attack on the West Indians were the industrial capitalists—cotton manufacturers, sugar refiners, shipowners. They had voted against West Indian slavery in 1833. "Relief from this monopoly", said a sugar refiner, "would be cheaply purchased by granting the West India proprietors the full amount of the compensation proposed."<sup>12</sup> The capitalists had even demanded the admission of Brazilian sugar, not for consumption but for refining and re-export. This was parliamentary strategy. They were interested in cheap sugar, not free-grown sugar, and in 1836 they came out brazenly for the unrestricted importation of all sugar, irrespective of origin or method of production.

They based their arguments on the ground that the protecting duty forced their laborers to pay higher prices for sugar and so took away from them the money earned in the factories.<sup>13</sup> They called the protecting duty an "obnoxious tax",<sup>14</sup> which cost England more than the value of British exports to the islands.<sup>15</sup> The West Indian did not pay a farthing more for a bale of British calicoes than his Brazilian rival, so of what value was the system of monopoly to British manufacturers?<sup>16</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Hansard, Third Series, LXV, 1075, Baring, Aug. 5, 1842.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, LXX, 1294, July 21, 1843.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, LXVIII, 753, April 10, 1843.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, XVIII, 589, Clay, June 11, 1833.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, C, 54, Milner Gibson, July 3, 1848.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, LXXVII, 1053, Gibson, Feb. 24, 1845.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, LXXV, 444, Villiers, June 10, 1844.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, LXXVII, 1061-1062, Gibson, Feb. 24, 1845.

To the capitalists the distinction between free-grown and slave-grown produce was humbug. Britain depended for her very existence on the slave-grown cotton of the United States. The government had abolished all duties on cotton; it had reduced the duty on Brazilian slave-grown coffee and Cuban ores worked by slave labor. The British Parliament saw slavery only where it saw sugar; its humanity was bounded by the circumference of a hogshead.<sup>17</sup> British legislators framed their tariff on grounds of morality, they erected a pulpit in every custom house and made their landing-waiters enforce anti-slavery doctrines.<sup>18</sup> They tried things by a thermometer of their own; it rose to boiling point on Cuban sugar, but sank to a most agreeable temperature on Carolina cotton.<sup>19</sup>

The situation was farcical. Cobden wrote a skit on it in the form of an imaginary interview at the Board of Trade between Lord Ripon and the Brazilian Ambassador. The Ambassador taunts the embarrassed Englishman:

No religious scruples against sending slave-grown cotton into every country in the world? No religious scruples against eating slave-grown rice? No religious scruples against smoking slave-grown tobacco? No religious scruples against taking slave-grown snuff? . . . Am I to understand that the religious scruples of the English people are confined to the article of sugar?

Ripon, obviously uncomfortable, reiterates his inability to take Brazilian sugar, and pleads, in defense, the promptings of the Anti-Slavery faction led by Joseph Sturge. At this moment in walks Sturge, with a cotton cravat, his hat lined with calico, his coat sewn with cotton thread, his pockets well lined with slave-wrought gold and silver. The two diplomats burst into laughter.<sup>20</sup>

Even with regard to sugar the British were inconsistent. In 1845 British ships conveyed 24,000 tons of slave-grown sugar

<sup>17</sup> Hansard, Third Series, XCIX, 1223, G. Thompson, June 26, 1848.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, LXXV, 170, Russell, June 3, 1844.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, LXXXVIII, 517, Lansdowne, Aug. 10, 1846.

<sup>20</sup> J. E. Ritchie, *The Life and Times of Viscount Palmerston* (London, 1866-1867), III, 743-744.

from Rio de Janeiro alone.<sup>21</sup> It was this same "lucrative humanity" which had provoked smiles at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, when Britain had tried to persuade the Central Powers of Europe to boycott in their dominions the slave produce of Brazil and Cuba which she herself transported to Europe.<sup>22</sup> Britain took the slave sugar of Louisiana, arguing a reciprocity treaty with the United States, but when Spain, basing her claim on an ancient treaty, demanded most favored nation treatment for her colonial sugar, Britain refused.

The capitalists saw in this nothing but an attempt to defend the West Indian monopoly. It was injustice and folly, in their opinion, to impose protective duties on food.<sup>23</sup> Monopoly was unsound, costly to all, and had destroyed the great empires of the past.<sup>24</sup> Protection was an opiate which enervated and paralyzed the planters, making them everlasting grumblers, like Oliver Twist, always asking for more.<sup>25</sup> Defeated time and again, the free traders, as Bright warned, returned to the charge with renewed energy.<sup>26</sup> Ricardo advised the planters that "the ball was rolling, and nothing that they could do would suffice to stop it."<sup>27</sup> Bright called them impudent, reminded them tartly that it was not the duty of Parliament to make sugar cultivation profitable, and advised them to grow cloves and nutmegs.<sup>28</sup>

Ever since 1814 the British government, under abolition pressure, had been committed to a policy of suppressing the slave trade. It had established a squadron on the African coast to deter or capture the slavers. But the British govern-

<sup>21</sup> Hansard, Third Series, LXXXVIII, 517, Lansdowne, Aug. 10, 1846.

<sup>22</sup> E. J. Stapleton (ed.), *Some Official Correspondence of George Canning* (London, 1887), I, 62. Memorandum for the Cabinet, Nov. 15, 1822.

<sup>23</sup> Hansard, Third Series, LVII, 920, Villiers, April 5, 1841.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, LVII, 162-163, Labouchere, March 12, 1841.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, LXXVII, 1144, Bright, Feb. 24, 1845; *ibid.*, 1066, Ewart, Feb. 24, 1845; *ibid.*, XCIX, 1428, Bright, June 30, 1848.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, LXXVIII, 930, March 14, 1845.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, LXXVII, 1078, Feb. 24, 1845.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, LXXVI, 37, June 27, 1844; XCIX, 747, 1420, June 16 and June 30, 1848.



ment's hands were tied. British goods, from Manchester and Liverpool—cottons, fetters and shackles—were sent direct to the coast of Africa or indirectly to Rio de Janeiro and Havana, where they were used by their Brazilian and Cuban consignees for the purpose of purchasing slaves.<sup>29</sup> In 1845 Peel refused to contradict the fact that British subjects were engaged in the slave trade.<sup>30</sup> The Liverpool representative in Parliament, questioned point blank, would not deny that Liverpool exports to Africa or elsewhere were not appropriated to "some improper purpose".<sup>31</sup> John Bright was well aware of the interests of his Lancashire constituents when he argued eloquently in 1843 against a bill prohibiting the employment of British capital, however indirectly, in the slave trade on the ground that it would be a dead letter, and that the matter should be left to the honorable and moral feelings of individuals.<sup>32</sup>

The economy of Brazil and Cuba depended upon the slave trade; hence the British capitalists opposed the policy of suppression. Commerce was the great emancipator. Leave the slave trade alone, it would commit suicide. If the miscreants of any nation chose to engage in it, their guilt be upon their own heads; leave to a higher tribunal the moral government of the world.<sup>33</sup> Bright criticized as audacity the idea that justice to Africa should be done at the expense of injustice to England.<sup>34</sup> They had a great deal to do at home, argued Cobden, within a stone's throw of where they were, before they embarked on a scheme of redeeming from barbarism the whole coast of Africa.<sup>35</sup> There were other occasions on which to devote attention to the social happiness of the world, other means of endeavoring to advance that happiness, and they should not interfere violently by fiscal regulations with the

<sup>29</sup> Hansard, Third Series, LIX, 609, Brougham, Sept. 20, 1841.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, XCVI, 1095. Quoted by Hutt, Feb. 22, 1848.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, XCVIII, 1198, Cardwell, May 18, 1848.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, LXXI, 941, Aug. 18, 1843.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, XCVI, 1100, Hutt, Feb. 22, 1848.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, XCIX, 748, June 16, 1848.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, CXIII, 40, July 19, 1850.

feelings of others.<sup>36</sup> Britain's "blundering and ignorant humanity" had only aggravated the sufferings of the slaves. The slave trade was on the increase, and not all the forces of the British Navy, not all the resources of the British Treasury could suppress it.<sup>37</sup> Had the British governments surrendered their reason to philanthropy?<sup>38</sup> Had they prostituted their diplomacy to the purposes of an unreasonable fanaticism?<sup>39</sup> Was it not curious to see governments, not distinguished by devotion to constitutional liberties at home, assuming that a distant and barbarous people had more claims on their conscience than their own countrymen?<sup>40</sup>

Mercantilism meant colonies. The West Indies were only the most precious of the colonies in the eighteenth century. "He should ever consider", said Chatham, "the sugar colonies as the landed interest of this kingdom, and it was a barbarism to consider them otherwise."<sup>41</sup> In the free trade era the West Indies had fallen from grace. "Jamaica to the bottom of the sea," said Roebuck, "and all the Antilles after it." These "barren" colonies had ever been "the most fatal appendages" of the Empire, and if they were to be blotted out from the face of the earth Britain would lose not "one jot of her strength, one penny of her wealth, one instrument of her power."<sup>42</sup>

The capitalists in fact wanted no colonies. Adam Smith had written against the colonial connection and Arthur Young called the colonies nuisances. To Cobden they were expensive encumbrances, making dazzling appeals to the passions of the people, serving but as "gorgeous and ponderous appendages

<sup>36</sup> Hansard, Third Series, LXXV, 170, Russell, June 3, 1844.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, XCVI, 1092, 1096, 1101, Hutt, Feb. 22, 1848.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, XCVII, 986-987, Urquhart, March 24, 1848.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, CI, 177, Urquhart, Aug. 16, 1848.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, LXXXI, 1156, 1158, Hutt, June 24, 1845.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in R. Pares, *War and Trade in the West Indies, 1739-1763* (Oxford, 1936), p. 509.

<sup>42</sup> Hansard, Third Series, LXIII, 1218-1219, June 3, 1842; *ibid.*, LXXV, 462, June 10, 1844.

to swell our ostensible grandeur, but, in reality, to complicate and magnify our government expenditure, without improving our balance of trade." He could see nothing but a "monstrous impolicy" in "sacrificing our trade with a new continent, of almost boundless extent of rich territory, in favour of a few small islands, with comparatively exhausted soils."<sup>43</sup>

The Navigation Laws, regarded in the mercantilist era as the very keystone of the imperial arch, were now, in the age of laissez faire, swept away by the full tide of anti-colonial sentiment as the lumber of former times. When corn and sugar were on the run, shipping could enjoy no immunity. Ricardo advised the advocates of the "long voyage" to practice seamanship by sailing their cargo three times around the British Isles.<sup>44</sup>

### *The Abolitionists*

The story of the great humanitarian crusade has been frequently told and as frequently misunderstood. In one of the greatest propaganda movements of all times, the abolitionists had, before 1833, gone far beyond the bounds of British West Indian slavery. They had dreamed of the universal abolition of slavery and the slave trade. They had lobbied at the European Congresses from 1815 to 1820 in favor of an international ban on the slave trade, and were even prepared to go to war for abolition. They had urged the government not to recognize Brazil without an explicit promise to renounce the slave trade.<sup>45</sup>

Actually, however, their condemnation of slavery applied only to the Negro and only to the Negro in the British West Indies. As an apology for the East India Company, Zachary Macaulay urged that "they had obtained dominion over countries which had been previously under the Hindoo and Mogul

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, CXV, 1443, April 10, 1851; *The Political Writings of Richard Cobden* (London, 1878), pp. 12, 14.

<sup>44</sup> K. N. Bell and W. P. Morrell (eds.), *Select Documents on British Colonial Policy, 1830-1860* (Oxford, 1928), Introduction, p. xli.

<sup>45</sup> *Despatches, Correspondence and Memoranda of Field Marshal Arthur, Duke of Wellington* (London, 1867-1880), I, 474-475, Oct. 31, 1822.

Governments. They therefore could not be blamed if, when they came into possession of those countries, they found principles acted upon with which, however adverse to their feelings, it would be unsafe to interfere, without due caution."<sup>46</sup> In 1837 Buxton expressed the fear that sugar would produce a system of slavery in the East as disgraceful as it had produced in the West. The government spokesman assured him it would not. Buxton "was much obliged . . . for that assurance."<sup>47</sup> In 1843 Brougham, veteran abolitionist, was still looking forward with sanguine hope to the abolition of slavery in India, "a consummation not to be accomplished so much by legislation, or by doing violence to property", as by encouraging the native slaveowners to declare their children free after a certain date.<sup>48</sup> Yet it was the sugar of this country that the abolitionists urged upon the people of England in preference to the slave-grown sugar of the West Indies. Some of the abolitionists had East Indian interests, and "perhaps their detestation of West Indian slavery was sharpened by a sense of the unfair discrimination of the sugar duties in favour of the West Indies and against the growing sugar plantations of India."<sup>49</sup> Thomas Whitmore, East Indian leader in Parliament, was a Vice President of the Anti-Slavery Society, and a candidate for the succession to the leadership of the Anti-Slavery Party. Zachary Macaulay had shares in the East India Company. James Cropper, one of the most active of the abolitionists, who had been the first to import the slave-grown cotton of America, was the greatest importer of East India sugar into Liverpool.

The abolitionists were equally silent about American slavery which supplied England's factories with their vital raw supply. The West Indian could legitimately ask whether "slavery was only reprehensible in countries to which those members do not

<sup>46</sup> *Debates at the General Court of Proprietors of East India Stock on the 19th and 21st March 1823 on the East India Sugar Trade* (London, 1823), p. 35.

<sup>47</sup> Hansard, Third Series, XXXVIII, 1853-1854, July 10, 1837.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, LXX, 1294, July 21, 1843.

<sup>49</sup> Bell and Morrell, *op. cit.*, Introduction, p. xxx.

trade, and where their connections do not reside.”<sup>50</sup> The abolitionists made curious replies. The person who received slave-grown produce from America dealt in the produce of labor performed by slaves who were not his fellow subjects, and there was not, in the slavery of the United States, any evidence of that destruction of human life which was one of the most appalling features of the system in the British West Indies.<sup>51</sup> The boycotters of West Indian sugar sat upon chairs of Cuban mahogany, before desks of Brazilian rosewood, used inkstands of slave-grown ebony, and wrote on paper partly made of slave-grown cotton; but “it would do no good to go round and inquire into the pedigree of every chair and table.”<sup>52</sup> As the Newcastle abolitionists argued, only “the unnecessary purchase of one iota of slave produce involves the purchaser in the guilt of the slaveholder.”<sup>53</sup>

The acid test for the abolitionists after 1833 came over two questions: the suppression of the slave trade and free trade in sugar. Buxton condemned the slave squadron and the policy of forcible suppression as causing aggravated suffering to multiplied numbers.<sup>54</sup> Sturge reorganized the Anti-Slavery Society on a purely pacific basis. “The utter failure”, said James Wilberforce, Junior, Bishop of Oxford, at a great abolitionist meeting in 1840, “of every attempt by treaty, by remonstrance, and by naval armaments to arrest the progress of the slave trade, proves the necessity of resorting to a preventive policy founded on different and higher principles.”<sup>55</sup> Buxton, *filis*, “could not but see that those high principles by which this country had been guided for many years were now supplanted by others which, though important in themselves, were

<sup>50</sup> *The Liverpool Mercury and Lancashire General Advertiser*, July 27, 1832.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, August 24, 1832.

<sup>52</sup> *The Tariff of Conscience, Free Trade in Slave Produce Considered and Condemned* (Newcastle Anti-Slavery Series, n.d., in John Rylands Library, Manchester).

<sup>53</sup> *Conscience versus Cotton; or, the Preference of Free Labour Produce* (Newcastle Anti-Slavery Series, n.d.).

<sup>54</sup> Hansard, Third Series, LXXXI, 1159. Quoted by Hutt, June 24, 1845.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, CIX, 1098. Quoted by Hutt, March 19, 1850.

far inferior to those principles on which he had acted in former years." <sup>56</sup> Brougham's philanthropy was excited only by sugar and not by cotton, only by the slave trade and not by slavery, only by the slave trade between Africa and Brazil and not by the slave trade between Virginia and Texas. He condemned as "a gross perversion of the doctrines of free trade" the policy of obtaining cheap sugar "at the heavier cost of piracy and torture, and blood." According to his interpretation the United States did not carry on the slave trade; there was a difference between slave-grown sugar in Louisiana, increased by the natural increase of the slaves or more efficient cultivation, and slave-grown sugar in Brazil, increased by "the unnatural, forced, and infernal traffic in Africans carried on by force and fraud." <sup>57</sup>

Perhaps the greatest speech ever made on the slavery question was the speech of Thomas Babington Macaulay in 1845. It was a masterpiece of clarity and lucidity, befitting a great historian, but it was pro-slavery. "My especial obligations", said Macaulay with asperity, "in respect of negro slavery ceased when slavery itself ceased in that part of the world for the welfare of which I, as a member of this House, was accountable." He saw himself under no obligation to turn their fiscal code into a penal code for the purpose of correcting vices in the institutions of independent states, or their tariff into "an instrument for rewarding the justice and humanity of some governments, and for punishing the barbarity of others." He boldly faced the inconsistency of importing Brazilian sugar for refining but not for consumption.

We import the accursed thing; we bond it; we employ our skill and machinery to render it more alluring to the eye and to the palate; we export it to Leghorn and Hamburg; we send it to all the coffee houses of Italy and Germany; we pocket a profit on all this; and then we put on a Pharisical air, and thank God that we are not like those sinful Italians and Germans who have no scruple about swallowing slave-grown sugar. . . .

<sup>56</sup> Hansard, Third Series, XCIX, 849, June 19, 1848.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, CXXXIX, 116, June 26, 1855; *ibid.*, CL, 2205, June 17, 1858.

I will not have two standards of right. . . . I will not have two weights or two measures. I will not blow hot and cold, play fast and loose, strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel.<sup>58</sup>

Clarkson, the grand old man of the abolitionist movement, was now behind the times. In 1840 he was still looking to the East India Company for the achievement of his aim of extirpating slavery from the whole world, "by means that are perfectly *moral and pacific, according to your own principles*, namely, by the *cultivation of the earth* and by the employment of *free labour*."<sup>59</sup> In 1846 Clarkson sent a petition to the House of Lords, calling for the exclusion of all products raised by fettered and manacled hands.<sup>60</sup> Once he had been a voice crying in the wilderness, now he was nothing but the shadow of a mighty name.

A new attitude toward slavery had developed. Mr. Wilson was not prepared to say that, because the relation between employer and employed was that of master and slave, it should be branded as injustice and oppression.<sup>61</sup> The member for Oxford University opposed the slave trade and was prepared for war, if necessary, to suppress it, but he had never accepted the view that property in man was illegal.<sup>62</sup> The political economist, J. R. McCulloch, warned that without slavery the tropics could never have been cultivated and that, as an institution, it was not justly open to the opprobrium and denunciation heaped on it.<sup>63</sup> Look at the system of slavery more calmly, lectured Professor Merivale at Oxford; it was a great social evil, but one differing in degree and quality, not in kind, from many other social evils they were compelled to tolerate, such as the great inequality of fortunes, pauperism, or the over-

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, LXXVII, 1290, 1292, 1300, 1302, Feb. 26, 1845.

<sup>59</sup> Clarkson Papers (British Museum), Add. Mss. 41267A, ff. 178-179.

<sup>60</sup> Hansard, Third Series, LXXXVIII, 4-5, July 27, 1846.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, XCVI, 85, Feb. 4, 1848.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, L, 131, Inglis, Aug. 8, 1839; *ibid.*, XCIX, 1324, June 29, 1848.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, LXXXVIII, 163. Quoted by Disraeli, July 28, 1846.

working of children.<sup>64</sup> Public opinion, in the words of Lord Denman, had undergone a "lamentable and disgraceful change."<sup>65</sup>

### *The West India Interest*

Against the combined attacks of capitalists and abolitionists the West India interest put up a stubborn fight. If, however, the antagonists were the same as in the previous conflicts over abolition and emancipation, they had changed ideologies in the interim. The former slaveowners were now the great advocates of humanitarianism and free labor. Those who formerly had countenanced slavery in the British colonies were now the most zealous critics of slavery in the foreign colonies. Where formerly, as owners of slaves, they had demanded protection against the free-grown sugar of India, now, employers of free labor, they demanded it against the slave-grown sugar of Brazil. Formerly they had extenuated the evils of sugar cultivation by slaves, now they exaggerated them. When they employed slaves they apologized for the evils of slavery; now that they employed freemen they exalted the blessings of freedom.

They depended on three things to save them, protection, labor and the abolition of the slave trade. To them protection was simply a claim for justice.<sup>66</sup> To refuse it was un-English.<sup>67</sup> The protecting duty was necessary to safeguard the experiment of free labor (paid at twenty-five cents a day) from the advantages of Brazil and Cuba.<sup>68</sup> Did India, however, need this duty? Or did Barbados, with its 750 persons to the square mile, crying out for "living space"?

The planters continued to demand labor as if they were still living in the palmy days of the slave trade. Portuguese,

<sup>64</sup> H. Merivale, *Lectures on Colonization and Colonies, 1839-1841* (London, 1861), p. 303.

<sup>65</sup> Hansard, Third Series, XCVI, 1052, Feb. 22, 1848.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, C, 356, Bentinck, July 10, 1848.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, LXXV, 213, Stewart, June 3, 1844; *ibid.*, XCIX, 1094, Miles, June 23, 1848.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, LVI, 616, Sandon, Feb. 12, 1841.



Africans, convicts—anything would do. But the great source was India, as Africa had been before emancipation. Between 1838 and 1917 approximately 238,000 Indians were imported into British Guiana and 145,000 into Trinidad.<sup>69</sup> Unrestricted Indian immigration was the appeasement offered to the planters in return for the equalization of the duties.

Thereafter the West Indians turned their attention to the third of their trinity, the foreign slave trade. They had called for its abolition ever since 1807 and had sent special emissaries to England in 1830 to impress upon the government this indispensable prerequisite of British West Indian recovery.<sup>70</sup> A movement of considerable proportions developed in Jamaica in 1849 along these lines. All classes, colors, parties and sects presented a united front; laymen and churchmen, planters and laborers, former slaveowners and emancipated slaves, whites and blacks joined in the cry of justice to Africa, that "the odious term 'slave' [be] expunged from the vocabulary of the universe."<sup>71</sup> In 1807 the agent for Jamaica in England had lugubriously prophesied that abolition of the British slave trade would "occasion diminished commerce, diminished revenue and diminished navigation; and in the end sap and totally remove the great cornerstone of British prosperity."<sup>72</sup> In 1849 the African slave trade and slavery were denounced in Jamaica as "opposed to humanity—productive of the worst evils to Africa—degrading to all engaged in the traffic, and inimical to the moral and spiritual interests of the enslaved."<sup>73</sup>

<sup>69</sup> I. Ferenczi, *International Migrations* (New York, 1929). Figures estimated from tables in vol. 1, pp. 506-509, 516-518, 520.

<sup>70</sup> *H. of C. Sess. Papers, Accounts and Papers, 1830-1831*, vol. IX, No. 120, p. 84. Keith Douglas to the Board of Trade, Oct. 30, 1830; C. O. 137/186, Memorial of Jamaica deputies, Nov. 29, 1832.

<sup>71</sup> D. Turnbull, *The Jamaica Movement, for Promoting the Enforcement of the Slave-Trade Treaties, and the Suppression of the Slave Trade* (London, 1850), especially pp. 65, 94, 95, 99, 120, 201, 267.

<sup>72</sup> "The Manuscripts of J. B. Fortescue, Esq., preserved at Dropmore" (Historical Manuscripts Commission, London, 1892-1927), IX, 14-19. Edmund Lyon to Grenville, Jan. 16, 1807.

<sup>73</sup> Turnbull, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

*Gladstone*

Sugar was a question of enormous complexity, involving not merely the simple issue of protection or free trade, as in the case of corn, but the more thorny one of free labor and slave labor. Its difficulties have been followed by a consideration of the attitudes of the major interests involved. These can further be illustrated by a consideration of the attitudes of England's three leading statesmen: Gladstone, Disraeli and Palmerston.

Gladstone was a West Indian. His father owned extensive sugar plantations in British Guiana and was at one time chairman of the Liverpool West India Association, while he was also one of the first private traders to venture into the Indian field. The great statesman was therefore well fitted to defend the joint West-East Indian sugar monopoly after 1836. His maiden speech in Parliament had been a defense of the slavery on his father's plantations. All his filial feelings, taunted an opponent, were involved in the question of slavery, and his family connections with West Indian sugar plantations brought out all his eloquence.<sup>74</sup>

The free trader of later years was at that time a protectionist in sugar. But he could not defend the East Indian claim for protection,<sup>75</sup> and he was forced to admit that the distinction between free-grown and slave-grown sugar was not so clear that it could be drawn with uniform and absolute precision.<sup>76</sup> In 1841 he openly supported the policy of suppression of the slave trade, refusing "for small and paltry pecuniary advantages . . . to forgo the high title and noble character they had earned before the whole world", or "to substitute an uniformity in wrong for an inconsistent acknowledgment of what was right."<sup>77</sup> Nine years later the suppression policy appeared to him anomalous and preposterous: "it is not an ordinance of Providence that the government of one

<sup>74</sup> Hansard, Third Series, LXXVIII, 469, Bright, March 7, 1845.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, CXI, 581, May 31, 1850.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, LXXVII, 1269, Feb. 26, 1845.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, LVIII, 167, 169, May 10, 1841.

nation shall correct the morals of another.”<sup>78</sup> And it was Gladstone who led the campaign in England for the recognition of the Confederacy, claiming that “Jefferson Davis and other leaders of the South have made an army; they are making, it appears, a navy; and they have made what is more than either, they have made a nation.”<sup>79</sup>

### *Disraeli*

The sugar question was a party issue. If Corn was the King of monopolies, Sugar was his Queen. The Corn Laws and the Sugar Duties were part of the same protectionist policy, motivated by the desire to protect the poor soil of Britain and the poor soil of the British West Indies from the competition of the richer soil of other countries. The aristocracy of the sugar hogsheads joined hands with the aristocracy of corn. Peel, free trader in cotton and silk, was protectionist in corn and sugar. The West Indian cause was ably championed by the protectionists, Bentinck, Stanley, above all, Disraeli.

To Disraeli, equalization of the sugar duties was merely an extension of protection to the slaveowners of Brazil and Cuba. The abolition of slavery had ruined the West Indies. It was the greatest blunder ever committed by the English people, “an exciting topic . . . addressed to an insular people of strong purpose, but very deficient information.”<sup>80</sup> When the West Indians bargained the protecting duty for Indian immigration, Disraeli turned the batteries of his scorn on their leader, “mounted on a hogshead of sugar, in a white sheet, holding the taper of penitence, and crying ‘peccavi’.”<sup>81</sup>

Yet Disraeli condemned the suppression of the slave trade on grounds of economy and as a questionable policy which involved Britain in difficulties in every court and in every colony.<sup>82</sup> The great betrayal was in sight. In 1846 the West

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, CIX, 1162, March 19, 1850.

<sup>79</sup> P. Guedalla, *Gladstone and Palmerston* (London, 1928), pp. 64-66.

<sup>80</sup> Hansard, Third Series, XCVI, 132-133, Feb. 4, 1848.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, LXXXVIII, 166, July 28, 1846.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, XCVII, 994-996, March 24, 1848.

Indies were still to him "a fragment, but a fragment which I value, of the colonial system of England."<sup>83</sup> But to the apostle of imperialism in the seventies, the wretched colonies were, in the fifties, millstones round Britain's neck. "After the immense revolution that has been carried into effect, we cannot cling to the rags and tatters of a protective system."<sup>84</sup> Mercantilism was not dead but damned.

*Palmerston*

What, then, of Palmerston, the "last candle of the nineteenth century"? The slave trade has been called Palmerston's "benevolent crotchet". In office he accomplished little. Out of office he goaded the government to greater efforts to accomplish what he had failed to do. A simple motion for returns of the slave trade between 1815 and 1843 was accompanied by a speech which fills over twenty-five columns in Hansard, a rhetorical display crowned by a magnificent peroration, which might have been culled from anti-slavery speeches of the last half-century.<sup>85</sup> As if he was appealing to Parliament and the country for full appreciation of his labors in the cause, once every month he drew attention to those labors.<sup>86</sup> But when Manchester's representative emphasized the difficulties which Britain's suppression policy was causing with the Brazilian government and deprecated armed interference, Palmerston spoke about France, Cuba, the Imaum of Muscat, everything but the Brazilian slave trade.<sup>87</sup>

In Palmerston's eyes the distinction between free-grown sugar and slave-grown sugar was irreconcilable to common sense, untenable in practice, founded upon the principle of protection<sup>88</sup> which he opposed as "a principle . . . of fatal injury to the country and inimical to the prosperity of every

<sup>83</sup> Hansard, Third Series, LXXXVIII, 164, July 28, 1846.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, CXXIV, 1036, March 3, 1853.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, LXXVI, 947, 963, Peel, July 16, 1844.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, LXXX, 482, Peel, May 16, 1845.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, LXXXII, 1058-1064, July 24, 1845.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, LXXV, 1068, June 17, 1844.

country to whose affairs it may be applied.”<sup>89</sup> He wished to see the word “protection” erased from every commercial dictionary.<sup>90</sup> They had given proof, he thought, of their zeal for the suppression of the slave trade, and if they prohibited the importation of Brazilian sugar, Brazil would think that they did not really believe that free labor was cheaper than slave.<sup>91</sup> By their “absurd tariff and mischievous policy” the government had “sacrificed the commercial interests of the country in the Brazilian trade, in the Spanish trade, and I fear, also in other quarters about to follow, and all for the purpose of maintaining a favorite crotchet, based upon hypocritical pretences.”<sup>92</sup>

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In 1857 the London *Times* wrote with reference to the cotton trade of the Southern states: “it is our trade. It is the great staple of British industry. We are Mr. Legree’s agents for the manufacture and sale of his cotton crops.”<sup>93</sup> The wheel had come full circle. British capitalism had fostered West Indian slavery and destroyed West Indian slavery—all in the interests of British capitalism. But it continued to thrive on Brazilian, Cuban and American slavery.

ERIC WILLIAMS

HOWARD UNIVERSITY

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, CXI, 592, May 31, 1850.

<sup>90</sup> Guedalla, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

<sup>91</sup> Hansard, Third Series, LVIII, 648, 653, May 18, 1841.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, LXXXII, 550, 552, July 15, 1845.

<sup>93</sup> *Times*, Jan. 30, 1857.