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Blood, money and endless paper: slavery and capital in British imperial history

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BLOOD, MONEY AND ENDLESS PAPER:
SLAVERY AND CAPITAL IN BRITISH IMPERIAL HISTORY

Abstract

The history of slavery in Britain and the British empire has placed the legislative milestones of anti-slavery - the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and the abolition of slavery in 1833 - at the centre of historical inquiry. This essay considers why the passing of anti-slavery laws, rather than the implementation of anti-slavery reforms, has been so pivotal in the historiography. It asks what the history of slavery in Britain and the British empire would look like if turned toward the continuities between slavery and freedom, rather than emphasizing the bright line of emancipation. It places British approaches to the history of slavery into a wider historiographical context, and considers how renewed emphasis on the physical experience and everyday routines of slavery and anti-slavery and a rigorous rethinking of the archives might shape the future of the field.

In 1827, as the movement for the abolition of slavery in the British empire gained traction, a Commission of Inquiry appointed by Parliament arrived in [Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone](#). The small British Crown Colony on the West African coast was famous for its association with antislavery. The two commissioners were concerned that emancipation might cause the production of sugar and cotton in the West Indies to bottom out, and wondered whether flying British capital might roost in Africa. Opinion in Freetown was divided. One official reckoned that market gardeners might prosper but concluded that “cultivation on a large scale, by a Capitalist would not succeed.”¹ Governor [Sir Charles Turner](#) was more sanguine. He boasted, “Every merchant in the place, besides capitalists in London with whom I am acquainted, [is] ready to establish plantations.”² Still, Turner worried that without heavy investment, the more than 20,000 ‘Liberated Africans’ released from the slave trade and repatriated in the colony since

¹ Report of Commissioners of Inquiry, Evidence of D.M. Hamilton, Appendix C17, Records of the Colonial Office (CO), The National Archives, Kew, CO 267/92. For recent work on the relationship between British abolitionists and Sierra Leone, see Everill, *Abolition and Empire*; Scanlan, “The Rewards of Their Exertions.”

² Dispatch from General Sir Charles Turner to Earl Bathurst, 25 January 1825, published in Great Britain, Parliament, House of Commons, *Papers Relating to Liberated Africans Located in the Colony of Sierra Leone*, 26:5.

1808 – including 2,400 people in 1825-26 – would “retrograde in the woods, into a state of nature and barbarism.”³

In Britain and its empire in the nineteenth century, the imperial civilizing mission, the exponential growth of colonial and domestic bureaucracy and the explosive power of global capitalism all drew strength, shape and impetus from the abolition of colonial slavery. All these phenomena were visible in Sierra Leone in 1827: The Commissioners visited the colony to measure its ‘civilization,’ to document its population, governance, trade and integration into the wider empire, and to test the proposition that the colony might replace the West Indies as a sugar bowl and investment portfolio. The debates about how to end slavery were also debates about the structure and pace of the imperial civilizing mission. Early antislavery advocates in the 1770s and 1780s imagined ‘civilization’ as a pathway toward freedom, and hoped for a British empire of, as Christopher Brown puts it, “free black men and women vested with certain limited rights and liberties traditionally enjoyed by British subjects.”⁴ By the 1820s, advocates for emancipation occupied a wide spectrum of positions regarding how much ‘civilization’ was necessary for emancipation. In counterpoint, most slave-owners replied that ‘civilization’ was not a prelude to freedom; it was a prerequisite. Both sides generally agreed that emancipation would have to be gradual and incremental. In his remarks to the Commissioners, Governor Turner was asking a question that made both sides of the debate about colonial slavery anxious: Without the discipline of labour in capital-intensive plantation agriculture, would people of African descent in the West Indies backslide into ‘a state of nature’?

In the British imperial imagination, the black colonial subject – enslaved or free – was an imperial ward, subject to physical coercion if necessary. [The Sierra Leone Commission of](#)

³ Ibid.

⁴ Brown, *Moral Capital*, 231.

[Inquiry](#) spoke for many Britons when it concluded “that a mild and well-regulated system of coerced labour for a limited period, and exclusively with a view to the advantage of the negroes” would be the best practice for people freed from the slave trade and repatriated in Sierra Leone. By implication, a similar scheme could be established in the West Indies. Without force, formerly enslaved people might not work “to improve their condition beyond ... their own idea of comfort, which includes little more than an abundance of food and sufficient shelter from the weather.”⁵ Emancipation could foster civilization; civilization could be measured by the yield of cash crops for sale on the European market.

This is the problem that [Thomas Holt](#), writing about Jamaica, called ‘the problem of freedom,’ of how “thoroughly [to reform] ... ex-slaves’ culture so as to make them receptive to the discipline of free labour.”⁶ The Commissioners were friendly to emancipation, in part because they agreed that even the most ‘backward’ enslaved people would ‘naturally’ organize their economic lives in the image of British folkways after emancipation: they would work to fixed schedules for fixed wages, save money, buy land, consume goods. As one abolitionist writer commented, “The negro likes his comforts fully as much as the white man... Human nature is pretty much the same in all countries.”⁷ This well-meaning sentiment had sinister implications. Abolitionists sometimes conceived of emancipation as ‘[the Great Experiment](#),’ a test to prove the economic superiority of wage labour, but the ‘experiment’ was also a test of emancipated people’s ability to conform to British expectations. If a capitalist market economy

⁵ Rowan and Wellington, “Report of the Commissioners of Inquiry, Part 1,” 56.

⁶ Holt, *Problem of Freedom*, xxii.

⁷ Madden, *Twelvemonth’s Residence in the West Indies*, 47.

was ‘human nature,’ then it followed that formerly enslaved people who ‘failed’ to emulate British economic life were at least deeply backward, and possibly less than human.⁸

In practice, ‘civilization’ was often represented in economic data, and indexed to morality. One of the early slogans of abolitionists in Britain was ‘commerce, Christianity and civilization.’⁹ The market economy was a powerful metaphor in Evangelical Anglican theology from the late eighteenth through the mid-nineteenth centuries; souls ‘earned’ salvation and tested their mettle on an open and free market.¹⁰ Participation in the market economy became a proxy for ‘civilization.’ Abolitionism drew rhetorical power from the idea that enslaved people had been denied the chance to be saved *and* were part of an economically backward system of production. Antislavery was capitalist. It posited the autonomous, liberal consumer as the basic unit of society both on Earth and in Heaven. Although antislavery advocates insisted on its gruesome quaintness, violence and economic backwardness, slavery was also capitalist, and profoundly integrated into the global financial, commodity and labour markets of the early nineteenth century. In British history, the tendency has been to reify emancipation, to treat the abolition of the slave trade and the end of slavery in the empire as not only legislative achievements, but as the terminus of the shameful entanglement between the British empire and global systems of slave labour. And yet, as historians of slavery in the Americas have shown again and again, slavery did not ‘end’ after every enslaved person in the empire had been legally emancipated.¹¹ The emancipation of enslaved people in the British empire in 1833 was not the

⁸ See Hall, *Civilising Subjects*; Hall, “‘From Greenland’s Icy Mountains . . . to Afric’s Golden Sand’.”

⁹ Porter, “‘Commerce and Christianity’”; Schwarz, “Commerce, Civilization and Christianity.”

¹⁰ See especially Hilton, *Age of Atonement*; Hilton, *A Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People?*, 183. See also Campbell, *Middle Passages*, 24; Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 21.

¹¹ Holt, *Problem of Freedom*; Holt, “The Essence of the Contract: The Articulation of Race, Gender, and Political Economy in British Emancipation Policy, 1838-1866”; Hahn, *Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom*; Scott, *Slave Emancipation*; Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*; Scott, “Paper Thin”; Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens*; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*.

happy conclusions of an Enlightenment history of ‘moral revolution’ in Britain. Rather, it was a chapter in a longer history of coerced labour, capitalism, and bureaucratic sophistication and sprawl – of blood, money, and endless paper.

1.

British abolitionists wrote a great deal about their achievements: Thomas Clarkson’s two-volume, thousand-plus-page [history of the movement to end the British slave trade](#), first published in 1808, set the pace for a movement that was never at a loss for words. The vast archives of abolitionism permit historians to take at face value the idea that the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and the abolition of slavery in 1833 were watershed moments not only for activists in Britain, but for the entire empire. Because British abolitionists were confident that emancipation was not only morally right, but also economically sound, some historians have adopted the view that the economic consequences of both the end of the slave trade and the end of slavery have bearing on the moral probity of the abolitionists. The end of slavery is then framed as an empirical economic question with an odd and abstract moral corollary: Did Britain lose money? If it did, then British abolitionists should be praised. If it didn’t, then they were hypocrites. This has distorted the historiography in two ways. First, it has allowed historians uncritically to index the balance of trade to moral praise and blame, an idea smuggled into the present from the archives. Second, because economic data flowed into Britain from the empire, it has tended to make Britain itself the geographic focus of histories of abolitionism. As [Catherine Hall](#) and her co-authors recently observed, “Distance insulated metropolitan Britain from the physical realities of slavery ... and has continued to shelter British history from them since.”¹²

¹² Hall et al., *Legacies of British Slave-Ownership*, 250. Legacies 250

Sustained public outcry against police brutality and widespread, systematic discrimination against African-Americans in the past two years has finally pushed [arguments](#) about the [open wound](#) of [slavery](#) – arguments that activists, scholars and everyday people have been making since well before Reconstruction – toward the centre of American life. Concomitant with movements like [Black Lives Matter](#), historians of the United States have put forward new accounts of how black bodies were and are brutalized by a nation built on the principle of white supremacy and structured around the preservation of white privilege. For many historians of slavery and emancipation in the Americas, this has meant a focus as much on the painstaking practices of actually transforming a slave society into a ‘free’ society as on the legislative struggle of building consensus around antislavery laws. In contrast, the history of British slavery is still framed around its [legislative abolition](#). The end of slavery in the West Indies serves as synecdoche for the end of imperial expansion based on the founding of new colonies and as point of transition to an empire of trade and trusteeship, echoing a bright line drawn in domestic British history drawn by the [Great Reform Act of 1832](#).

Consequently, the history of slavery in the British empire has been the history of British *abolitionism*, not British abolition: of explaining and evaluating how many Britons came to reject slavery, not of explaining how – or if – slavery was taken apart. In general, this history has been written from one of two very broad positions. One position frames the end of British slavery as fundamentally altruistic. This position was partly invented by the abolitionists themselves. In the ‘altruist’ camp, historians argue that Britons abolished slavery in spite of their economic interests, that they sacrificed wealth for the greater good. The second camp is the ‘self-interest’ camp; in the ‘self-interest’ camp, abolitionism – or at least elite abolitionism – was a cynical response to a changing economic and political situation, a wolf in saint’s clothing. [Eric](#)

[Williams](#)' *Capitalism & Slavery* (1944) is a point of origin for this school. Williams argued that abolition was made possible by capitalism, that the abolitionist movement hit its stride just as rich and powerful industrial capitalists no longer needed slavery to sustain their wealth. Slavery bankrolled factories in Britain, after which it was discarded. Williams' argument was sensational and influential, dovetailing with a broader critique of British colonialism and with anti-colonial nationalisms. In the 1970s, historians like [Seymour Drescher](#) and [Roger Anstey](#) aimed to rehabilitate the abolitionists with a data-driven version of the altruist argument.¹³ Drescher in particular returned to data about the value of the sugar industry to show how profitable the West Indies sugar industry was at the time of abolition. In *Freedom Burning*, an account of the imperial dimensions of antislavery policy, told from the perspective of the Foreign Office, and broadly satisfied with British moral leadership, [Richard Huzzey](#) takes the 'altruist' argument to the wider empire. *Freedom Burning* celebrates the degree to which antislavery activities were a part of wider British foreign policy objectives, and scolds historians for critiquing antislavery from "anachronistic expectations," insisting that the Victorians did what they could with the ideological tools that they had.¹⁴

This division of the field is crude, and obscures a great deal of excellent work. But however blunt an instrument it might be, it shows how resolving *why* Britain abolished its slave trade became the dominant heuristic in the literature. The most original and influential recent history of British abolitionism, [Christopher Brown](#)'s *Moral Capital*, reminded historians of the imperial dimensions of abolitionist ideology. Brown shows how crucial the loss of the American colonies was to both the abolitionists and the British public. The loss of the 'respectable' slave

¹³ Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition*; Drescher, *Econocide*; Drescher, "Whose Abolition? Popular Pressure and the Ending of the British Slave Trade"; Drescher, *Mighty Experiment*; Drescher, "The Shocking Birth of British Abolitionism."

¹⁴ Huzzey, *Freedom Burning*, 19. See also Mulligan and Bric, *Global History of Anti-Slavery Politics*; Huzzey, "Minding Civilisation and Humanity in 1867."

states of the American South, Brown argues, made it easier to convince the public of anti-slave-trade and antislavery arguments.¹⁵ And yet, even Brown is concerned largely with how abolitionists managed to transform discomfort with slavery into a formal abolitionist movement. Brown's history ends in 1787, with the founding of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, bracketing out the path from activism to the passage of the [Slave Trade Act of 1807](#), and concealing the history of the implementation of imperial laws against slavery.

2.

Slavery was a complete political economy, and a system of violence and power that shaped every aspect of everyday life in the British empire long after emancipation. It was also connected to capitalism, not in opposition but in symbiosis. However, accounts of 'capitalism' that are over-preoccupied with defining the term and then finding case studies that conform to the definition tend to conceal the closeness this symbiotic relationship. Weber famously insisted that one of the markers of 'capitalism' was "free labour. People must be available who are not only legally in the position to do so, but also economically compelled to sell their labour." Moreover, a capitalist society was one where "property takes on the form of negotiable paper."¹⁶ The problem with this definition is that in the nineteenth century, slavery involved transforming people who could not sell their labour on the open market into pieces of negotiable paper – not only chattel, but securitized, insured chattel. Rather than asking what global capitalism *is*, we might ask along with the anthropologist [Anna Tsing](#), "Why is global capitalism so messy?"¹⁷

¹⁵ Brown, *Moral Capital*; Brown, "Empire without Slaves."

¹⁶ Weber, *Max Weber on Capitalism, Bureaucracy, and Religion*, 109–110.

¹⁷ Tsing, *Friction*, 11.

A cohort of historians of the United States offer new answers to that question, a new ‘history of capitalism.’ Their work, very broadly, emphasizes the history of the United States as told through the everyday operations of finance, tracing American history through the history of banking, insurance, investment and credit.¹⁸ Enslaved people and their labour became the basis of new financial instruments that circulated among and within the North and the South, [blurring the line between a ‘modern’ industrial North and a ‘backward’ South](#). Slavery, of course, has never been far from the top of the agenda for historians of the United States, but the ‘history of capitalism’ has given a different impetus, [attracting attention, money and graduate students](#). Crucially for the purposes of British historians, it offers a way of thinking about ‘capitalism’ as a regime of everyday practices. As [Seth Rockman](#) writes, “Too often capitalism appears as a synonym for market exchange and not as a political economy that dictated who worked where, on what terms, and to whose benefit.”¹⁹ In those terms, the line between the labour of enslaved people in 1832 in Jamaica, and the work migrant labourers did for wages in the 1840s is much murkier. Wage labour did not abolish the *practices* of slavery.

That is not to say that historians of the British empire ignore the place of commerce in its expansion and governance. Whether the empire was made “in a fit of absence of mind” or by an “imperialism of free trade” or by “gentlemanly capitalists,” Britain’s was a commercial empire.²⁰ And yet, as [Alexander X. Byrd](#) reminds us, “the late eighteenth century British empire was overwhelmingly black.”²¹ Historians of the British slave trade have done the demographic work

¹⁸ See, among other works, Zakim and Kornblith, *Capitalism Takes Command*; Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told*; Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis*; Beckert, “Emancipation and Empire”; Beckert, *Empire of Cotton*; Rosenthal, “From Memory to Mastery”; Levy, *Freaks of Fortune*; Levy, “Accounting for Profit and the History of Capital”; Mihm, *A Nation of Counterfeiters*; Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart*; Rockman, *Scraping By*.

¹⁹ Rockman, *Scraping By*, 5.

²⁰ See, very broadly Seeley, *The Expansion of England*; Gallagher and Robinson, “The Imperialism of Free Trade”; Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism, 1688-2000*.

²¹ Byrd, *Captives and Voyagers*, 2.

to prove this point; historians of the British West Indies have reconstructed the bleak world of the plantation.²² The challenge is to find ways to connect British and colonial histories in new ways, to understand and honour the lives of enslaved people while also tracking the origins and development of the everyday practices of governance in the colonies. In line with the surge in the United States of slavery and finance capital, University College London's [Legacies of British Slave-Ownership](#) database offers an easy-to-use, comprehensive and well-presented glimpse of how deeply slave-ownership was embedded in British society. In 1833, [after extended debate](#) along with the emancipation of enslaved people in the West Indies, the British government paid £20 million to slave-owners as compensation for their lost 'property'; the Legacies database makes public and searchable the records of this transaction, "the largest single financial operation undertaken by the British state to date."²³ In his monograph on the compensation scheme, [Nicholas Draper](#) takes pains to show both how many Britons leapt at the chance to identify themselves as slave-owners in order to claim compensation and how the compensation money was itself broken down into securities and other financial products.²⁴

And yet, historians need to be cautious of relying overmuch on financial records to write a history of visceral suffering. The 'history of capitalism' risks shading into the history of capital itself, of a new set of financial abstractions with distant consequences. In *River of Dark Dreams*, [Walter Johnson](#) describes the Lower Mississippi in an opening scene told from the point of view of a man propelled high above the Mississippi River [amid the wreckage of an exploding steamship](#). Before he died, he might have seen the American Deep South as "land that had been promised to white yeoman farmers, but that was being worked by black slaves; land that had

²² See, for example Eltis and Richardson, *Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade*; Dunn, *A Tale of Two Plantations*.

²³ Draper, *Price of Emancipation*, 270.

²⁴ Draper, *Price of Emancipation*.

been stripped bare by the cultivation of cotton; land in the United States of America that was materially subservient to the caprice of speculators in distant markets.”²⁵ Johnson takes particular care, and seems to stand quite deliberately apart from the cohort of ‘historians of capitalism,’ by emphasizing that although financial instruments were created by abstracting the labour of enslaved people into financial products, what matters is what happened to the people in bondage, and not to the people buying bonds. As Johnson puts it, the history of the [Cotton Kingdom](#) is a history of “sun, water and soil; animal energy, human labor and mother wit; grain, flesh and cotton; pain, hunger, and fatigue; blood, milk, semen and shit.”²⁶

The fluids, wit and pain of individual people in British colonies before and after emancipation may provide a way into more intimate imperial histories of the transition from slavery to freedom. For example, many historians acknowledge the common histories of British and American abolitionism, particularly in the eighteenth century, but few carry those histories forward past the abolition of slavery in the West Indies.²⁷ Comparisons of life and work on plantations in the West Indies and the American South have been powerful and fruitful works of history; Natasha Lightfoot’s recent work on Antigua, *Troubling Freedom*, augurs for renewed interest in gradual emancipation among historians of slavery in the British empire.²⁸ The day-to-day practices of the abolitionist North in the United States and the post-emancipation West Indies offer another way of reuniting American and British abolitionism. Quaker antislavery activism on both sides of the Atlantic emphasized the slow, gradual path to economic and personal autonomy that follow manumission or emancipation. [Anthony Benezet](#), perhaps the most important abolitionist Quaker writer of the mid-eighteenth century, proposed that former

²⁵ Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*, 2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 9. See also Johnson, *Soul by Soul*.

²⁷ See, most famously Davis, *Problem of Slavery*; Brown, *Moral Capital*; O’Brien, “A Transatlantic Community of Saints.”

²⁸ Lightfoot, *Troubling Freedom*.

slaves work to pay off the cost of their manumission, while bound to designated farms and closely supervised.²⁹ Likewise, in the 1780s and 1790s, many Northern states formally abolished slavery, but virtually all replaced it with programs of bonded labour for former slaves.

Gradual emancipation allowed abolitionists on both sides of the Atlantic to put off designing a post-emancipation society, to preserve plantation economies, and to coddle politically powerful planters.³⁰ Abolitionists could instead embrace antislavery as a process of sentimental education, not a revolutionary act of liberation, a chance to remove “the stain of sin and the fear of just reprisal but retain the control.”³¹ In the British West Indies, the preamble to emancipation was a series of laws demanding the registration of the names and locations of enslaved people in central repositories, and extensive regulations designed to ‘improve’ the condition of slavery, in order to make the transition to emancipation easier. Sierra Leone, for example, relied on the practices of gradual emancipation as best practices. In 1833, the Emancipation Act called for five years of ‘apprenticeship’ before emancipation. Apprentices were expected to continue to work for their former ‘owners’ for most of the week, and were expected to sell the rest of their time, either on the plantation or elsewhere. As Diana Paton has shown, while apprenticeship was not strictly ‘slavery,’ it was forced labour – and was, moreover, the catalyst for the construction of a substantial and powerful system of incarceration and judicial terror in the West Indies.³²

3.

²⁹ Zilversmit, *First Emancipation*, 87.

³⁰ Zilversmit, *First Emancipation*; Melish, *Disowning Slavery*; Gigantino, *Ragged Road to Abolition*; Levine-Gronningsater, “Delivering Freedom.”

³¹ Melish, *Disowning Slavery*, 64.

³² Paton, *No Bond but the Law*; Green, *British Slave Emancipation*.

In addition to blood, semen and shit, the empire of ‘civilization’ and emancipation was made out of paper. Both the new financial instruments invented to catalyse global capitalism and the data and religious and ethnographic hand-wringing required new, robust and globalizing empires of paper. ‘Civilization’ and emancipation, as much as capitalism, required bureaucracy, and recent histories of slavery and capitalism dovetail with innovative approaches to understanding the organization and functioning of the British empire. Perhaps the most influential working historian of American capitalism, [Sven Beckert](#), models a research program that shares many features with the approach to British history pioneered by historical geographers in his *Empire of Cotton*. In American history, the connection between the development of bureaucratic and managerial capitalism has long been part of the research agenda, and “cotton had paced the transformation.”³³ Britain did not have slavery, but it had vast investments in the commodities produced by slave labour, and in the slave states of the Americas. Britain did not grow cotton, but its industrial economy virtually depended on it.

Beckert’s work emphasizes the connection between British cotton manufacturing and American cotton plantations, demanding more attention from historians to the relationship between Britain and the complex and interdependent economy of slave labour and industrial production in the United States. Beckert also emphasizes that this relationship was not solely a nineteenth-century phenomenon. It was made in part by what he calls ‘war capitalism: “Slavery, the expropriation of indigenous peoples, imperial expansion, armed trade, and the assertion of sovereignty over people and land by entrepreneurs” – in short, the everyday business of British imperialism in the eighteenth century (and, minus official support for the slavery, in the

³³ Chandler Jr., *Visible Hand*, 27.

nineteenth and twentieth).³⁴ The ‘Empire of Cotton’ Beckert describes bears a close resemblance to the empire described by the historian [John Darwin](#). The ‘empire’ of cotton did not have a centre; rather, it was “built by myriad actors with local and diverse connections often solving very local problems.”³⁵ Darwin, for his part, describes the British empire as “largely a private-enterprise empire: the creation of merchants, investors, migrants and missionaries, among many others.”³⁶ As [Miles Ogborn](#) comments, “Imperialism is constituted through its arrangement of spaces, places, landscapes, and networks of connection.”³⁷ Those networks, driven by local practices but connected to wider institutions and structures may be useful for managing the problem of scaling between individual lives and wider historical forces.

The empire of cotton was also an empire of paper. The sun and blood of the cotton fields was abstracted out into the reams of paper needed to understand and control it. Consequently, paperwork takes on more importance for historians working on the relationship between slavery and capitalism. Social historians interested in American capitalism have written innovative histories of both printed forms, which “fed the paperwork addiction of managerial capital” and of the many thousands of writers and clerks who managed and filed the forms.³⁸ As [Michael Zakim](#) writes, “the age of capital” was “overrun with scribbling men” trained in new-fangled techniques for speedy reading and writing taught by specialized schools and popular correspondence courses.³⁹ A one-day workshop for early-career historians I organized at the [Center for History and Economics](#) at Harvard University on the ‘[New Histories of Paperwork](#)’ showed just how pervasive, and how compelling and innovative, histories of bureaucracy have become in the age

³⁴ Beckert, *Empire of Cotton*, xv.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 207.

³⁶ Darwin, *Unfinished Empire*, xi.

³⁷ Ogborn, *Indian Ink*, 4.

³⁸ Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge*, 24.

³⁹ Michael Zakim, “Paperwork,” *Raritan* 33, no. 4 (2014): 35.

of digital sources. It is worth remembering that the British empire was also an empire of paper, of plantation ledgers and Blue Books and memoranda and letters. The history of slavery in the empire is ready for a social history of paperwork – of how bookkeepers, of in the employ of slave-owner, produced the statistics that abolitionists and their historians rely upon.

Slavery helped to create the instruments of bookkeeping, accounting and financial transparency that were instrumental in the integration of the Atlantic economy.⁴⁰ The tools built for slavery served antislavery just as well; the movement flourished as the British public demanded greater and greater transparency, auditing and oversight of its government. The muckraking entrepreneur John Wade's bestselling [Extraordinary Black Book](#), which laid bare the structures of Old Corruption by printing the salaries and sinecures of politicians and clerics, interspersed with polemic against the powerful, was published in the early 1830s and went through dozens of editions, updates and printings. The *Black Book* conjured clarity and morality out of a published account of a bureaucracy. Historians of the Atlantic slave trade were among the first to rely on 'big data' and the massive accumulation and presentation of charts and tables – condemning the slave trade by representing it in all of enormity. The [Transatlantic Slave Trade Database](#) is perhaps the most impressive example of this kind of work. And yet, both historical and contemporary 'audits' of slavery and the slave trade ought to give pause. Taking spreadsheets from the past, the compilers of the database did the titanic work of data entry and labelling, creating spreadsheets for the present. And yet, all of this amounts to an implied critique of capitalism that relies on the apparatus of capitalism. There is almost certainly no other option, and the world of scholarship would be much the poorer without the curation of big data for the use of other historians. But, as the historian of science [Theodore Porter](#) comments,

⁴⁰ See for example Wennerlind, *Casualties of Credit*; Hancock, *Citizens of the World*.

“Quantification is a social technology.”⁴¹ The big data of Atlantic history offers an opportunity to write social histories of data collection and measurement. As [Kirsten Weld](#) cautions in another context, “We must place archives – with their histories, their contingencies, their silences and gaps, and their politics – at the heart of our research questions rather than simply relegating them to footnotes and parentheses.”⁴² The data upon which historians of the slave trade and slavery rely has a social history worth exploring.

Finally, combining close attention to practices with careful attention to the contingencies of the production of paperwork and archives connects the history of emancipation to the histories of settler colonialism, racism and Victorian schemes for imperial trusteeship. In the eighteenth century, images of human suffering like the [famous print of the slave ship *Brookes*](#) were intended to persuade Britons by forcing them to face the physical horrors of the slave trade. In the nineteenth century, economic data became more important; the Great Experiment required data to prove its success or failure. Soon, opponents of emancipation, writing about the West Indies, noted the falling production of sugar and coffee in British colonies. One critic noted that the only crop yield that increased after emancipation was [allspice](#). But the author remarked that allspice thrived in fallow land, allowing “the negro women and children [to pick] the berries without the trouble of cultivation... These facts and statistics,” he concluded, “demonstrate the down-hill progress of Jamaica.”⁴³ Accounts of the ‘decline’ of Jamaica became, in the words of one contemporary writer, “the stalking horse of pro-slavery arguments.”⁴⁴

⁴¹ Porter, *Trust in Numbers*, 49.

⁴² Weld, *Paper Cadavers*, 13. See also Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*. Other contributions to the history of paperwork include Vismann, *Files*; Raman, *Document Raj*; Kafka, *The Demon of Writing*; Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge*; Hull, *Government of Paper*.

⁴³ Van Evrie, *Free Negroism*, 15.

⁴⁴ Pringle, *Fall of the Sugar Planters*, 3.

‘Commerce, Christianity and Civilization’ had been an enduring mantra for abolitionists. Civilization became indexed to commerce, and the profusion of publically available commercial data gave opponents and proponents of various kinds of imperial reforms a means of showing the ‘development’ of British subjects, and a rhetoric for asserting why Britain ought to control that development, for the good of her subjects. A lack of commerce – or rather, unwillingness to either trade with Britain entirely, or unwillingness to produce for the market the things that Britain needed – was taken as evidence of barbarism, and as a justification for further intervention. “A check upon commerce is a check upon civilization,” commented one American author.⁴⁵ Slavery was at the root of that discussion; in the abolitionist bestiary, where the slave-selling African king was near the very bottom of the ladder of civilization, the degree to which a society participated in the European market economy became a convenient gradient for measuring civilization. A society that did not trade was barely a society at all. Haiti was presented as the best example of the phenomenon. In the 1840s, one commenter wrote, “We behold the British Colonies... [of the West Indies] approaching the semi-barbarous condition of St. Domingo.” Even defenders of Haiti agreed in principle that commerce was a clear indicator of civilization. When the Bishop of Oxford declared, “If the island were sunk, it would not, he believed, produce such an impression as the loss of one ship or one flag!” an indignant refutation also relied on export figures, pointing out that Haiti exported 35,000 tons of coffee in 1786, and 300,000 tons in 1832.⁴⁶

The mantra of ‘commerce, Christianity and civilization’ assumed that the three were interconnected and would advance together, that the end of slavery would allow formerly enslaved people to participate in both the material and spiritual marketplace and in the process

⁴⁵ Christy, *Lectures on African Colonization, and Kindred Subjects*, 65.

⁴⁶ Davy, *The West Indies, Before and Since Slave Emancipation*, 89–90.

become more ‘civilized.’ The missionary impresario [Dandeson Coates](#) remarked, “Christianity, when received by an uncivilized people, not only leads to the adoption of salutary laws for preserving the peace of the community and cultivating the virtues of social life, but it secures protection to the merchant and the mariner, and the greatest facilities for the extension of commerce.”⁴⁷ The irony of the Great Experiment was that the expectations of capitalism in the British empire meant that as commerce was indexed to civilization, the West Indies became the sort of place that *couldn’t* be civilized. By reckoning civilization in commercial terms, perversely, the West Indies had been more ‘civilized’ in the days of slavery. Material culture became a proxy for civilization.⁴⁸

Setting aside the preoccupation with emancipation as the end of the history of slavery in the British empire offers a new way of understanding the empire in the long nineteenth century. Historians interested in the history of British humanitarianism after 1833, and especially in histories of movements for ‘legitimate commerce’ in West Africa and the protection of aboriginal people in the settler colonies recognize that those movements, which spanned the entire British world, drew their strength from the successes of abolitionism.⁴⁹ Organizations like the [Aborigines Protection Society](#) not only included many abolitionists, but relied on the mixture of economic data and ethnographic description pioneered by abolitionists.⁵⁰ The history of Britain requires a new account of slavery, one that no longer pivots so heavily on legislative emancipation, and that recognizes that ‘emancipation’ did not mean – and was never intended to

⁴⁷ Coates, *Christianity the Means of Civilization*, 183.

⁴⁸ Francis, “The ‘Civilizing’ of Indigenous People in Nineteenth-Century Canada,” 57; Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, 5.

⁴⁹ See Temperley, *White Dreams, Black Africa*; Heartfield, *The Aborigines’ Protection Society*; Everill and Kaplan, “Introduction: Enduring Humanitarianisms in Africa”; Lester, “Humanitarians and White Settlers in the Nineteenth Century”; Lester and Dussart, *Colonization and the Origins of Humanitarian Governance*.

⁵⁰ Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, 240–245. See also Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science*.

mean – genuine autonomy for enslaved people. The fact that abolitionism was as much driven by the logic of capitalism as the plantations of the West Indies hides in plain sight, but colours the whole bleak history of the British colonial empire. As the traveller and author [Mary Kingsley](#) complained in the 1890s of West Africa, “The labour problem has been imported with European civilisation. The civilisation has not got on to any considerable extent, but the labour problem has.”⁵¹ The ‘labour problem,’ of getting imperial subjects to dance to the tune of the market, was much a problem of slavery as a problem of ‘freedom.’

⁵¹ Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa*, 645.

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