British slavers against abolition

Olivette OTELE
Université Paris 13

Introduction

The 1780s and 1790s were marked in Britain by the fight for the abolition of the slave trade within and outside the political arena. Popular momentum was supported by the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, commonly known as the London Committee. The Committee was set up in 1787 by Quakers and key figures such as Rev. Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce, a Member of Parliament. It efficiently organised, with the support of Manchester, Plymouth and other British cities, the petitioning of Parliament in 1792. Gradual abolition was voted by 230 to 85 in the House of Commons that year, but the abolitionist cause was destabilised by international colonial events. The overseas economy was threatened by slave revolts and by French and British colonial rivalry. In 1791, a slave rebellion led by Toussaint Louverture had taken French colonists by surprise. Black slaves rapidly captured the island, forcing the remaining plantation owners to flee. In 1794, the new revolutionary French government, known as the ‘National Convention’, abolished slavery, provoking the rage of French plantation owners and creating a mixture of hope and anxiety among British slavers. France had been Britain’s major competitor in the slave trade since the seventeenth century. On the one hand, the French decision to abolish this trade raised high hopes of substantial wealth among British West Indian merchants. On the other hand, the success of the Black Rebellion could be emulated by British slaves. As Hilary Beckles noted, Haiti was ‘an inspiring expression of the endemic abolition movement that long typified the Caribbean colonial experience’. Haiti’s constitution guaranteed individual freedom and extended the courtesy to potential runaway slaves: ‘by providing that any enslaved person who arrived in Haiti would become automatically a free citizen, it set a benchmark in abolitionist politics for all nations’. Plantation owners saw their fears confirmed by two rebellions in 1794 and 1795. The Fedon Rebellion in Grenada, led by Julian Fedon – an admirer of Toussaint Louverture and the son of a white French settler and a free black woman from Martinique –, started in 1794. The second Maroon War (1795-1796) caused important economic and social

4 Ibid., p. 114.
damage to the British ‘plantocracy’. At home, the French Revolution had become a bone of contention among British abolitionists. Utterly disgusted by the revolution, Prime Minister William Pitt and his cabinet members argued that the time was not right for the abolitionists to press their case. Thomas Clarkson’s support of the French Revolution was deemed inappropriate by Wilberforce. Yet time would heal these differences. As Seymour Drescher put it, ‘The dissociation between abolition and French radicalism was eased by Napoleon’s re-institution of colonial slavery in 1802’. William Pitt returned to office in 1805 and resumed his support for the cause defended by his friend Wilberforce. Clarkson was once again sent out on a tour to gather popular support in the form of signatures. The following year, Lord Grenville, who had been Foreign Secretary under Pitt’s leadership, became Prime Minister. He openly expressed his preference for gradual abolition that had been promoted by the London Committee. The slave trade had to stop, he contended, but plantation slaves should not be freed. Owners needed time to recover from the loss of African labour by investing in other trades. They still needed slave labour for a period of time. In 1806, the Foreign Slave Trade Bill was passed. Grenville’s point of view had been a direct response to one of the main arguments used by plantation owners since the second half of the eighteenth century, regarding the loss they would have to endure if the slave trade was to end. I would argue that a shared view concerning the place of black people in the Atlantic world led Parliament to take into account pro-slavery interests before and after 1807. This mutual stance can partly explain the compensation of slave-owners after emancipation in 1833 and the enforcement of the Apprenticeship system. This paper focuses on the ideology, discourse and identity of slave owners in relation to abolitionists. Secondly, it discusses the legal measures chosen by the mother country to improve the lives of slaves in the West Indian plantations and the planters’ response through new estate management. The paper closes on the bitter-sweet victory of emancipation and its aftermath.

**Ideology, discourse and identity**

Pro-slavery ideology was built around three intertwined points: a racially-biased view of enslaved Africans, a discourse centred on principles of humanity with paternalist and imperialist overtones and finally the defence of a ‘pure’ British identity commonly shared with abolitionists. In 1774, Edward Long published *The History of Jamaica: Or General Survey of the Ancient and Modern State of the Island: with Reflections on Its Situation, Settlements, Inhabitants, Climate, Products, Commerce, Laws, and Government.* Long’s book became a reference in Britain from the end of the 1770s onwards. As a colonial administrator, he had spent many years in Jamaica. His observation of Negroes’ physical attributes and his reflections regarding their intelligence, or rather the lack of it, posited him as an expert on enslaved Africans. It was believed at the time that the more one travelled up north, the fairer the skin colour became. It was thought that enslaved Africans would change slightly and take on a colour that would be more acceptable to European eyes. This proved to be a disappointment as Long wrote that:


Negroes have been introduced into the North American colonies near 150 years. The winters, especially at New York and New England, are more severe than in Europe, and yet the Blacks born here, to the third and fourth generation, are not at all different in colour from those Negroes who are brought directly from Africa.\(^7\)

This presented the colonist with the inconvenience of having to look at a ‘covering of wool, like the bestial fleece, instead of hair’\(^8\) and to endure their ‘bestial or fetid smell, which they all have in a greater or less degree [...] especially when their bodies are warm either by exercise or anger.’\(^9\) Their brain did not seem to redeem their physical aspect as ‘in general, they are void of genius, and seem almost incapable of making any progress in civility or science’.\(^10\) They were, according to Long’s expert eyes, only interested in women, drinking and ‘with no wish but to be idle’\(^11\). Long’s views of American and West Indian slaves were tempered by the remarks of another pro-slavery colonist Bryan Edwards, in 1793. Edwards contended that improving the conditions of enslaved Africans would raise them to a higher degree of knowledge, even if they would never compare with the wit and intelligence of white settlers. In fact, Edwards saw these attempts as a sign that ‘the age itself is hourly improving in humanity’\(^12\) and Whites were to lead the movement by raising the Negroes’ intelligence to a higher level. Pro-slavery campaigners were not the only ones to share these views about enslaved Africans. In 1797, William Wilberforce published a pamphlet about ‘true Christianity’. Referring to enslaved Africans or the ‘Children of nature’ as he called them, he remarked that:

They appeared incapable of conjugal affection, or parental fondness, or filial reverence, or social attachments; uniting too with their state of barbarism, many of the vices and weaknesses of polished society [...] But you give up the heathen nations as indefensible, and wish rather to form your estimate of man from a view of countries which have been blessed with the light of revelation. True it is, and with joy let us record the concession, Christianity has set the general tone of morals much higher than ever found in the Pagan World.\(^13\)

According to abolitionists, the lack of religious education, cultural obscurantism and unpolished manners were among the reasons why they thought that enslaved Africans could not handle freedom without preparation. In addition, they considered it a duty to prevent slaves from acquiring freedom too soon, as their well-being was at stake. Britain’s principles of humanity commanded her to follow gradual abolition. This particular discourse regarding the ability of black slaves to

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\(^7\) Ibid., pp. 352-53.
\(^8\) Ibid., p. 53.
\(^9\) Ibid.
\(^10\) Ibid.
\(^11\) Ibid.
\(^12\) Bryan EDWARDS, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies*, London: John Stockdale, 1807, p. 130.
handle freedom was highlighted by the blatant refusal to forge an alliance with black abolitionists such as Toussaint Louverture. British abolitionists wanted the slave trade to end, but many were opposed to the end of slavery. Accordingly, as Hilary Beckles has suggested, ‘Wilberforce denounced self-liberation and by extension condemned Caribbean anti-slavery leaders […]. [H]e did not intellectually respect the epistemological position of enslaved Africans, whose lives were the ultimate abolitionist weapon.'

Thomas Clarkson also used Wilberforce’s argument of gradual abolition in 1823. He saw it as a ‘preparatory school to fit them for the right use of their freedom’. Contrary to Long, Edwards and even Wilberforce, Clarkson believed that black people could learn as much as their white counterparts simply because ‘the Negro character is malleable at the European will’. He postulated that there is: ‘a singular pliability in the constitutional temper of the Negroes; and they have besides a quick sense of their own interest, which influences their conduct.’ A particular discourse on the Negroes’ abilities was accompanied by a strong imperial sense of entitlement. Europeans had been victorious on the economic front. They should enjoy a well-deserved place as both the leaders of trade and the protectors of humanist principles. Referring to infancy when it came to the intelligence of enslaved Africans was common among both defenders of slavery and the abolitionists. For the novelist Matthew Lewis, the Caribbean represented the wilderness and yet a place where happy Negroes lived. Lewis had inherited two plantations in Jamaica. He visited his estates for the first time in 1815-1816, and he travelled back only once again in the following two years. Lewis, one among the absentee owners, knew little or nothing about plantation life and estate management. Such plantations were run by agents established in the Caribbean. Daily management was delegated to white managers or overseers who lived on the estates. Upon his arrival in Jamaica, he recorded in his *Journal of a West India Proprietor*: ‘It was particularly agreeable for me to observe, on Saturday, as a proof of the good treatment which they had experienced, so many old servants of the family […] were still strong, healthy, and cheerful’. Being warmly welcomed by slaves was of particular value to Lewis, as it contrasted with English social codes of conduct. He noted: ‘Je ne vois que des yeux toujours prêts à sourire. I find it quite impossible to resist the fascination of the conscious pleasure of pleasing; and my own heart, which I have so long been obliged to keep closed, seems to expand itself again in the sunshine of the kind looks and words which meet me at every turn.’ Although in favour of the abolition of the trade, Lewis was against emancipation. According to him, slaves who had run away were ungrateful creatures, unable to understand that slavery represented a shelter for them. When confronted with a particular case of a

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16 Ibid., p. 34.
17 Ibid.
runaway slave, he did not appear to understand the need for freedom, even from those who have been fairly treated:

In England, a man only runs away with another person’s wife: but a run away with his own – what depravity! – As to my ungrateful demigod of a sheep-stealer, Hercules, the poor wretch has brought down upon himself a full punishment for all his misdeeds. [...] He has been struck by the palsy. Yesterday some of my Negroes found him in the mountains, unable to raise himself from the ground [...] he now lies having quite lost the use of one side, without hope of recovery. He is still a young man [...] he may look forward to a long and miserable existence. 19

It took Lewis another visit to Jamaica the following year to gain a clear picture of plantation life with the hard treatment experienced by slaves on his own estates. As Judith Terry noted in the introductory notes of the Journal, in one of Lewis’s wills, he recommended that the subsequent owner visit his plantations for at least three months every third year. This was an implicit criticism of absentee owners who had no idea of the harshness of life in the Caribbean.

Lewis’s Journal raises several questions concerning the identification of owners with their environment. It brings out the question of identity. Could plantation owners who lived in the Caribbean be British? They often sent their children to study in Britain. Lewis’s mother and father, for instance, were sent to Britain to acquire an education and stayed in England where they met and married. Lewis was therefore a slave owner by inheritance. He viewed himself as an Englishman not as a Creole. To be a white Creole implied that one was navigating between two worlds: the slaves and the free white settlers. Being in the Caribbean for generations meant being burdened with the suspicion that an ancestor might have had children with black slaves. The fear of not only ‘bad blood’ – that entailed being lower in the social ladder – but even worse, ‘tainted blood’ was recurrent in the eighteenth century. Caribbean settlers were deemed vulgar, brutal and unsubtle. Brontë’s novel Jane Eyre is revealing in that respect. Bertha Mason, Rochester’s first wife, seduced him, and her family lured him into a marriage that was a match of unequals. She is revealed to be mad and ends up living in a secluded part of Rochester’s mansion. She is the product of ‘tainted blood’, a Creole, that is a native of the place. The ambiguity of the term Creole is expressed in Jane’s words. To be Creole means to be black, white, or both. Jane referred to her ‘discoloured face’ and to her ‘savage face’,20 while Rochester explained that she had inherited her insanity from a drunk and mad mother, a Creole herself. Brontë, Thackeray and other authors used the figure of the manipulative, insane, unsophisticated white Creole. Britishness or Englishness seemed to have had geographic boundaries. Abolitionists also emphasized the difference between the British and ‘them’. In his analysis of the links between West Indian planters and the British, Christer Petley contended that ‘British attitudes towards the planter class were characterised by a mixture of envy and ridicule’ as exemplified in a popular play called The West Indian, in which the

19 Ibid., p. 128.
protagonist described how his taste for liquor led him to bring ‘rum and sugar enough […] to make all the water in the Thames into punch’. Abolitionists used the same rhetorical device, arguing that pro-slavery campaigners lacked the refinement of sensibility.

Caricaturists such as James Gillray started to represent not only the planter but also the overseer. In Gillray’s Barbarities in the West Indies, an overseer is depicted stirring a vat of sugar juice, from which a black slave is struggling to escape. In addition to these representations, Brycchan Carey has analysed the ways in which both groups competed to posit themselves as men and women of sensibility and knowledge, through for instance the Gentleman’s Magazine, a journal that published both abolitionist and pro-slavery letters and essays. Planters considered they were ‘loyal British subjects overseas’, who were also capable of engaging in philosophy and literature. Adam Hochschild has analysed the ways in which the West India Committee, a pro-slavery lobby, used newspapers to respond to the abolitionists’ petitions. £1,600 were used by pro-slavery campaigners to publish articles in the 1790s. Their actions were intensified when they started to meet three hours every day in 1792. Hochschild noted that a man called Bell was paid a weekly £5 to ‘monitor provincial papers’; then a writer was hired for £100 a year to write pro-slavery literature. A provincial newspaper such as the Bristol Mercury serialised disputes among local residents. These exchanges were not exempt from religious and philosophical considerations:

The West Indians say that the cultivation of their islands cannot be carried on without Negroes. The coast of Africa is the only place from whence they can obtain a supply. [...] All moral and commercial writers confirm their principles, and it is an unavoidable consequence from the premise. Therefore, the West Indian islands and this part of Africa are linked together by Nature, in a state of mutual dependence. It is to be asked, wherein are the West Indies serviceable, in return, to the African? [...] They answer, by instructing them in Morality, Civilization, and Religion. [...] Hence is deducted the following corollary: any attempt to impede or interrupt this arrangement of Nature, and stop this current of mutual benefits, must be vain and fruitless; as the ordinations of Nature, sooner or later, burst all barriers, and triumph over every opposition of wild theory or interest; and as morality and religion are concerned, every measure, which limits the extent of their influence, is wicked; and if these be used as

24 Ibid., pp.88-92.
25 Christer PETLEY, “British Links and the West Indian proslavery argument”, op. cit.
pretext, to the original wickedness is superadded hypocrisy.\textsuperscript{27}

Pro-slavery campaigners, supported by the Committee of West Indian merchants, petitioned and lobbied Parliament as abolitionists did. In Bristol, the movement was led by the powerful Society of Merchant Venturers which gathered merchants and politicians such as George Daubeny. A sugar refiner and glass manufacturer, Daubeny was mayor of Bristol in 1786. In 1788, he rallied the abolitionist side and signed a petition against slavery. The following year, he struck a major blow against the abolitionist cause by joining the anti-abolition committee. In the West Indies, planters founded the Kingston-based periodical, the \textit{Jamaica Magazine}. It became an essential tool to promote slavery and above all to show English readers that they had similar interests. As Petley demonstrated, ‘Promoting a reading culture was one of the ways in which sections of the slaveholding elite tried to order their world along British lines, presenting themselves as enlightened and progressive men of culture’.\textsuperscript{28}

\textbf{Legal Measures and delaying tactics}

In the defence of slavery, the first major arguments used by West Indian owners were both economic and legal. Since the seventeenth century, the British Parliament had been deeply involved in the transatlantic slave trade, to maintain a monopoly of the African trade by setting up the Company of Adventurers Trading to Africa, or by adopting measures to regulate it, such as the Dolben Act of 1788. Throughout the history of the trade, planters emphasized the benefits it generated. In the first half of the eighteenth century, the annual value of overseas trade increased from £10.4 million (between 1700-1709) to £26.8 million (from 1765 to 1774), a spectacular increase of 25%.\textsuperscript{29} Decisions related to international trade were taken by Parliament, but local legislations were enforced by assemblies of regional members in the Caribbean islands. Planters argued that abolishing the slave trade was impinging on their rights to run local matters such as the commerce of slaves. They contended that as slaves were their property, Britain’s intervention was a direct attack on their rights as both free subjects and as owners. Abolitionists had struggled to counter the economic argument. Female anti-slavery campaigners, such as Elizabeth Heyrick, attempted to show that Britain could survive without sugar. They advocated the boycott of slave-grown products and expressed their commitment to immediate, not gradual abolition. Concerning the right to interfere in colonial matters, in 1823 Thomas Clarkson argued that Britain had the right to regulate colonial commerce, simply because planters were living under British dominions and therefore under British government. Besides, British subjects had the right to interfere in Caribbean matters, because they were their customers and bought sugar exclusively from the West Indians ‘at a much dearer rate than they can get it from other quarters’.\textsuperscript{30}

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\textsuperscript{27} “To the editors of the Bristol Mercury”, Feb. 23, 1790. \textit{The Bristol Mercury}, Monday, March 1, 1790, p. 4. Bristol Record Office, 40461 (2).
\textsuperscript{28} Christer PETLEY, “British Links and the West Indian proslavery argument”, \textit{op. cit}.
\textsuperscript{30} Thomas CLARKSON, \textit{Thoughts On The Necessity Of Improving The Condition Of The Slaves [...]}, \textit{op. cit}., p. 49.
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By the end of the eighteenth century, there seemed to be a shift in pro-slavery discourses regarding those rights. They started using what Christer Petley referred to as ‘delaying tactics’. These consisted in pretending they agreed with measures regarding the treatment of slaves in order to delay abolition. For instance an Act for ‘the better Protection and promoting the Increase of Population’ was passed in Grenada, in 1788. A similar Act was voted in Dominica, but Governor Prevost declared that it was no more than a ‘political measure to avert the interference of the mother country in the management of the slaves’. Abolitionists believed naively, Clarkson noted, that by abolishing the slave trade, planters would be forced ‘to take care of those whom they might then have in their possession’. He strongly believed that they would take the matter into their hands and alter the laws related to the treatment of slaves. It was only in 1823, that Clarkson openly declared his disappointment in relation to those inefficient measures. Meanwhile in the Caribbean, panicking planters were attempting to reorganise plantation life. One of the means they found was to ship slaves from one colony to the other, in order to break any rebellion and to sell the ‘unprofitable’ ones. Domestic slaves were sent out into the fields, which destabilised the slave communities even more. In addition, the slaves on ships captured by British patrols were ‘spewed out “liberated” into the terrifying death hole that was Demerara’. Heavily in debt, slave owners wanted to capitalise on what was left before emancipation. These changes led to some of the bloodiest rebellions in the history of the British trade. They took place in Barbados in 1816, Demerara in 1823 and Jamaica in 1831. In the metropolis, the population was puzzled. Those who knew little about life in the Caribbean had enthusiastically believed that the abolition of the trade would suffice.

It appeared from the planters’ point of view that estate management had to be revised. Some of them still believed they could prevent emancipation. As Diana Paton has demonstrated, while the death rate rose due to ill-treatment, pronatalist policies were put in place. For instance, cash payments were made to women whose children survived for one month after birth; bonuses were offered to mothers at Christmas time; planters went even further by reducing labour for pregnant women. Such measures had already started in the Leeward Islands with the Leeward Island Slave Code (1798) and in Jamaica but they had become a source of tension between planters and slaves after 1815. Paton explained how women, after giving birth, refused to stop breastfeeding their children as their owners demanded. Breastfeeding for a long time was one of the means they used to prevent pregnancy. Women tried to turn these ‘benevolent’ measures into rights. For instance in May 1836, four women, Diana Hall, Eliza Hall, Elenor Hall and Frances Thomas, refused to go back to work in the fields, because they had six to ten young children to look after. Before the arrival of the new overseer, they had been exempted from work in the cane fields. They were taken to the Jamaican stipendiary magistrate who decided they should be allocated to ‘light’ work in the fields. Elenor accepted but the others

31 Ibid., p. 3.
refused. They were sentenced to the house of correction for seven days and to solitary confinement. When they were released they still refused to go back to work. They appeared before the magistrate once again. Two of them refused to go back to the fields. Eventually, they were sentenced to fourteen days in the house of correction with ‘two daily spells on the treadmill’. There, punished slaves were made to run on a treadmill as fast as they could while being whipped. These examples became widespread during the apprenticeship era. Paton reported that women who had refused to wean their children were locked in solitary confinement at night for weeks. Others were physically punished because they had decided, contrary to the rules, to take time off work to look after their sick children.

In addition, promoting birth was accompanied by measures to convince female slaves to stay on the estate. Villeinage was advocated by pro-slavery planters such as Bryan Edwards. It was a type of serfdom that existed in the Middle Ages in Europe. It required that the villeins be attached to the land. They could own property, but in most cases they did not have sufficient resources to do so. They had to allocate their time to work for the lords or, in the present case, the owner. They could not move away from the estate without his consent. This solution proved to have common ground with what abolitionists were defending. Thomas Clarkson had refuted the idea, supported by planters such as Edward Long, that Negroes were indolent and idle. He suggested in his pamphlet of 1823 that if Negroes were idle, the expression ‘to work like a negro’ would not be so widespread in England. To prove his point, he first referred to Toussaint Louverture who had tried villeinage as he thought it ‘unwise to allow the former [the labourers], in the infancy of their liberty, to get notions of change [...] He ordained, therefore, that they should be attached to the plantations, and made, though free labourers, a sort of adscripti glebae for five years’. Clarkson then used a second example. He narrated the experiment carried out by Mr. Steele, the Vice-president of the London Society of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce, also the owner of three estates in Barbados, an absentee landlord. Steele had decided to see for himself what life was like in the Caribbean during the 1790s, at a time when the debate about abolition was raging. He had changed the way his slaves were treated and introduced a system of villeinage. He noticed that slaves worked faster during their spare time than for their master. He then decided to introduce the incentive of paid work for those who ‘deserved’ it.

Nevertheless despite common ground on the treatment of slaves and the possibility of introducing villeinage, the vast majority of planters were in favour of continuing under the pre-abolition system of terror to make sure that slaves would obey the master. The campaign for emancipation was, according to them, proof that abolitionists did not think about the impact it could have on slaves. According to letters from Government House, Dominica:

34 Ibid.
36 Thomas CLARKSON, Thoughts On The Necessity Of Improving The Condition Of The Slaves [...], op. cit.
37 ‘tied to the land’.
38 Ibid., p.25.
Mr. Sydenham said that the negroes generally did not behave so well as they used; that instead of doing their duty cheerfully, they are obliged to be flogged to make them attend to it and it happens that they have an idea that they will soon be emancipated. 39

and:

It has been represented to me that erroneous ideas appear to have been impressed on the minds of numbers of the slave population of this colony, leading them to expect emancipation and tending to produce in them a general misconduct and acts of subordination. I have thought fit to issue this my proclamation, warning the slave population not to listen to the false representing of evil minded persons, tending to mislead them from their peaceful, temperate behaviour into unfounded expectations; Any act of disobedience or insubordination will call forth all the powers His Majesty the King has been pleased to invest in me, to punish offenders in the most prompt, rigorous and exemplary manner, and will also prevent the adoption of any further measure for the purpose of meliorating the condition of the slave population of this island. 40

The bitter-sweet victory of emancipation

The Parliamentary Reform Act of 1832 followed the vast campaign led by abolitionists against slavery which had been greatly helped by the account of Mary Prince, a slave who had endured the hardship of slavery. Britain had to face one important fact: the financial cost of slavery. Mike Kaye established how the Baptist War of 1831 accelerated the movement for abolition in Parliament. The Baptist deacon Samuel Sharpe led the rebellion in Jamaica, in which about 200 people were killed, 312 rebels were executed and property worth £1,132,440 was destroyed. 41 British troops eventually took control after two weeks of fighting. Kaye established that the cost of protecting just one colony had been too high and that Britain could become entangled in a war against her colonies. As Lord Howick, the parliamentary under-secretary at the colonial office acknowledged, ‘Emancipation alone will effectively avert the danger’. 42 Aware that emancipation was unavoidable, West Indian planters started to put pressure on the government to find measures that would secure their future. The very active West India Committee was helped by prominent planters from Bristol and Liverpool. As the papers of the Bright family

42 Ibid.
from Bristol have revealed, anger and fear prompted planters to publish desperate pamphlets related to the question of emancipation. Henry Bright wrote in 1833:

*We have noticed none of the schemes for emancipation because we look at them all as perfectly chimerical. Continuous labour, or labour to be commanded at all times, is necessary to the agriculture and manufactures of the colonies. We are confident it cannot be sacred under any plan yet hinted at. We have humanely, and in a pecuniary sense, considerably administered a system approved and enjoined upon us by our country; and we shall demand from the people of England, who became rich by the profits and participated in the guilt (if guilt there be), a full, fair, and immediate compensation for our slaves, and the most ample pecuniary security and political protection for our lands, should they compel us to adopt any alterations in the system injurious to our property.*

In 1833, an Act which abolished slavery throughout the British colonies was passed. It came into effect on 1 August 1834. This was indeed a victory for abolitionists, but the Act contained two controversial clauses. The first one stipulated that West Indian planters were to receive compensation for their lost property. They obtained £20 million; about 40% of the country’s national budget at the time. Enslaved Africans were not given any compensation. The second clause specified that slaves had to work as apprentices for their masters from 1834 to 1840. After that they would be free. Children under six years old were immediately freed. Absentee Planters, who were already wealthy, invested in various industries in the metropolis, while West Indian planters had to settle their debts. The city of Bristol, which had been the biggest slaving port in the world in the 1730s, received £500,000. Money in Bristol was invested in arts, philanthropic deeds and mostly transport such as railways and canals. Initially apprehensive about apprenticeship, West Indian planters realised that they could make a profit out of it as the apprentices had to pay for their own food and houses. Nonetheless apprenticeship proved to be another cause of trouble. According to planters, as former slaves were not used to being treated as apprentices, they had become restless and unruly. Colonial papers suggested that:

*The increased force of the temptation, derived from the improved condition of the apprenticed labourers, may increase also the number of fugitive slaves. As their numbers increase, so may insubordination and discontent be diffused among our own emancipated population. The risks of the passage from foreign to British Colonies, and the fearful waste of human life consequent upon them may thus be multiplied. [...] A necessity for rigorous measure for coercion in the foreign settlements may thus be enhanced, engendering there a spirit of distrust and alarm, with consequent severity of treatment.*

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43 Printed pamphlet by Henry Bright, Bristol, 1833. Bristol Record Office, 11168/73 (a).  
44 “A circular despatched from Mr. Secretary Spring Rice to the Governors of all the West India Colonies, including the Bahamas and Bermuda to the Cape of Good Hope and to the
Contrary to what had been anticipated, apprenticeship neither improved the economic state of planters nor created a new kind of relationship between them and their former slaves. Abolitionists started to campaign against it, arguing that it was another form of slavery. Under pressure, Parliament voted for emancipation. The Act was to take effect on 1 August 1838. Many black people left the plantations in search of what they thought to be a better life. Others stayed and continued to work for their former masters.

History remembers planters as people who clung to an unproductive system while brutally exploiting slaves and then apprentices. Pieter Emmer has defended a different position. Drawing on the research done over the last thirty years by various scholars, he has pointed out that by choosing not to remain on the plantations and to work for their masters, former slaves compromised their economic future. Indeed, very often they ended up owning land and working as peasants for themselves for long hours, thus making it difficult to benefit from education. They also saw their life expectancy diminish. Planters had to turn to labourers willing to live on plantations for a low salary. It was argued that planters could have raised pay and secured black labour. Emmer contended that ‘higher wages further stimulated the freedmen’s move away from the plantations, as their need for a regular cash income was limited […] The more they paid, the less likely it was that the freedmen would work longer hours on the plantation’. In addition, as they were on the verge of bankruptcy, planters had no other option than to turn to cheap labourers such as those from Portugal and then from India and China. According to Emmer, the introduction of Asian workers barely allowed planters to compete with other sugar producers. Plantations actually tended to disappear.

Emmer’s argument exposes clearly the ideological debate which still surrounds the history of transatlantic slavery. Was it just a trade in labour? According to Emmer, former slaves became too emotional about working on the plantations and did not consider their long term interests. Leaving aside the psychological consequences of centuries of enslavement on free black slaves, he wrote: ‘plantation work remained the most secure source of income for the freedmen and most alternative employment caused a substantial decline in their living standards. Freedom came at a price, and it was obvious that the plantation system had not prepared the ex-slaves for this disappointment’. Emmer dismissed research done on Asian labour, on violence inflicted on them by planters over time, and on the very specific relationships which were established between white planters and former slaves, producing a subtly segregated society. Indeed, ‘shadism’ or a stratification of society based on a hierarchy between skin colours still plays an important part in Caribbean societies. Emmer implied that economic opportunities missed by freedmen resulted in their being excluded from the winning team. The population from the Asian sub-continent knew better and the historian noted that:

Suicide, marital violence, and return migration decreased over time,
while Indian ownership of land, savings, and even physical stature increased. These new data have destroyed the (no doubt racially biased) assumption of the abolitionists that more than a million Asian migrants were of such limited intellectual capacity as to be misled for almost a century into inadvertently degrading themselves. In reality, the attraction of the earning potential of the Caribbean can be deduced from the massive influx of Asian migrants. After all, they could have opted to go to many destinations in Africa and Asia, or, for that matter elsewhere in India itself.\(^{46}\)

Black communities did not choose the rational solution which, according to Pieter Emmer, was to continue working on plantations and buy land. Yet, it has been established that one of the causes of the revolt of Morant Bay in Jamaica, in 1865, was that former slaves did not have enough land to cultivate while Crown lands were left untouched. As suffrage was limited to those who possessed a certain amount of land, poor black freemen and women were unable to play a key role in enforcing favourable legislative measures. The social, political and economic power was still in the planters’ hands. During the rebellion, the mother country gave them help. Troops were sent out to support the planters. The measures which followed only proved that the British government considered that, as they had been unable to control their black population, colonial power should be centralised in London.\(^{47}\) This marked a shift in Britain’s imperial policy.

In order to understand why it took about 18 years after the London Committee had been set up to abolish the slave trade and about 27 years to abolish slavery, this paper has suggested that there was a bond of a particular nature between Creole planters and British abolitionists. This link was partly based on a shared view of the ‘Other’ or the enslaved African. The ideology of Pro-slavery planters and merchants was based on a racially biased perception of enslaved Africans. The discursive field of imperialism served as a backdrop to promote pro-slavery views as exemplified by Lewis and his peers. Interestingly, by attempting to rally the British audience to their cause, the planters adopted the abolitionists’ rhetorical devices. They, too, were men and women of sensibility. They, too, were British subjects who, in addition, had dedicated their efforts and lives to assert imperial power through the slave trade. They tried to demonstrate that they belonged to British society despite their being the interface between ‘children of nature’ or brutish Africans and the culture and refinement of Britain. Longing to be accepted, they created journals and produced literature which only highlighted the fact that they had a distinctive identity shaped by their economic contingencies and by the slave system. They were white British Creoles. The main battlefield remained the abolition of the slave system. Planters went along with measures adopted by Parliament to improve the lives of enslaved Africans, not in order to gradually lead them to abolition as abolitionists believed but to delay abolition. A brief study of specific estates revealed how drastic


measures chosen after 1807 disrupted community life in the West Indian plantations. The desperate attempt to promote the slave population growth through a pronatalist policy led to more confrontation between planters and slaves. Emancipation seemed inevitable. It came, in 1834, as a severe blow for planters who had been struggling to clear their debts. The government decided to compensate planters and to allow them to benefit freely from the work of former slaves known as apprentices. The system led to further conflicts and increased illegal migration of British slaves. Emancipation had been a bitter-sweet victory and life after 1838 would continue to be characterised by an economic, social and cultural gap between plantation owners, indentured servants from the Asian sub-continent and former slaves.

Bibliography


