Claudius K. Fergus

Revolutionary Emancipation: Slavery and Abolitionism in the British West Indies.

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As many readers of this journal will know, Eric Williams's *Capitalism and Slavery*, more than any other single work, set the agenda for scholars working in the area of British slavery and abolition. In this compact book, Williams staked out the following provocative claims: (1) Atlantic slavery fueled the first industrial revolution; (2) the economic decline of the sugar planting class was integral to the passage of Britain's slave trade abolition bill (1807) and its emancipation bill (1833); and (3) the enslaved were fully prepared to take their freedom if parliament did not push forward emancipation, as evinced by Jamaica's massive Christmas Rebellion (1831). Taken in total, these bold assertions decentered the metropolitan narrative of the rise of British power and British humanitarianism by casting attention on important developments in the periphery. This reorientation leads to the conclusion that policy was not born out of abstraction, but rather from concrete developments and dramatic episodes in the colonies.

Williams's rendering of the materialist forces that led to 1807, 1831, and 1833 was roundly attacked by a train of historians who sought to recenter the abolition story. Seymour Drescher's collective work has done the most to advance this agenda by dismissing Williams's economic decline thesis as well as his proposition that radicalized slave resistance and rebellion had a positive effect on the progress toward emancipation. Drescher, alternatively, sees the most effective slave rebellions as those that were moderated by Christian doctrine, which allowed for metropolitan identification with the humanity and the plight of the enslaved. In other words, Drescher argues that British sentiment was primarily responsible for reform and that the enslaved played a minor and supportive role in undermining the slave system.¹

Claudius Fergus's new book rejects Drescher's interpretation by ascribing the birth of metropolitan antislavery to the actions of slave rebels who fought a series of antislavery wars across the Caribbean in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Building on Christopher Brown's contention that the abolitionists were motivated by a spirit of imperial and national reform, Fergus claims that the white-led political attack on the slave trade, and later on

1 See, for example, Seymour Drescher, 2011, *Civilizing Insurgency: Two Variants of Slave Revolts in the Age of Revolution*, in Seymour Drescher & Pieter C. Emmer (eds.), *Who Abolished Slavery? Slave Revolts and Abolitionism: A Debate with João Pedro Marques* (New York: Berghahn Books), pp. 120–32.

slavery, was fundamentally motivated by the conviction that imperial reform could control laborers more effectively than the traditional West Indian slave system. Thus, he argues that metropolitan abolitionists were not humanitarians committed to racial equality or universal freedom, but were instead proto-social scientists who plotted a paternalist plantation paradigm that would “civilize” Africans for the benefit of the planter and the empire. The most effective arguments against the conventional slave system, he reasons, were those that promised a prosperous and permanent peace in the Caribbean.

Fergus identifies Tacky’s Rebellion (Jamaica, 1760) as the start of a series of antislavery uprisings that were responsible for launching metropolitan interest in the slave system. He tells us that West Indian planters were the first to reflect on the causes of slave militancy, beginning with Edward Long’s 1774 analysis. This well-known planter propagandist argued that the rebellion was the consequence of an overreliance on African laborers, who, unlike Creoles, could never be at peace with their New World status. Fergus explains that this rendering of native-born slaves as passive workers was a complete fiction, but Long’s explanation nonetheless had a significant reach and it unwittingly served as the basis of the first abolitionist critiques of the slave trade and of colonial society. James Ramsay, and later James Stephen, promised that an end to the African slave trade would reduce investor risk and the state’s exposure to the cost of fighting malcontented slaves.

The false assumption that Africans were more dangerous than Creoles, Fergus writes, finally ended the nation’s grip on the slave trade in the early nineteenth century. The security argument, which formed the basis of William Pitt’s 1790s attacks on the slave trade, was resurrected and is said to have been central to abolitionist successes in 1806 and 1807. But the reformers who supported abolition were soon disappointed by the creolization plan, whose failure was made manifest by the Barbadian Bussa Rebellion (1816). This uprising subsequently directed reformers to pursue a range of social engineering strategies under the banner of “amelioration.” Fergus explains that these policies played out in differing degrees throughout the British Caribbean, but his focus is on Trinidad, whose crown-colony status gave parliament a strong position from which to mandate reform. As with the promise of creolization, however, the amelioration plan failed to deliver workforce compliance, as proved by continued slave resistance in the 1820s and 1830s.

This elegantly argued book forces the careful reader to consider the important implications of its radical reinterpretation of western “progress” and British reform. Unlike typical accounts of British abolitionism, *Revolutionary Emancipation* does not depict a clear-cut dichotomy between humanitarian reformers and the planting interest. Rather, Fergus shows us how both fac-

tions shared the common goal of creating a compliant West Indian workforce. It was the construction of the enslaved as “wards” that explains why neither immediate freedom nor social justice was advanced by generations of white abolitionists. By 1833, the gift of “civilization” was considered to be sufficient compensation to Afro-West Indians for their two-hundred years of captivity. Further, white imperial reformers continued to endorse race-based labor control strategies after emancipation, including the apprenticeship program and restrictions on land ownership. *Revolutionary Emancipation*, therefore, casts the white abolitionists as reformers who were reacting to the radicalism of the enslaved rather than as innovative fighters for social justice. Once again, the abolition and emancipation story is decentered.

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