Book Reviews

Barbara L. Solow

The Economic Consequences of the Atlantic Slave Trade. Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2014. xv + 141 pp. (Paper US\$39.99)

This posthumous collection of essays deals with three arguments presented by the Trinidadian historian and prime minister, Eric Williams, in his classic work, *Capitalism and Slavery*, first published in 1944. His three contentions were “that the slave/sugar/plantation complex [of the British West Indies] was a fundamental in the onset of the Industrial Revolution in England; that abolition of the slave trade occurred when the older British islands were in decline; and that racism was the consequence, not the cause of slavery” (p. xiv). As Barbara Solow correctly points out, these are controversial and widely and heatedly debated contentions in the current literature. She argues that Williams was correct on all three points, but in these essays she focuses her primary attention on establishing the correctness of the first hypothesis, that “slavery in the British West Indies contributed significantly to English industrial growth in the second half of the eighteenth century” (p. 77).

While she and I have been on different sides of this particular argument (and others), there is no denying the importance of her research and of the empirical aspects of the debate. The seven essays in the book (five of which have been previously published) were written over a period of about 25 years, and deal with several of the related themes in the work of Williams. The first essay, from 1985, is a useful survey of the literature on the westward movement of the slave/sugar/plantation complex from its emergence in Mesopotamia to its arrival in Cyprus, Crete, Anatolia, and the islands on the west coast of Africa, and then to its years of greatest success in Brazil and the European colonies in the Caribbean, where it made its “fundamental” contribution to British economic development. A previously unpublished essay, “Marx, Slavery and American Economic Growth,” discusses Evsey Domar’s argument about the role of “free” land in the Americas, but also draws parallels between the economic

effects of New World slavery and the agricultural revolution in Britain, with its important contributions by “technical change in agriculture ... which would have been impossible without the remodeling of property rights” (p. 107). Her critique of those attacking Williams makes the point that “Slavery did not cause the Industrial Revolution, but played an active role in its pattern and timing” (p. 17) and that “to argue that slavery was important for British economic growth is not to claim that slavery caused the Industrial Revolution” (p. 18), but that one key to British economic growth was “the Atlantic trading system of the eighteenth century ... directly based on it” (p. 107). While this provides a rather nuanced interpretation of the manner in which Williams’s argument is often presented, it has, not surprisingly, limited the magnitude of the pros and cons on the specific issue as well as on the broad sweep of Williams’s work. As such, this means that Solow’s book and those critiquing Williams will give students an interesting and useful introduction to examining major aspects of the history of slavery and the way it effected (and was affected by) its role in the world economy.

Solow’s contribution to the ongoing scholarship on Eric Williams goes beyond her own writings. She was the primary organizer of three important conferences dealing with Williams (in 1985, 1989, and 2011), the first two of which have been published. *British Capitalism & Atlantic Slavery*, based on a conference that I helped to organize and co-edit, was published in 1987. The second was published as *Slavery and the Rise of the Atlantic System* in 1991. The third was held at Oxford University to mark the one-hundredth anniversary of Williams’s birth at the college where he began his studies in England in 1932 and from which he received his Ph.D. in 1938. Solow’s interest in the Caribbean came rather late in her career. Her Ph.D. at Harvard, “The Land Question and the Irish Economy, 1870–1903,” was completed some 13 years after her graduation from Radcliffe, and is regarded as one of the early works of cliometric history. She taught economic history at several Boston-area universities, and made an important contribution to scholarship as a research associate at the W.E.B. Du Bois Research Institute at Harvard (now known as the Hutchins Center). In that capacity she, along with David Eltis and Skip Gates, arranged the initial funding for the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, which drew together the previously independent work of Eltis, Herbert Klein, David Richardson, and Stephen Behrendt on the slave voyages of vessels from different countries using primary archival sources. Over time this has expanded to include over 35,000 slave voyages and has become an exceptionally widely-used source for all those working on various aspects of world slavery and the slave trade.

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