

REVIEW ESSAY

From Williams's Thesis to Williams Thesis: An Anti-Colonial Trajectory*

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WILLIAMS, ERIC. *The Economic Aspect of the Abolition of the West Indian Slave Trade and Slavery*. Ed. by Dale W. Tomich. Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, MD [etc.], 2014. 278 pp. \$92.00; £65.00.

Eric Williams's *Capitalism and Slavery*, published in 1944, is one of the most influential and controversial historical studies of the twentieth century.¹ This relatively short book firmly associated the name of its author to key debates about the connections between capitalist development, slavery, the slave trade, abolitionism, and the roots of racism – topics that have recently re-emerged in quite remarkable fashion.² This fact in itself

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1. Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1944). To show its influence, it suffices to mention the many edited volumes and special issues of academic journals dedicated to the book and its author. These include Barbara L. Solow and Stanley Engerman (eds), *British Capitalism and Caribbean Slavery: The Legacy of Eric Williams* (Cambridge, 1987); Heather Cateau and S.H.H. Carrington (eds), *Capitalism and Slavery Fifty Years Later: Eric Eustace Williams – A Reassessment of the Man and His Work* (New York, 2000); the articles in "Eric Williams and the Postcolonial Caribbean", *Callaloo*, 20:4 (1997); and in the "Symposium on Eric Eustace Williams", *Journal of African American History*, 88:3 (2003). A special issue on Williams's dissertation appeared in *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, 35:2 (2012).

2. Most noticeably under the heading of the "new histories of capitalism".

would make the publication of Williams's dissertation *The Economic Aspect of the Abolition of the West Indian Slave Trade and Slavery* of historiographical interest. This thesis, defended by Williams at Oxford in 1938, provided the template from which *Capitalism and Slavery* would develop. However, the final text diverged in important aspects from the first draft, from which even the signature concept "capitalism" is absent. As editor Dale Tomich argues in his preface to the text, the differences between the dissertation and the book can provide new insights into the intellectual sources, evolution, and theoretical directions of Williams's work.³ This might be true for any *urtext* of a later classic. But it is particularly relevant to understanding the trajectory of Eric Williams, whose style has been described as "elusive", saddling the eponymous debate with great problems of interpretation.⁴ The fact that Williams's previously hard to access doctoral thesis is now available to the general public will help to clarify important aspects of the "Williams Thesis" and its genesis.

The significance of *The Economic Aspect*, however, is not confined to mere historiography. Williams ends *Capitalism and Slavery* on an uncharacteristic note of modesty: "The historians neither make nor guide history. Their share in such is usually so small as to be almost negligible."⁵ Williams's own share was not however.⁶ In fact, the years in which he reworked his dissertation into the published book saw his emergence as a leading Caribbean intellectual figure, and in political terms were crowned by the British government's grudging acceptance of Williams as a member of the Anglo-American Caribbean Commission discussing the future of the region.⁷ As one historian of Trinidadian decolonization notes, Williams's authority "was the *deus ex machina* which propelled the independence movement forward, revolutionized the political life of the colony almost overnight, and shattered the complacency of the sputtering transition to self-government".⁸ *Capitalism and Slavery* established Williams's status as a prominent thinker and actor in the decolonization movement, ushering in his appointment in 1962 as the first prime minister of independent Trinidad and Tobago. The network in which Williams operated during his period of political and intellectual formation included the Trinidadian far-left thinkers and organizers George Padmore and C.L.R. James, the African-American

3. Dale W. Tomich, "Preface", in Williams, *Economic Aspect*, pp. viii–ix.

4. The epitaph comes from Ken Boodhoo, *The Elusive Eric Williams* (Kingston [etc.], 2002).

5. Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, p. 212.

6. Eric Williams's autobiography *Inward Hunger: The Education of a Prime Minister* (London, 1969) leaves the distinct impression that he was aware of this fact.

7. Tony Martin, "Eric Williams and the Anglo-American Caribbean Commission: Trinidad's Future Nationalist Leader as Aspiring Imperial Bureaucrat, 1942–1944", *The Journal of African American History*, 88:3 (2003), pp. 274–290.

8. Ivar Oxaal, *Black Intellectuals Come to Power: The Rise of Creole Nationalism in Trinidad and Tobago* (Cambridge, MA, 1968), p. 96.

academics Ralph Bunche, Alain Locke, and Abram Harris, and scholars from the wider Caribbean, such as the Cuban historian Fernando Ortiz.⁹ In the six years between his dissertation defence and the publication of *Capitalism and Slavery*, Williams published a short book *The Negro in the Caribbean*, in which he used the history of slavery as the starting point for a blistering condemnation of the results of political and economic dependency, as well as a flurry of articles on British colonialism in the Caribbean.¹⁰ The route from dissertation to final text runs parallel to Williams’s trajectory from a young black student combating racism and imperial narratives at Oxford to the future prime minister of an independent nation.

Apart from being an important historiographical document, Williams’s dissertation is therefore also a historical source in its own right. In this article, I will examine both aspects of the text. I will use *The Economic Aspect* to present a reconsideration of the “original content” of the Williams Thesis, the intellectual influences that went into it, and the way in which Williams’s political engagement in the years 1938–1944 influenced its finished form. Though the article does not deal with the Williams Debate that followed the publication of *Capitalism and Slavery*, reconsidering the “making of” the Williams Thesis can have a profound impact on how we view its later interpretations and current relevance.

THE ECONOMIC ASPECT AND CAPITALISM AND SLAVERY COMPARED

For readers familiar with *Capitalism and Slavery* and the heated debates it triggered, reading Williams’s dissertation must feel like watching the X-rays of a famous painting. Underneath the all too familiar surface, we find the old master’s original pencil sketch. While the sketch clearly depicts the same theme as the finished work, using the same cast of figures, and showing the unmistakable traits of the master’s hand, we see a completely different composition. Some of the key protagonists are missing, some attributes have been greatly enlarged, while others have been moved into the background.

9. On this network, see in particular William Darity, Jr, “Eric Williams and Slavery: A West Indian Viewpoint?”, *Callaloo*, 20:4 (1997), pp. 801–816; John Hope Franklin, “Eric Williams and Howard University”, in Cateau and Carrington, *Capitalism and Slavery Fifty Years Later*, pp. 23–28; Colin A. Palmer, *Eric Williams and the Making of the Modern Caribbean* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2006), pp. 25–31; and Humberto García Muñiz, “Eric Williams y C.L.R. James. Simbiosis Intelectual y Contrapunteo Ideológico”, in Eric Williams, *El Negro en el Caribe y Otros Textos* (Havana, 2011), pp. 419–458.

10. Eric Williams, *The Negro in the Caribbean* (Washington DC, 1942). For a full list of Williams’s publications during these years, including his academic articles, see David Barry Gaspar, “They ‘Could Never Have Too Much of My Work’: Eric Williams and *The Journal of Negro History*, 1940–1945”, *The Journal of African American History*, 88:3 (2003), pp. 291–303, 295–296.

To make the differences understandable, it is necessary to start from the finished work, *Capitalism and Slavery*. The book is chiefly famous for establishing two major theses. The first linked the growth of capitalism in Britain in the eighteenth century to slavery and the slave trade (for the purpose of this article: Thesis I). The second held that the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in 1807 and of slavery in the British West Indies in 1834 can be explained by the declining economic importance of the Caribbean colonies to the emerging industrial capitalism of the age (Thesis II).¹¹ Williams was not the first to advance either of these claims.¹² But he was the first to bring them together in a comprehensive study based on original source material, and he provided powerful and original arguments for both. His work was also more wide-ranging than its immediate predecessors, containing many observations on both the very local and the global impact of slavery, philosophical statements on the role of economic forces in history, and the important argument that slavery was the cause of racism, not its effect. The latter point, to which most of the first chapter of *Capitalism and Slavery* was devoted, sparked an entire historiographical debate of its own.¹³ It has rightly been viewed as a separate Williams Thesis (Thesis III), but for reasons of space it cannot be discussed extensively here. However, as we shall see in the final section of this article, the inclusion of Thesis III in *Capitalism and Slavery* was significant for the overall trajectory of Williams's thinking.

Capitalism and Slavery has proven to be fertile ground for further investigation. However, it has also bequeathed the ensuing Williams Debate with real problems. As the late Barbara Solow argued: "Part of the difficulty in dealing with *Capitalism and Slavery* arises because it is not precisely clear what the Williams thesis is".¹⁴ Throughout the book, Williams slides between "strong versions" and "weak versions" of Thesis I and Thesis II. At the far end of this bandwidth stands a theory of direct causation, in which slavery and the slave trade were the most important sector on which British industrial capitalism was

11. Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, p. 210. Also see Barbara L. Solow and Stanley L. Engerman, "British Capitalism and Caribbean Slavery: The Legacy of Eric Williams: An Introduction", in Solow and Engerman, *British Capitalism*, pp. 1–23, 1.

12. William Darity, Jr, "The Williams Abolition Thesis Before Williams", *Slavery & Abolition*, 9:1 (1988), pp. 29–41. The next section will deal more extensively with the question of antecedents.

13. Williams succinctly summarizes his point at the start of the book: "Slavery in the Caribbean has been too narrowly identified with the Negro. A racial twist has thereby been given to what is basically an economic phenomenon. Slavery was not born of racism: rather, racism was the consequence of slavery." Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, p. 9. For the ensuing debate, which attained particular intensity in North America, see Alden T. Vaughan, "The Origins Debate: Slavery and Racism in Seventeenth-Century Virginia", *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 97:3 (1989), pp. 311–354; William A. Green, "Race and Slavery: Considerations on the Williams Thesis", in Solow and Engerman, *British Capitalism*, pp. 25–49; and David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 48–76.

14. Barbara L. Solow, "Caribbean Slavery and British Growth: The Eric Williams Hypothesis", *Journal of Development Economics*, 17:1–2 (1985), pp. 99–115, 101.

built, and in which the successes of abolitionism were the product of an absolute incompatibility between slavery and modern industrial capitalism. But other formulations by Williams point towards weaker versions for both theses, asserting that slavery supplied just one significant *element* of the funds for the Industrial Revolution, and that a combination of structural and conjectural economic factors merely created the *circumstances* under which abolitionism could be successful.¹⁵ The difficulty thus created is compounded by the argumentative structure of the text. In his preface to the book, Williams describes it as “strictly an economic study of the role of Negro slavery and the slave trade”.¹⁶ In reality, the content of his study is far from straightforward. Under the broad rubric of “economic forces”, *Capitalism and Slavery* alternately refers to very different elements and processes, the connections between which he neither fully explains theoretically, nor proves empirically.¹⁷ These include, but are not limited to: a) an alleged *structural* tendency in slave-based sugar production to over-exploit land and labour; b) *conjectural* shifts in international trade leading to a decline in the competitiveness of the British West Indies; c) *political* conflicts between industrialists and old commercial interests over free trade and protectionism; d) an anti-mercantilist and free-labour *ideology* emanating from political economists such as Adam Smith and Arthur Young.

All four, operating at essentially different levels of determination, are invoked at some point in the book as the “economic interests” driving slavery’s changing relationship with capitalism.¹⁸ Of these four different directions, the first two are the most measurable in purely quantitative terms. It is here that economic historians challenging the Williams Thesis have mainly concentrated their fire.¹⁹ As a result, the Williams Thesis has become almost synonymous with the “decline thesis” of West Indian sugar

15. For example, for Thesis I: Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, pp. 51–52, where the triangular trade is first designated the primary role in British trade in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but on the next page more safely denoted as “one of the main streams of that accumulation of capital in England which financed the Industrial Revolution”. Or p. 98, where Williams rhetorically asks: “The industrial expansion required finance. What man in the first three-quarters of the eighteenth century was better able to afford the ready capital than a West Indian sugar planter or a Liverpool slave trader?”, just to say immediately afterwards that they only “supplied part of the huge outlay” needed for industrialization. For Thesis II, p. 142, where we find the overstated “In the era of free trade the industrial capitalists wanted no colonies at all, least of all the West Indies”, and p. 169, where after arguing that “[t]he capitalists had first encouraged West Indian slavery and then helped to destroy it”, Williams makes clear that the capitalists’ opposition to slavery “was relative not absolute”.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 210.

18. A useful overview of the very different economic mechanisms invoked by Williams in the dissertation and in *Capitalism and Slavery* can be found in David Beck Ryden, “Eric Williams’ Three Faces of West India Decline”, *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, 35:2 (2012), pp. 117–133.

19. The all-out attack of economic historians on Williams’s decline thesis was launched, to great effect, by Seymour Drescher, *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition* (Pittsburgh, PA, 1977).

production, moving debates over *Capitalism and Slavery* onto considerably narrower terrain than the one sought by its author. The “appropriation” of the Williams Debate by quantitative economic history has pushed Williams’s arguments on inter-capitalist conflicts between free traders and mercantilists into the background as one of the lesser aspects of his thought. The question of “ideology” was later reintroduced into the Williams Debate, concentrating on possible links between capitalism and the rise of humanitarian sensibilities rather than on economic policy. This was perceived as a move away from Williams’s “strictly economic approach”.²⁰ Furthermore, economic historians tended to argue for or against Williams’s assertion of the declining profitability of sugar within a largely bilateral framework focused solely on Britain and its imperial connections.²¹

Based on *Capitalism and Slavery* alone, it is hard to tell what weight to give to the various factors enlisted by Williams. It is here that the publication of *The Economic Aspect* can prove particularly useful. Both Dale Tomich and David Beck Ryden have argued that in his dissertation Williams formulates his arguments more coherently, in a less linear fashion, and with a considerably different emphasis than in the later text.²² The greater coherence in presentation is partly due to the choice made by Williams in covering a much more limited subject and time frame. The twelve chapters and three appendices of the dissertation extensively cover only the period from 1783, the year in which the first petition for the abolition of the slave trade was presented to the British Parliament, to 1833, the year Parliament passed the Slavery Abolition Act. As these dates suggest, the dissertation focuses entirely on the contribution of economic factors to the abolition of the slave trade and slavery, and leaves out the question of the contribution made by slavery to the development of British capitalism in its earlier phase. In fact, perhaps astonishingly, the word “capitalism” is not mentioned anywhere in the dissertation. Although the course of the argument makes it quite clear that Williams thought about his problem in broad systemic terms, he chose to present his findings in the more modest language of “economic aspects” that led to slavery becoming considered “impolitic” by leading sections of the British ruling class.²³

Each of the four levels of economic determination described above can be found in some form in the dissertation. But unlike in *Capitalism and Slavery*,

20. Thomas Bender (ed.), *The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism as a Problem in Historical Interpretation* (Berkeley, CA, 1992).

21. David Beck Ryden, *West Indian Slavery and British Abolition, 1783–1807* (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 14–18.

22. Tomich, “Preface”, p. ix, and Ryden, “Three Faces”, pp. 130–131.

23. Williams, *Economic Aspect*, p. 197, where Williams talks about the rising power of “the industrial bourgeoisie”, makes clear the systemic nature of his argument. The question of the “impolicy” of slavery fills the long first chapter, pp. 13–42.

the mode of presentation makes it possible to attach weight and direction to these factors. With a clear focus on the economic arguments involved in the parliamentary debates on abolition and emancipation, and a chronology that revolves around the key turning points in these debates, much more space is allowed for the contingent ways in which structural problems, shifts in international trade, rising free-trade ideologies, and even humanitarian movements came together at different moments. This does not so much lead to a change of outcome, but one of emphasis between the two texts. In *The Economic Aspect*, the humanitarianism of the abolitionists is not completely dismissed as a fig leaf for purely material interests. Rather, with considerable attention to the utterances of leading abolitionists themselves, Williams sets out to show the changes in the "economic atmosphere" that determined to what extent "noble ideas and elevated sentiments" could exert decisive influence on policy.²⁴ Furthermore, the driving force of economic change did not stem directly from the ebbs and flows of Caribbean sugar production, but from an empire-wide crisis of mercantilist economic policies that stimulated the rise of powerful domestic reform movements, tying the question of slavery to more general campaigns over free trade, the corn laws, and parliamentary reform. The "decline" of the British West Indies attains its definitive meaning only within this larger context.²⁵

Williams's narrative in *The Economic Aspect* foregrounds international and comparative aspects. The pivotal moments sealing the fate of the British Caribbean slave complex and mercantilist trade policies alike were the American Revolution, the failure of the British state to definitively conquer the French colonies after the Haitian Revolution, and the rise of new sugar-producing centres in Cuba, Brazil, and East India. To be clear, these international events and processes would remain highly significant to Williams's argument in *Capitalism and Slavery*. But the mode of presentation in the latter work seemingly privileges bilateral connections between Britain and its colonies. In *Capitalism and Slavery*, apart from the American Revolution that fills the crucial chapter 6, international events are treated in relatively brief sections as part of chapters that principally revolve around developments, groups, and classes in Britain ("British Capitalism", the "Commercial Part of the Nation", "The Saints"). In contrast, eight of the twelve chapters of *The Economic Aspect* have international comparative aspects or geopolitical conflicts at their core.²⁶ More than in *Capitalism and Slavery*, in his dissertation Williams explains the debates between capitalists

24. *Ibid.*, p. 77, fn. 39.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 202.

26. These are, in order, chapters on "The Superiority of the French West Indies" (pp. 43–51), "East India Sugar" (pp. 52–63), "The Attempt to Secure an International Abolition" (pp. 64–71), "The West Indian Expeditions" (pp. 72–81), "The Significance of the West Indian Expeditions"

and policymakers as a result of the changing comparative weight of competing slave systems, geopolitics, and international diplomacy, and conflicting visions of the “national interest”. This also translates into the conclusions of the dissertation, which are much more open-ended than those of the book. The difference in emphasis can be seen most clearly in comparing the two versions of Williams’s final reflections on the 1833 Slavery Abolition Act. In *Capitalism and Slavery*, Williams ends the penultimate chapter on the following triumphant note: “In 1833, therefore, the alternatives were clear: emancipation from above, or emancipation from below. But EMANCIPATION. [...] The Negroes had been stimulated to freedom by the development of the very wealth which their labor had created.”²⁷ *The Economic Aspect* ends much more soberly, closer, in fact, to modern discussions on the “second slavery” than to debates over the “decline thesis”:

The West Indians were thrown overboard, but slavery was not thereby abolished all over the world. In fact slavery and the slave trade increased and we give a false view of the emancipation movement if we do not present it in its proper context as part of the struggle of the industrial and commercial classes against monopolies. What gaps were left by the abolition of slavery in the West Indies would be filled up by the slave labourers of Brazil, Cuba, and the United States.²⁸

Thus, in important respects, *The Economic Aspect* runs against standard interpretations of the Williams Thesis that have shaped debates over capitalism and slavery for over seven decades. To understand why *Capitalism and Slavery* became such a different book from the original draft, it is first necessary to situate the dissertation.

ADVERSARIES, SOURCES, AND INFLUENCES

Eric Williams entered Oxford University in 1932 as a man barely twenty-one years of age, after having obtained a prestigious Island Scholarship in his native Trinidad. Despite coming top of his class in his undergraduate studies, his application for a fellowship at All Souls College was unsuccessful. In his autobiography, Williams describes the negative impact of institutional racism on his chances of getting into this prestigious college.²⁹ In the end, he decided to continue his studies in history, defending his DPhil thesis in 1938. Vincent Harlow, writer of a study on the seventeenth-century colonization of Barbados, acted as his supervisor.

(pp. 82–95), “The Foreign Slave Trade” (pp. 142–163), “East India Sugar” (pp. 164–181), and “The Distressed Areas” (pp. 182–197).

27. Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, p. 208.

28. *Idem*, *The Economic Aspect*, pp. 216–217.

29. Convincing him that “No ‘native’, however detribalised, could fit socially into All Souls”. *Idem*, *Inward Hunger*, p. 45.

Reginald Coupland was one of his examiners. After graduating, Coupland would become the target of Williams's most bitter recriminations against the imperial school of British historiography. As he later remarked:

Coupland's historical writings carry on the tradition of British historiography as established in the nineteenth century [...], sharpening this tradition in order to face the increasing criticism to which imperialism was subjected. The core of his doctrine is his analysis of the abolition movement as a successful humanitarian crusade.³⁰

Although Williams did not challenge Coupland directly in his dissertation, attacking the humanitarian interpretation was his main aim: "By thus giving all the credit to humanity and none to sound policy a distorted view was presented which it is the purpose of this thesis to correct."³¹ Both Darity and García Muñiz demonstrate the pressure that his supervisor Vincent Harlow exerted on Williams to mollify his treatment of the humanitarian school.³² In the version of the dissertation defended before the committee Williams made some concessions to the influence of humanitarianism, but left the thrust of his argument fully intact.

Given this overarching aim to challenge imperial historiography, it is unsurprising that Williams sought battle with the humanitarian school on its own terrain. It is worthwhile noting that the introduction to *The Economic Aspect* does not present the text as "strictly an economic study", but rather as a study of economic *motives* and the way they influenced the course of political debate.³³ Williams employs economic statistics to show that the shifting terms in British debates were based on "real" material changes.³⁴ But the figures everywhere are supportive of a main narrative that focuses on arguments drawn from parliamentary debates, the writings and letters of leading abolitionists, and diplomatic papers – the type of material that was also used by the political historians he criticized.³⁵ This approach points towards an important intermediary step between "economic forces" and policy that is sometimes missing from *Capitalism and Slavery*. The "impolicy" of the slave trade and later slavery became a crucial weapon in the abolitionists' arsenal, because their goal was "to win over hostile forces thinking fundamentally in terms of economics".³⁶

30. *Idem*, *British Historians and the West Indies* (London, 1966), p. 197.

31. *Idem*, *The Economic Aspect*, p. 108.

32. Letter from Harlow to Williams of 15 November 1937, cited in William Darity, Jr, "Introduction", in Williams, *The Economic Aspect*, p. xii. See also García Muñiz, "Williams y James", pp. 425–427.

33. Williams, *The Economic Aspect*, p. 1.

34. For example, *ibid.*, pp. 103, 165, and the footnotes on pp. 175, 192, 193, and 195.

35. Williams even contemplated writing a biography of Wilberforce as his next project. Boodhoo, *Elusive Williams*, p. 72.

36. Williams, *The Economic Aspect*, p. 14.

Apart from providing a clearer view of how economic interests became translated into abolitionist policies, this line of reasoning also gives Williams some room to acknowledge that other, perhaps even humanitarian motives played a role in the struggle against slavery. Howard Temperley has gone so far as to suggest that, as a result, the dissertation does not consider economic factors as dominant over humanitarianism.³⁷ But Darity has rightly, and with acerbic wit, rejected this as selective reading on Temperley's part.³⁸ Many of the passages in which Williams grants humanitarianism an independent role bear the marks of having been injected as a concession to his supervisor.³⁹ Some such formulations found their way into *Capitalism and Slavery*, but in neither of the two texts did Williams compromise on his key points: that the humanitarian sentiments of the leading abolitionists were circumscribed and held in check by economic interests, and that the abolitionists' ability to influence power remained dependent on economic circumstances throughout.⁴⁰

The question of the intellectual precedents for Williams's rejection of the humanitarian school proves harder to solve than it would seem at first glance. Whether it was out of awareness of his precarious position within a white and elitist academic environment, or stemming from a wish to underline his intellectual independence, Williams remained highly idiosyncratic in his choices to reveal or conceal his influences. William Darity has suggested that "major aspects of Williams' argument concerning the causes of British abolition were present in prominent texts in British economic history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries despite Williams' lack of acknowledgement".⁴¹ He further suggests that rivalry between Oxford and Cambridge might have led to Williams's omissions in this regard.⁴² Instead, already in the dissertation Williams foregrounds the work of one North American scholar in particular, Lowell Joseph Ragatz. In the annotated list of secondary sources, he praises Ragatz's "monumental" bibliographical work, and also singles out his *The Fall of the Planter Class in the British Caribbean* as "easily the best work on the period".⁴³ A few years later, Ragatz would become

37. Howard Temperley, "Eric Williams and Abolition: The Birth of a New Orthodoxy", in Solow and Engerman, *British Capitalism*, pp. 229–258, 237–238.

38. Darity, "Introduction", p. xvii: "Indeed, for Temperley, the dissertation is more Temperley than Williams."

39. For example, Williams, *The Economic Aspect*, p. 111.

40. *Idem*, *Capitalism and Slavery*, p. 197. Interestingly enough, *The Economic Aspect*, p. 139, makes one exception. Hinting at Williams's strong left-leaning political sympathies, he argues that only "the people" were "spontaneously moved by the conviction that slavery was a disgusting and immoral system".

41. Darity, "Before Williams", p. 31.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

43. Williams, *The Economic Aspect*, p. 241, referring to Lowell Joseph Ragatz, *A Guide for the Study of British Caribbean History, 1763–1834* (Washington DC, 1932) and Lowell Joseph Ragatz,

Williams’s academic liaison with the University of North Carolina Press, the publisher of *Capitalism and Slavery*. Williams even dedicated the book to him. For these reasons, it is not surprising that many have seen Ragatz as a major influence on the formulation of Williams’s thesis. But some caution is warranted. Both in his dissertation and in *Capitalism and Slavery*, Williams made copious use of the statistical information gathered by Ragatz. These statistics helped to show that, in 1790, “that grand edifice, the old plantation system in the British West Indies, was tottering from structural weakness”.⁴⁴ However, the other central link in Williams’s economic reasoning – that the collapse of the West Indian sugar economies was a manifestation of a crisis of the mercantilist system of colonial trade – is not of great importance to Ragatz. Moreover, Ragatz and Williams are completely at odds in their explanation of abolitionism. In both his chapter on abolition and that on emancipation, Ragatz presents the movement as “the most signal triumphs of the new humanitarianism” over vested interests.⁴⁵

If there is a real candidate for having launched elements of the Williams Thesis before Williams, it is a very different author whom Williams praises in *The Economic Aspect* but who completely vanished from *Capitalism and Slavery* and, subsequently, went largely unnoticed. This author is the German economist Franz Hochstetter, who in 1905 published a short book called *Die wirtschaftlichen und politischen Motive für die Abschaffung des britischen Sklavenhandels im Jahre 1806/1807*.⁴⁶ As the title suggests, it covers only the theme of half of Williams’s dissertation, leaving out the entire period from the abolition of the slave trade to the emancipation of the slaves in the British West Indies. Hochstetter’s racialized notions of moral and cultural development were starkly at odds with Williams’s inclinations.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, in the way Hochstetter constructs his argument that economic reasoning lay behind the abolition of the slave trade, there is a direct line to *The Economic Aspect*. Rejecting the “extreme Liberalism” of the British historical school,⁴⁸ Hochstetter argued:

dass die Abolition eine nationalökonomische Angelegenheit allerersten Ranges ist [...] und dass auch in diesem Falle die geistig-sittlichen Ideen den Negerhandel

The Fall of the Planter Class in the British Caribbean, 1763–1833: A Study in Social and Economic History (New York, 1977 [1928]).

44. Ragatz, *Fall of the Planter Class*, p. 206.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 239. cf. p. 425.

46. Franz Hochstetter, *Die wirtschaftlichen und politischen Motive für die Abschaffung des britischen Sklavenhandels im Jahre 1806/1807* (Leipzig, 1905). Marcel van der Linden had already suggested to me the possible influence of this text before either of us discovered that Williams had, in fact, used the book for his dissertation.

47. *Ibid.*, pp. 30 and 85–86.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

nicht eher überwinden konnten, als bis seine ökonomischen Grundlagen und Voraussetzungen gefallen waren.⁴⁹

Hochstetter structures his arguments along the same lines as Williams in Part I of his dissertation, connecting the fate of the trade in British colonial goods, primarily sugar, to the “continuous shifts in the political situation in Europe”, the impact of the American and Haitian Revolutions on the possibilities for Britain to assert itself against its rising competitors, and ultimately the way this dual economic and political crisis undercut the old mercantilist system of colonial trade.⁵⁰ Although Williams cites Hochstetter only once, the first hundred pages of his dissertation are heavily indebted to him.⁵¹ The lack of citation is made good by Williams in the bibliography, where he says that the book “is very well argued and does not merit the neglect which has befallen it. The author has used his authorities well and it deserves to be translated”.⁵² However, by the time we come to *Capitalism and Slavery* any mention of Hochstetter has disappeared. The most likely explanation is political. In the 1930s, Hochstetter became a professed supporter of the Nazi regime.⁵³ *Capitalism and Slavery* came out when World War II was in full swing, and it is likely that Williams, who was a staunch anti-fascist and supporter of the allied war effort, found some embarrassment in expressing praise for such a dubious source.⁵⁴

Although Williams was not the first to argue for strong connections between economic interests and abolition, he was certainly original in the way he developed this argument to cover the entire arch of abolition and emancipation. The fact that this pitted him against his supervisors, the Oxford establishment, and the wider British historical world did not dissuade him from laying down his bold thesis, but rather encouraged him. However, Williams did not do so in isolation. In thinking about the origins and evolution of the Williams Thesis, it is necessary to take on board a group of co-thinkers who were much more sympathetic to the way he developed his arguments, and whose influence becomes even more apparent when rereading *Capitalism and Slavery* through the lens of his dissertation.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 15 (citation), pp. 33–34 (geopolitical shifts), p. 43 (mercantilism).

51. The citation can be found in Williams, *The Economic Aspect*, p. 23.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 242.

53. Hochstetter remained so, despite differences over economic policies that led to his fall from grace. Werner Onken, “Natürliche Wirtschaftsordnung unter dem Hakenkreuz. Anpassung und Widerstand”, in *idem* and Günter Bartsch, *Natürliche Wirtschaftsordnung unter dem Hakenkreuz. Anpassung und Widerstand* (Lütjenburg, 1997), pp. 7–66, 19–23.

54. How Williams’s anti-fascism and support for “the defence of the Western Hemisphere” influenced his writing at the time is apparent from his article “The Impact of the International Crisis upon the Negro in the Caribbean”, *The Journal of Negro Education*, 10:3 (1941), pp. 536–544, 542.

RADICAL CROSSROADS: WILLIAMS AND JAMES

The most significant and enduring influences on Williams's historical thought came from the left. These connections would propel Williams not only on the path towards *Capitalism and Slavery*, but also to his increasing involvement in anti-colonial movements. But, again, the relationship is not a simple one. C.L.R. James's *The Black Jacobins*, the influential Marxist interpretation of the Haitian Revolution, appeared in the same year that Williams defended his thesis.⁵⁵ While the book is not mentioned in *The Economic Aspect*, Humberto García Muñiz has meticulously reconstructed the deep personal and intellectual influence exerted by this radical thinker from Trinidad. Much later, the by then much more conservative Prime Minister Williams and the revolutionary James would develop such profound political disagreements that Williams ordered that James be put under house arrest.⁵⁶ But in the 1930s and 1940s, James could still be described as Williams's friend and mentor.⁵⁷ Ten years older than his protégé, and already established as a writer and thinker when Williams started his work on the dissertation, James was present at every step of the project. He discussed the proposal and, in all likelihood, even suggested the topic, he took Williams along on a research trip to the French archives, where he was collecting sources for *The Black Jacobins*, and he later claimed he read the dissertation in draft "three or four times".⁵⁸ James would do the same for *Capitalism and Slavery*. In 1944, he was the one who at the last minute convinced Williams to add the final chapter on "The Slaves and Slavery", introducing slave resistance as a crucial aspect to the history of abolition and emancipation.⁵⁹

The historical significance of the relationship between James and Williams exceeds that of mere academic exchange. Together with George Padmore, another illustrious compatriot who found himself in England in these years, they formed what Williams called a "Trinidadian trinity".⁶⁰ When their paths crossed in the mid-1930s, all three were on their way to becoming major figures in the emerging independence movement in the Caribbean and beyond. But the trajectories through which they did so were very different. Padmore joined the US Communist Party in 1927, and soon became a leader in the attempts by the international communist movement to organize black workers across continents.⁶¹ By the mid-1930s, Padmore

55. C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (London, 1980 [1938]).

56. On the context of this conflict, see Boodhoo, *Elusive Williams*, pp. 166–168.

57. García Muñiz, "Williams y James".

58. Boodhoo, *Elusive Williams*, p. 159.

59. García Muñiz, "Williams y James", pp. 437–438.

60. Williams, *British Historians*, p. 210.

61. Jerome Teelucksingh, "The Immortal Batsman: George Padmore the Revolutionary, Writer and Activist", in Fitzroy Baptiste and Rupert Lewis (eds), *George Padmore: Pan-African Revolutionary* (Kingston and Miami, FL, 2009), pp. 1–22.

had become disenchanted with Moscow, eventually leading him to choose pan-Africanism over communism. His break from Stalinism brought him closer politically to his childhood friend C.L.R. James, who had also turned away from the official communist movement to become a Trotskyist.⁶² In these years, James wrote widely on the struggles of “the Negro in his relation to European civilization”.⁶³ However, more than the other two, James saw this struggle as an integral part of a universal revolutionary movement.⁶⁴ When he came to England, the much younger Williams was naturally drawn to these two figures.⁶⁵ In their slipstream he first entered anti-colonial networks focused on England, witnessing speeches by Kwame Nkrumah, Jomo Kenyatta, and Jawaharwal Nehru and participating in protests against the Italian invasion of Ethiopia.⁶⁶ The adoption of the language of materialism and class by Williams was a direct result of this cooperation. But unlike James or Padmore, Williams steered clear of any association with either communism or oppositional Marxist movements.⁶⁷

If anything, in his writings Williams’s acknowledgement of the two remains understated.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, the impact of especially James was profound. In the bibliography of *Capitalism and Slavery*, Williams mentions *The Black Jacobins* and says: “On pages 38–41 the thesis advanced in this book is stated clearly and concisely and, as far as I know, for the first time in English.”⁶⁹ The fragment of *The Black Jacobins* cited indeed shows great similarities with Williams’s work. It opens with an attack on the humanitarian school that is every bit as strong as Williams’s: “A venal race of scholars, profiteering panders to national vanity, have conspired to obscure the truth about abolition.”⁷⁰ James then continues to lay out an argument that clearly prefigures that of Williams, but interestingly enough does so in a form that is much closer to *The Economic Aspect* than to

62. Anthony Bogues, “C.L.R. James and George Padmore: The Ties that Bind: Black Radicalism and Political Friendship”, in Baptiste and Lewis, *George Padmore*, pp. 183–202.

63. C.L.R. James, *A History of Negro Revolt* (London, 1938), p. 5.

64. Anthony Bogues, *Caliban’s Freedom: The Early Political Thought of C.L.R. James* (London, 1997), pp. 49–75.

65. Boodhoo, *Elusive Williams*, p. 63.

66. García Muñoz, “James y Williams”, pp. 429–430.

67. Boodhoo, *Elusive Williams*, pp. 157–158. The moment and place at which Williams entered the political scene could be an important aspect of the explanation. In the mid-1930s the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) made its turn towards a popular front strategy, leading it to soften its critique of British and French colonialism in comparison with the earlier period. Evan Smith, “National Liberation for Whom? The Postcolonial Question, the Communist Party of Great Britain, and the Party’s African and Caribbean Membership”, *International Review of Social History*, 61:2 (2016), pp. 283–315, 286–289. At this time, Padmore was moving away from communism, and James’s Trotskyism condemned him to the very margins of the international left.

68. Palmer, *Williams*, p. 25.

69. Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, p. 268.

70. James, *Black Jacobins*, p. 51 (page numbers refer to the 1980 edition).

Capitalism and Slavery. Economic decline of the West Indian sugar complex plays a role, but it is seen through a multilateral, not a bilateral lens. The key factor was relative decline next to the expansion of the French colonies. This relative decline, combined with the impact on world trade of the American Revolution, the failure of the British state to take over the French possessions, and the rise of East Indian sugar, weakened West Indian interests in the face of a mounting challenge by the industrial bourgeoisie to mercantilism. The abolition of slavery was a moment in the "victorious attack upon the agricultural monopoly which was to culminate in the Repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846. The West Indian sugar-producers were monopolists whose methods of production afforded an easy target".⁷¹

The close affinity between *The Black Jacobins* and *The Economic Aspect* raises another moot point: Williams's broader relationship to Marxism. *Capitalism and Slavery* has often been seen as related to Marx, even though Williams never mentioned him by name in either the dissertation or the book.⁷² Time and again, Williams chooses formulations that underline his historical materialism, arguing that the mercantile system formed a "brake on the development of the productive power of England and her colonies", or later that English politics necessarily were "brought into accord with the economic revolution which had taken place".⁷³ However, other writers have pointed out that politically Williams was emphatically not a Marxist, and also that what Marx had to say on slavery in theoretical terms diverged in fundamental ways from the positions expressed by Williams.⁷⁴ The suggested incompatibility of slavery and industrialization in *Capitalism and Slavery* has

71. *Ibid.*, pp. 51–54, citation on p. 52. A small but telling further indicator of the affinity between James's argument and that of Williams's dissertation is that they both refer to the socialist leader and historian Jean Jaurès as a source for their understanding of the place of the colonies and the attack on slavery in the French Revolution, although they cite different passages. In *Black Jacobins*, p. 47, James says that his discussion of the place of slavery in the development of French capitalism is based on Jean Jaurès, *Histoire Socialiste de la Révolution Française*, 8 vols (Paris, 1922–1924), vol. 1, pp. 62–84. Williams, *The Economic Aspect*, p. 50, quotes Jaurès's treatment of the same subject through the debates in the *Assemblée Législative*, in vol. 3, pp. 295–296. However, Ivar Oxaal also points out a crucial difference between the two texts: whereas for James, the economic changes created the preconditions under which the revolutionary activity of the slaves, aided by the European masses, could end slavery, for Williams the emphasis is less on the self-activity of the slaves and more on the conflicts within the capitalist class. Oxaal, *Black Intellectuals*, p. 76.

72. For example, in D.W. Brogan, "Introduction", in Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (London, 1964), p. ix, or in Eugene D. Genovese, *In Red and Black: Marxian Explorations in Southern and Afro-American History* (New York, 1968), p. 33. Characteristically, Williams quotes Marx's associate Frederick Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*, twice, but only for some inconsequential statistical information. Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, p. 242, notes 28 and 36.

73. Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, pp. 107 and 134, respectively.

74. For example, García Muñiz, "Williams y James", p. 439.

wrong-footed many readers (myself included). It has led later interpreters to seek connections between the Williams Thesis and Marx's fragmentary remarks on developed capitalism's intrinsic antagonism to slavery. Reading *Capitalism and Slavery* through the prism of the dissertation gives a whole new perspective on this issue. In *The Economic Aspect* we find the following phrase, that will surprise many who thought they knew the Williams Thesis: "It was the West Indian monopoly which interested the industrialists, not the state of slavery in the colonies."⁷⁵ Neither is it an incidental remark, it is a guiding thought of the final chapters of the book, which reappears in *Capitalism and Slavery*.⁷⁶ As we have seen, it is also consistent with the conclusions drawn by Williams on the significance of the 1833 Slavery Abolition Act. According to Williams, monopoly and the mercantile system put a brake on capitalist development, and slavery had to disappear in as far as it supported those two. Where it did not, as in the expanding cotton sector of the American South or the successes of the Brazilian sugar trade, Williams pointed out gleefully that "to imagine that the industrialists were thinking of the slave trade or slavery would be to labour under a delusion".⁷⁷

Given Williams's closeness to James and Padmore, his consistent materialism and employment of the language of class, as well as his interest in the development of nineteenth-century economic thought, which is apparent from both his dissertation and *Capitalism and Slavery*, there is enough ground to speculate on an unacknowledged Marxian influence. However, the most likely place to look for such a speculation might not be Marx's scattered remarks on slavery at all. There is no sign that Williams studied *Capital*, Volume 1, the locus of the most significant theoretical observations on the relationship between capitalism and slavery. Another important source of Marx's views on slavery, his journalistic writings and letters on the American Civil War, had not been easily available for a long time. Nevertheless, it is possible that Williams read them, for in the mid-1930s these writings were republished in much discussed editions on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.⁷⁸ But if so, the direction of their influence would be far from clear. Rather than categorically stating the incompatibility between modern capitalism and slavery, Marx launched vehement attacks on British capitalists and politicians for their willingness to support the Southern slave states of North America, as does Williams in

75. Williams, *The Economic Aspect*, p. 206.

76. For example, in a passage on the abolitionist and capitalist James Cropper, whom Williams accuses of "thinking less of West Indian slavery than of West Indian monopoly". Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, p. 187.

77. Williams, *The Economic Aspect*, p. 215.

78. Kevin Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* (Chicago, IL, 2010), p. 80.

his dissertation.⁷⁹ Nothing of this comes close to being a precursor to the Williams Thesis. If any such precursor can be found, the most likely place to find it is not in Marx's writings on slavery, but in his and Engels's remarks on the rise of the English industrial bourgeoisie and the repeal of the Corn Laws. We have already seen that both Williams and James discussed the 1833 Slavery Abolition Act explicitly in the context of this wider movement for economic and parliamentary reform. When Marx and Engels discussed the English free trade agitation of the 1830s and 1840s, they did so in similar terms, explaining the large shifts in English economic policy of the first half of the nineteenth century as the result of a struggle between a powerful new industrial interest and waning commercial lobbies attached to the old mercantile system.⁸⁰ Engels first wrote about the subject in the final chapter of *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, a work quoted by Williams in *Capitalism and Slavery* (albeit on a different topic).⁸¹ Marx saw these campaigns as a key political question in the arguments among English political economists of the first half of the nineteenth century. Such writings informed the interpretations of English politics in the early nineteenth century that were current among left-wing and radical historians at the time Williams worked on his dissertation.⁸² And it is certainly not far-fetched to think that they found their way into Williams's dissertation. For Williams, as for Marx, the colonial question "was part of the general movement towards a free trade, that movement against the landed class which began in France in 1789, triumphed in Britain in 1832 and 1846, and culminated in the American Civil War".⁸³

79. For example, Karl Marx, "The American Question in England", reprinted in Robin Blackburn, *An Unfinished Revolution: Karl Marx and Abraham Lincoln* (London and New York, 2011), pp. 139–150.

80. For example, in Karl Marx, "Rede über die Frage des Freihandels", in *Marx Engels Werke*, 4 (Berlin, 1959), pp. 444–458. Engels's preface to the 1888 English edition of this text includes the following passage with its decidedly Williamsian ring: "After a long and violent struggle, the English industrial capitalists, already in reality the leading class of the nation, that class whose interests were then the chief national interests, were victorious. The landed aristocracy had to give in. The duties on corn and other raw materials were repealed. Free Trade became the watchword of the day. To convert all other countries to the gospel of Free Trade [...] was the next task before the English manufacturers and their mouthpieces, the political economists", available at: <http://www.marxistsfr.org/archive/marx/works/1888/free-trade/index.htm>, last accessed 3 April 2017.

81. Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/condition-working-class/ch13.htm>, last accessed 3 April 2017.

82. For example, G.D.H. Cole and Raymond Postgate, *The Common People 1746–1938* (London, 1938), pp. 250–251.

83. Williams, *The Economic Aspect*, p. 202. Lucia Pradella has recently shown how in his London notebooks, of course unknown to Williams or any of his contemporaries, Marx himself had paid considerable attention to the links between the free trade reforms, colonialism, and slavery. Lucia Pradella, *Globalization and the Critique of Political Economy: New Insights from Marx's Writings* (Abingdon and New York, 2015), pp. 109–112.

The Economic Aspect provides important insights into the genealogy of the Williams Thesis that are much harder to grasp from the more polemical, and more layered text of *Capitalism and Slavery*. It contains pointers towards immediate influences that were lacking in the later book, such as the work of the right-wing German economist Franz Hochstetter. It also further underlines the closeness in thinking on the subject of slavery and abolition between Williams and James. Finally, it contains a Williams Thesis that is formulated quite differently from that presented in *Capitalism and Slavery*, pointing towards possible connections to a wider stream of left-wing historical writing, including a very different link to Marx than the one that is usually suggested. However, this begs the question why Williams chose to rewrite his dissertation in such a fundamental way. While some historians have bemoaned Williams's decision to change the structure and scope of the dissertation and have defended *The Economic Aspect* as the more nuanced and interesting book, this loses sight of what was gained in the process of rewriting. *Capitalism and Slavery* holds the unique position of being both a highly original and wide-ranging intervention in historical debate, and an anti-colonial classic. It could never have acquired this dual status if Williams had confined it to the narrower aim of challenging the humanitarian interpretation of abolitionism favoured by British historians. It is only in the course of rewriting his dissertation that Williams's distinctive vision on the connections between colonial history and a post-colonial future emerged. The final section of the present article examines this transition.

WILLIAMS'S ANTI-COLONIALISM AND THE POLITICS OF CAPITALISM AND SLAVERY

After finishing his dissertation, Williams attempted to get the text published but was rebuffed even by "Britain's most revolutionary publisher".⁸⁴ After a brief search for academic positions in Britain and elsewhere, he accepted an appointment as Assistant Professor at Howard, Washington DC's high-standing historically black university. When he arrived there in 1939 "the place was literally teeming with distinguished black scholars".⁸⁵ Williams quickly rekindled his friendship with C.L.R. James who by then had moved to the United States, established contact with distinguished American scholars on abolition such as Lowell Ragatz, and in his first year in the US obtained a scholarship for a research trip to the Caribbean. Not only did he find the environment less obstructive to his academic ambitions, it also stimulated him to move away from the singular focus on debates in

84. Williams, *Inward Hunger*, p. 53.

85. Franklin, "Howard University", p. 24.

British historiography and seek a much wider terrain for his arguments. The outbreak of World War II and the resulting weakening of the British hold on its West Indian colonies, combined with rising mass opposition to colonial rule in the islands, further convinced him of the arrival of a new political conjecture. As Williams wrote, "the Negro cannot be expected to sit back and wait on the tender mercies of others. In his struggle for his place in the sun, he will have to make his own efforts, and for the immediate future his aim is democracy".⁸⁶ In these years, Williams's goals as a scholar became closely aligned to his political ambitions, with the latter increasingly gaining the upper hand. Between 1942 and 1944, Williams waged a successful campaign to be included on the Anglo-American Caribbean Commission (AACC), a super agency created by the colonial powers to discuss reforms for the islands. Williams managed to do so as a radical critic of the colonial regime, but his advances towards the AACC also signalled his early willingness to search for a negotiated path to independence rather than direct revolutionary confrontation.⁸⁷

In the five years from his arrival in Washington to the publication of *Capitalism and Slavery*, Williams published three full-length articles that dealt with aspects of the history of slavery and abolition, seven articles on current affairs in the Caribbean world that often had a strong historical component, and his first book *The Negro in the Caribbean*.⁸⁸ The three historical articles form a direct line connecting *The Economic Aspect* and *Capitalism and Slavery*. They show that despite the large changes in presentation, there was also a deeper-lying continuity in themes, concerns, and core arguments between the two books. The first article to appear was an essay, over forty pages long, in *The Journal of Negro History*. It deals with "The Golden Age of the Slave System in Britain", and presents material that is almost completely absent from the dissertation. In it, we find the first formulation of Thesis I – slavery as the foundation of British economic success – although as in the dissertation the word "capitalism" is not used: "The Negro slaves meant as much to the West Indian colonies as steam engines and coal to a modern factory. On the slave trade depended the whole West Indian trade in general and ultimately a very large share of British prosperity."⁸⁹ The publication of this extensive material within a year of his arrival suggests that Thesis I resulted in large part from research already done by Williams when he was still in Europe.

A second article, published in 1942, dealt with the inter-colonial slave trade after its abolition in 1807, a theme that featured prominently in the

86. Williams, "The International Crisis", p. 539.

87. Martin, "Anglo-American Caribbean Commission", p. 283.

88. Gaspar, "Williams and *The Journal of Negro History*", p. 295.

89. Eric Williams, "The Golden Age of the Slave System in Britain", *The Journal of Negro History*, 25:1 (1940) pp. 60–106, 61.

dissertation but for which Williams found less space in the book.⁹⁰ A third article, published in the *Political Science Quarterly* in March 1943, presented Williams's Theses I and II together for the first time. The opening passage confidently states the core of Williams's economic determinism:

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Britain's sugar colonies were the favored plantations of the Empire. By the middle of the nineteenth century they had become nuisances. [...] The attack on West Indian slavery was in a larger sense only a part of the general attack on monopoly and imperialism which characterized the transition of English economy from mercantilism to laissez faire. The rise and fall of slavery was a phase of the rise and fall of mercantilism.⁹¹

As in *The Economic Aspect* and, less visibly, in *Capitalism and Slavery*, Williams subordinates the question of slavery to that of the shift between mercantilism and free trade policies. Also firmly intact is Williams's multilateral approach. Brazil, Cuba, and India each play a major role in his description of British debates over the West Indies. What is different in this 1943 article is his explicit reference to "capitalists" and "capitalism" as the key carriers of what he had previously, more vaguely, described in terms of "the economy" or "economic aspects".⁹²

The shift is significant, for it is the reference to capitalism in its title that from inception marks out the systemic nature of Williams's argument in much clearer fashion than at any point in his dissertation. The key to understanding this reformulation can be found in Williams's more overtly anti-colonial texts, especially in *The Negro in the Caribbean*. It is here that Williams for the first time laid out his mature view that connected twentieth-century poverty and exploitation of the Caribbean to what he saw as the triple legacy of slavery: economic dependency as a result of the fostering of a monoculture based on sugar; a social structure organized around the large plantation and dominated by absentee capitalists; and a racist political system in which from the days of slavery onwards the "colored middle classes" colluded to the detriment of the black working class.⁹³ In its treatment of the rise and fall of Caribbean slavery, the book builds on the research Williams had done for *The Economic Aspect* and during his research trip to the Caribbean for which he had obtained a scholarship shortly after arriving in the US. But he adds to this crucial elements, which can be traced to his involvement with African-American anti-racist scholars and Cuban and Puerto Rican proponents of

90. *Idem*, "The British West Indian Slave Trade After its Abolition in 1807", *The Journal of Negro History*, 27:2 (1942), pp. 175–191.

91. *Idem*, "Laissez Faire, Sugar and Slavery", *Political Science Quarterly*, 58:1 (1943), pp. 67–85, 67.

92. *Ibid.*, p. 70. In footnote 1 of the text, Williams mentions "capitalism and slavery" as the theme of his coming book.

93. Williams, *Negro in the Caribbean*, on pp. 26, 46, and 61, respectively.

independence, as well as an acute sense of urgency emerging from the new international situation. One is a stress on the importance of racism as a result of slavery and a pillar of colonial oppression. As we have seen, the idea that slavery was the origin, not the result of racism became the guiding thought for the first chapter of *Capitalism and Slavery*, a separate thesis (Thesis III) absent from his dissertation. A second new element is the focus on the black masses, descendants of slavery, as the main force pushing towards democracy and economic and social reform. Williams fully embraced the popular movements, strikes, and uprisings that swept the Caribbean during the 1930s, hailing them as a "revolutionary" shift in leadership from the black middle class to the working class.⁹⁴

Throughout *The Negro in the Caribbean*, Williams adopts the language of anti-capitalism that was only latently present in *The Economic Aspect* but was to become central to *Capitalism and Slavery*. But there is a paradox to his adoption of a more overtly political language. The political conclusions of *The Negro in the Caribbean* were far from the revolutionary anti-capitalism propounded by his long-time friend C.L.R. James, as the latter would affirm in a review that mixed praise and sharp criticism.⁹⁵ Unlike James, Williams believed that the crisis of World War II had opened up the possibility to break the chains of king sugar and start a new era of economic and social development for an independent federation of Caribbean nations, as long as the US were prepared to resist the temptation to replace British by "Yankee imperialism and the almighty dollar".⁹⁶ Thus, rather than representing a "radicalization" from the more "compromising" dissertation, *Capitalism and Slavery* presents us with a change in Williams's thinking in two very different directions. On the one hand, his writings of this period show a deepening of his critique of colonialism and the detrimental impact of capitalism on the Caribbean. On the other, they exhibit a new sense that the relationship between the (soon to be former) colonies and the world market could be transformed, and that the ongoing shift in international power relations could be used to the advantage of independent economic development. For this duality, James would sharply admonish him, already pointing towards some of the reasons for their eventual political falling out:

He [Williams] is a sincere nationalist and a sincere democrat, but after so sure a grasp of historical development as he shows in this history of four centuries, he displays an extreme naivety in his forecasts of the future. He seems to think that the economic forces which have worked in a certain way for four hundred years

94. *Ibid.*, pp. 90–95.

95. García Muñiz, "Williams y James", p. 343.

96. Williams, *Negro in the Caribbean*, pp. 108–109.

will somehow cease to work in that way. [...] What makes the sudden slide downward so striking is that the whole book is a refutation of just such expectations.⁹⁷

James might have been right in his scepticism about the prospects for independent growth towards prosperity of the Caribbean region under the aegis of the new post-war order. But Williams proved to be a perceptive reader of the way the winds of change were blowing. His combination of forcing a political rupture with the colonial past and an attempt to find new room for economic development within the confines of a capitalist world economy can be seen as a precursor of the direction taken by the leadership of many of the decolonizing states, an early manifestation of the “Bandung spirit” of 1955. What made Williams’s position unique was that he combined these present concerns with a historical critique that he began formulating at Oxford, and that he brought to conclusion in a book that despite its contradictions, complexities, and shortcomings, would hold its place in academic debates.

CONCLUSIONS

The very complexity of Williams’s double move of sharpening his critique of capitalism’s history while becoming more hopeful about capitalism’s future in the Caribbean, combined with his shift away from merely challenging British historiography to directly challenging the Empire itself, all help explain why Williams rewrote his dissertation the way he did. By widening the core theme of his text to “capitalism” and by foregrounding the interplay between structural crisis and political change, Williams instilled in his book a far greater sense of urgency. Too much a historian to simply collapse the present into the past, he insisted at the end of *Capitalism and Slavery* that the observations in the book are merely offered “as guide-posts that emerge from the charting of another sea which was in its time as stormy as our own”.⁹⁸ The strong continuities between his dissertation and *Capitalism and Slavery* show that Williams did not sacrifice the rigour of his scholarship to an immediate political aim. Nevertheless, the purpose of the considerable changes that he made in the presentation of these arguments was to bring out, much more strongly than in the dissertation, the connections between history and future tasks. As he notes in the conclusions:

The crisis which began in 1776 and continued through the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars until the Reform Bill of 1832, was in many respects a world crisis similar to the crisis of today, differing only in the more comprehensive range,

97. In a review of *The Negro in the Caribbean* in the Trotskyist *The New Internationalist*, W.F. Carlton [pseud. C.L.R. James], “The West Indies in Review: Recent Developments in the Caribbean Colonies”, available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/james-clr/works/1943/06/westindies.htm>, last accessed 10 February 2017.

98. Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, p. 212.

depth and intensity of the present. It would be strange if the study of the previous upheaval did not at least leave us with certain ideas and principles for the examination of what is going on around us today.⁹⁹

This sense of historic urgency must have been a key factor leading Williams away from the more organized and measured challenge to British humanitarian historiography in *The Economic Aspect*. While maintaining the core arguments of the earlier text, Williams reshuffled them and integrated them into a wider critique of capitalism, slavery, and colonialism, introducing his more mechanic materialist vision of the nature of historical progress and leaving generations of readers both impressed and confused. The publication of *The Economic Aspect of the Abolition of the West Indian Slave Trade and Slavery* finally makes it possible for a wider audience to retrace Williams's steps. In the process, we can start to disentangle Williams's complicated relationship to the Oxford imperial historians, radical predecessors and contemporaries, and the emerging anti-colonial struggles of his day.

99. *Ibid.*, pp. 209–210.