

Adequacy of evidence used in *Capitalism and Slavery* by Eric Williams – A critical analysis

The book *Capitalism and Slavery* by Eric Williams is a historical discourse on the economic benefits provided to the Industrial Revolution by activities such as African enslavement and their use in production and manufacturing units of British industries. The arguments presented in this book are controversial, to say the least, and has sparked a number of debates about the angle provided to the events of that period and the choice of interpretation of the scholarly sources available at that time. This paper aims to provide an overview of the arguments presented by Williams in his book, the sources used and evidence collected, a critical analysis of the evidence in supporting his arguments, and the advantages and disadvantages of his choices of evidence used.

This book is considered to be the first elaborate study detailing the economic contributions of the Africans to Western Europe (Inikori 2002). In the preface of his book, Williams talks about the Industrial Revolution as in the early 1940s. According to him, during the period of the Industrial Revolution, Africans have contributed much to its development which has left a lasting impression for generations to come. The evidence he has used to justify the role of Africans in the Industrial Revolution is centered in the relationship between Britain's exemplification of early capitalism and Negro slave trade in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. However, Williams has made it pretty clear that this is just an economic discourse and other aspects of the Industrial Revolution are beyond the scope of his book.

The sources Williams has used for his book are those that he had collected during his doctoral project entitled "The economic aspect of the abolition of the British West Indian slave trade and slavery" at the University of Oxford in 1938. As his book *Capitalism and Slavery* was

published 6 years later, most sources were outdated and new information was uncovered which was not used in his book. His sources primarily included information which covered events that occurred during the 1783-1833 period and they were mostly Colonial office papers, Foreign office papers, Chatham papers, Custom Records in the Public Record Office of London, Minute books of the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, Liverpool papers, Auckland papers, Huskisson papers at the British Museum, sources available at popular libraries such as the Liverpool Public library, John Rylands library in Manchester, and the Rhodes House library in Oxford. Apart from these sources, he has also used evidence collected from parliamentary debates, custom receipts, stock ledgers, committee reports, pamphlets, legislation, correspondence and memoranda, and other material records of the slave trade. Finally, he has used works of historians and scholars such as Thomas Clarkson, William Wilberforce, Herman Merivale, Charles Davenant, Adam Smith, and William Pitt (Williams 2014).

Williams supports his arguments about the economic contribution of Africans to the Industrial Revolution by talking about private profits which arose due to their economic activities. He talks about the triangular trade structure which greatly profited the British industries. However, he does not talk about the range of the activities that reaped these profits. He also does not concentrate on the profits that were produced due to enslaved Africans in the West Indies involved in the production of commodities. Otherwise, he touches on every aspect related to these profits in various parts of his book in detail (Inikori 2002).

According to critics, Williams has failed to develop the arguments of profits in his book sufficiently. In his defense, during the time of publication of his book, insufficient evidence existed regarding the rates of profits generated by various activities and it would have been quite impossible for him to do such vast research all on his own. Hence, he has used more of

qualitative rather than quantitative evidence to support his arguments related to economic activities. His ideas and opinions may also have been clouded at the time due to the predominance of the Keynesian Revolution which considered investments to be an independent event. However, investments are dependent on the profits available which in turn are dependent on the economic activities taking place at that time. The evidence of his argument regarding geographical locations is also not sufficient, as he has chosen to focus only on the British Caribbean rather than the entire Atlantic basin. Hence, the narrow geographical context does not afford a wider understanding of the profitable economic activities by the Africans (Inikori 2002).

However, in spite of all the flaws and insufficiency of evidence related to his arguments, he was able to achieve his goal to provide a new angle of the economic contributions of the Africans during the period of the Industrial Revolution. All his arguments are valid, logical and have stood the test of time. It is one of the few historical books that is being read and critiqued even today, and it is without doubt one of the most influential history books ever written (Leigh 2014).

Williams has used a chronological system to examine the economic and political system of Britain through the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with special emphasis on the role and position of slavery and slave trade during every time period. He talks about great banking families such as the Barclays and the Barings and insurance firms like Lloyd's of London to enforce the amount of profits made off slave trade. He has also focused on a number of British industries such as sugar, wool and cotton industries to help readers understand the reach of the triangular trade. He also talks about Watt's invention of the steam engine and Lord Penrhyn's sugar plantations which pulled economic resources from the slave trade. He also places Britain's eventual abolition of the slave trade in an economic context. Williams has used

quite an impressive amount of statistical sources to back all his arguments in his book (Solow 2012).

In conclusion, the scope of Williams' book *Capitalism and Slavery* is limited as he has chosen to focus on very narrow and specific topics about the economic activities of the Industrial Revolution period. His focus on activities that generated profits, African enslavement and geographical locations is well defined and within the scope of his research, he has used compelling evidence to make his arguments. His broad range of sources used proves the width and depth of his research and there is no doubt that the book is not lacking in either the credibility of sources used or the strength of his arguments. Although some of his arguments may seem unsupported, modern scholars have proven the validity of his ideas through use of wider archival resources and modern databases.

Bibliography

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