THE RISE OF MERCHANT EMPIRES

LONG-DISTANCE TRADE IN THE EARLY MODERN WORLD, 1350–1750

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CHAPTER 9

Economic aspects of the eighteenth-century Atlantic slave trade

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In recent decades there has been a fundamental change in the study of the Atlantic slave trade. From almost total neglect, the trade has become an area of major concern to economists and historians who have dedicated themselves to analyzing the African experience in America. Especially since the publication by Philip Curtin of his masterly synthesis *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* in 1969, a massive amount of archival research has resulted in publications both of collections of documents from all the major archives of Europe, America, and Africa and of major works of synthesis on the demography, politics, and economics of the slave trade.[1]

[1] Curtin's book was published by the University of Wisconsin Press. Much of the archival material remained unpublished until quite recently. The major printed collection until the 1920s was the listing that the Foreign Office published for the trade from 1817 to 1843, to be found in *Parliamentary Papers*, 1845, xlix (73), 593–633. The first scholarly collections were published in the 1920s and 1930s by Dieudonné Rinchon, *La traite et l'esclavage des Congolais par les européens* (Brussels, 1929); Elizabeth Donnan, *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America*, 4 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1930); and Gaston Martin, *Négriers et bois d'ébène* (Grenoble, 1934). Recent publications of new archival materials include the monumental study of the French slave trade by Jean Mettas, *Répertoire des expéditions négrières françaises au xviiie siècle*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1978–84); and a more complete listing for Virginia by Walter Minchinton et al., *Virginia Slave Trade Statistics, 1698–1775* (Richmond, Va., 1984). Recent monographs on the economic aspect of the trade include Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition* (London, 1975); Herbert S. Klein, *The Middle Passage: Comparative Studies in the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Princeton, 1978); Colin Palmer, *Human Cargoes: The British Slave Trade to Spanish America, 1700–1739* (Urbana, 1981); Jorge Palacios Preciado, *La trata de negros por Cartagena de Indias* (Tunja, Colombia, 1973); Robert Louis Stein, *The French Slave Trade in the Eighteenth Century: An Old Regime Business* (Madison, 1979); Jay Coughtry, *The Notorious Triangle: Rhode Island and the African Slave Trade, 1700–1807* (Philadelphia, 1981); David W. Galenson, *Traders, Planters, and Slaves: Market Behavior in Early English America* (Cambridge, 1986); and David Eltis, *Economic Growth and the Ending of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New York, 1987). For a survey of the bibliography on the noneconomic aspects of the

In this essay, I would like to concentrate on those aspects of the trade most directly related to its economic organization and impact on world trade and markets, including that of the international market in labor. This will involve a study of such questions as the relative importance of the trade in African slaves within the total movement of goods and services across international frontiers; the relative costs and benefits of the trade in slaves to its various national participants; and the mechanics of the trade in terms of goods exchanged and routes developed. Finally, given the unique commodity being shipped by the slave traders, it is essential to examine the demographic characteristics of the trade and its impact on American and African labor markets.

Though the Atlantic slave trade officially dates its origin from the 1440s and does not end until the 1860s, both the mass of documentation and the period of its greatest importance were in the eighteenth century. Even though over a million and a half Africans had been brought to America before 1700, over six million arrived in the period 1701–1810, or 63 percent of the total who ever landed in the Western Hemisphere.[2] The eighteenth century also marks the definitive shift among all traders from an era of largely monopoly company activities to that of a free trade organization.[3] The trade ends for most Europeans by the last quarter of the eighteenth century and first decades of the nineteenth century, and it officially disappears from the public records of the remaining traders after 1830. For these reasons, the eighteenth century is the best studied of all centuries and the one most representative for almost all trading nations.

Though the slave trade was a concern for scholars, moralists, and politicians from the late eighteenth century and was one of the major areas of activity of British diplomacy and the British navy in the nineteenth century, the systematic study of the trade only dates from the twentieth century. A combination of late nineteenth-century European racism and imperialism and early twentieth-century unease with these concepts led to an era of scholarly neglect in which popular

trade, Herbert S. Klein, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* (New York, 1986).

2 Curtin, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, 268.

3 On the history of these trading companies see, e.g., Johannes Postma, "The Dimensions of the Dutch Slave Trade from West Africa," *Journal of African History* 13 (1972): 237–48, on the Dutch West India Company; for the very late development of limited Iberian monopoly companies see António Carreira, *As Companhias Pombalinas de navegação, comércio e tráfico de escravos . . .* (Porto, 1969); and Bibiano Torres Ramirez, *La compañia gaditana de negros* (Seville, 1973). On the French and British Chartered Trading Companies, see Abdoulaye Ly, *La Compagnie du Senégal* (Paris, 1958); and K. G. Davies, *The Royal African Company* (London, 1951).

writers dominated the analysis of the trade with their limited and highly emotional accounts based on few observations and a lack of awareness of the realities of African history or society. This rather uncritical literature created a whole set of untested hypotheses about the costs of the trade, the pattern of shipping slaves across the Atlantic, the mortality they suffered, and the ultimate gains and benefits to the Europeans. "Tight packing" and "astronomic" mortality rates were tied to the concept of virtually costless slaves.[4] This model of the trade, which still pervades much of the popular literature on the subject, also assumed a totally passive and dependent role of Africans. Research since the beginning decades of this century has shown this model to be badly flawed, and it is with this newer research and its implications with which I am concerned in this essay.

By the eighteenth century, the Atlantic slave trade had become one of the most complex international trades developed by European merchants. It involved the direct participation of East Indian textile manufacturers, European ironmongers, African caravan traders, European shippers, and American planters in the purchase, transportation, and sale of the largest transoceanic migration of workers known up to that time in recorded history. At its peak in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Europeans were moving some 90,000 Africans per annum to America in some 200 to 300 ships under the flag of every major maritime power of western Europe.

To begin with, it should be stressed that the trade in African slaves long preceded the European development of an Atlantic route. From known historical times African slaves had been shipped across the Sahara to the Mediterranean world and had also gone by sea and land routes to Asia Minor. Secondly, the slave trade was only one of several important exports from Africa to the rest of the world, with gold being the primary product until well into the eighteenth century. The Atlantic slave trade thus initially fitted into traditional trading networks and was but an extension of both the internal and the external slave trade markets already existing in Africa. Equally, this particular trade, even for Europeans, was initially not the most important product that they brought out of Africa. The Atlantic trade in slaves, which began in the mid-fifteenth century, was initially only a minor trade associated with the Portuguese exportation of gold, and to a lesser extent of ivory, from the western shores of sub-Saharan Africa. Since Europe was well populated with a growing peasant labor force at this

[4] See, e.g., D. P. Mannix and M. Cowley, *Black Cargoes: A History of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1518–1865* (New York, 1962); and James Pope-Hennesey, *Sins of the Fathers: A Study of the Atlantic Slave Traders, 1441–1807* (London, 1967).

time, the demand for slaves within Europe itself was small, and most of the Africans shipped to the Iberian peninsula were used in domestic or urban artisanal tasks. Few were brought into agriculture or even into the production of sugar, which was then of major importance in the local economies. For this reason, the export of slaves remained a minor part of the European trade with Africa at least into the middle decades of the sixteenth century, or some one hundred years after the first slaves were carried aboard Portuguese vessels. Even with the opening up of the eastern Atlantic islands (e.g., the Canaries) and their exploitation as sugar colonies in the last decades of the fifteenth and early decades of the sixteenth centuries, Africans were a minor element in the local labor force.

It was, of course, the opening up of America that finally guaranteed an expanding and seemingly limitless market for African slave labor. But even despite the ever-growing transportation of Africans to America in the first two centuries of American colonization, slaves did not surpass the value of all other African exports until 1700.[5] Thus European trade with Africa remained a multifaceted experience until some two and a half centuries after the first slave shipments. All of which meant that a whole range of commercial contacts not directly related to slaves had been developed alongside the slave trade. It also meant that African consumers had been well integrated into the European trading networks well before slaves became their chief export. It was only the decline of their own gold production (which peaked in the 1680s), and the entrance of American gold on the European market that finally forced them and their European contacts to turn more heavily toward shipments of slaves.[6] Whereas in the 1680s it has been estimated that gold and to a lesser extent ivory and other products made up over 50 percent of the value of exports from Africa, by the 1780s, these nonslave items had fallen to only an estimated 8 percent of the total value of goods exported from this region.[7]

It was this relatively sophisticated African consumer market and its basic needs that in many ways explains the geographic specialization that emerged in the European trading communities. It was no accident that by the mid–eighteenth century the two leading centers of Asian textile importers – the ports of Nantes and Liverpool – were to

[5] Richard Bean, "A Note on the Relative Importance of Slaves and Gold in West African Exports," *Journal of African History* 15 (1974): 351–6.

[6] Philip D. Curtin, "Africa and the Wider Monetary World, 1250–1850," in J. F. Richards, ed., *Precious Metals in the Later Medieval and Early Modern Worlds* (Durham, 1983), 245–7.

[7] David Eltis, "African Trade with the Atlantic World before 1870: Estimates of Trends in Value, Composition, and Direction" (unpublished paper, 1987).

emerge as the two biggest ports in France and England of African slave traders.[8] African demand for East Indian textiles was so high that there soon developed a close link between East Asian traders and African slave traders. Though the two trades were so complex that specialization was the norm for most merchant companies, slave traders found it convenient to be close to the single most important and expensive item used in their trade to Africa.

The role of East Indian products is well revealed in the French trade with Africa in 1775 and 1788, which showed a constant and dominant role for Indian cloths, representing 54 and 57 percent respectively of the total value (10.5 million livres tournois in 1775 and 14.7 million in 1788) of goods used to purchase slaves. With the addition of a small quantity of European cloths, the total value of all textiles represented 59 and 64 percent respectively of all goods shipped, with the second most important product, which was brandy, being a poor second at 12 and 7 percent respectively.[9] In comparing the West Indies trade – which exclusively consumed French-produced goods – with the African trade, the historian of French colonial commerce, Jean Tarrade, noted that the African consumers became very knowledgeable about general European and Asian products. Thus, "the Africans are accustomed to furniture coming from England or Holland and they refuse to accept merchandise of which the quality is not in conformity with acquired tastes. This explains why the principal articles used in the slave trade are of extra-metropolitan origin."[10]

The same trends produced at the national level were evident in detailed listings of the goods carried by outbound slave ships outfitted in the port of Rouen. In five selected years (1767, 1769, 1771, 1774, and 1776) the total value of all goods shipped was 3.9 million livres tournois. Of this total 1.4 million livres consisted of East Indian textiles. Not only were these cloths the single most valuable commodity shipped – representing 36 percent of the value of all trade goods – but they also represented 63 percent of the value of all cloths, European and East Asian combined (with the total textile figure representing 56 percent of all goods).[11] The reason for this African demand for

[8] Jean Tarrade, *Le commerce colonial de la France à la fin de l'Ancien Régime*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1972), 1:126.

[9] The third most valuable export of the French in 1788 was tobacco (at 5 percent), which the French had to import from Brazil (Ibid., 125).

[10] Ibid., 126.

[11] Pierre Dardel, *Navires et marchandises dans les ports de Rouen et du Havre au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1963), 141. Gaston Martin, summarizing his research on this question, estimated that East Indian cloths (and their counterfeits made in Europe) made up between half and two-thirds of the value of exports to Africa for shipping from the

East Asian textiles had a great deal to do not only with the brilliance and quality of the colors but also (as a French commercial text of the eighteenth century noted) with the durability of the cloths, which retained their brilliance through numerous washings.[12] The trade was also an important stimulus to the textile industry within Europe itself, especially in the last decades of the eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth centuries.[13]

All studies of the combination of goods making up the bundle of products that Africans demanded in payment for their slaves also show a very high proportion of Indian goods listed for the English trade in the eighteenth century. Marion Johnson has reconstructed British exports to Africa in the eighteenth century. Between 1699 and 1800 textiles accounted for 68 percent of all goods shipped from England to Africa, and among these textiles, East Indian goods accounted for 40 percent of all textiles and were the single largest item in the entire trade (27 percent of the value of all goods shipped from 1699 to 1800). Moreover, despite the steady growth of English cotton exports after 1750, Indian textiles continued to maintain their relative importance until the end of the century. Next in importance after textiles were metal products, with bar iron being the crucial element in this category. Guns and gunpowder represented only 5 percent, and alcohol just 4 percent of the total value of goods shipped.[14]

Between them, the French and the British in the late eighteenth century moved about two-thirds of the slaves being shipped to America, with the Brazilian and Portuguese traders transporting most of the rest. It should be stressed that the Portuguese traders, though they exported more foodstuffs, tobacco, and American-produced rum from Brazil, did introduce both re-exported East Asian textiles and English manufactured cotton cloths to Africa for purchasing slaves. Thus 41 percent of the value of Brazilian exports to Angola in 1812 were made up of European and Asian textile re-exports, with East Asian cloths making up 15 percent of the total value of textiles.[15] Rum,

port of Le Havre from 1767 to 1777 (*Nantes au xviiie siècle, l'ère des négriers [1714–1774]* [Paris, 1931], 47ff).

[12] See M. Chambon, *Traite général de comerce de l'Atlantique pour Marseille*, 2 vols. (Amsterdam and Marseille, 1783), 2:389.

[13] See Pierre H. Boulle, "Marchandises de traite et développement industriel dans la France et l'Angleterre du XVIII[e] siècle," *Revue Française d'Histoire d'Outre-Mer* 62 (1975): 76ff.

[14] H. A. Gemery, Jan Hogendorn, and Marion Johnson, "A Tentative Terms of Trade for Africa and England in the Eighteenth Century" (paper presented at the Nantes Colloquium on the Slave Trade, 1985), tables 1–4 (papers from this conference are to be edited by Serge Daget).

[15] Because of the special trading relations of the British with Brazil after 1808 and the

though the single most valuable item shipped from Brazil, made up only 14 percent of the total value of goods imported into Angola and with re-exported European wines accounted for only 19 percent of all imports. The rest of the imported goods was made up of foodstuffs (and tobacco) produced in Brazil.[16]

It is this high percentage of manufactures and imported (and thus re-exported) goods in the trade of Africa that explains the consistent finding for all the European slave trades that the goods used by the Europeans to purchase the slaves on the African coast were their single largest cost. Thus, from the earliest studies of Rinchon and Gaston Martin, through the recent detailed analyses of provisioning costs, it is evident that slaves purchased in Africa were not a low-cost item.[17] The goods exported to Africa to pay for the slaves were costly manufactured products and were the single most expensive factor in the outfitting of the voyage, being more valuable than the ship, the wages for the crew, and the food supplies combined. Two-thirds of the outfitting costs of the French slaves in the eighteenth century, for example, came from the goods used to purchase the slaves.[18]

Along with the myths about the cheap cost of slaves, the traditional literature stressed the dependent position of the African merchants in the trade. It was thought that prices demanded for slaves were low and invariant, that the trading was all dominated by the Europeans, and that the Africans were passive observers to the whole process. But in fact, all studies show that the mix of goods that went to make up the price in each zone tended to vary over time and reflected changing conditions of demand and supply. Thus African merchants adjusted their demands for goods in response to market conditions.

increasing African acceptance of British manufactured cloths in the nineteenth century, the relative weight of East Asian- and European-produced cloths had probably shifted substantially from the norms of the eighteenth century. On the nineteenth-century shifts in African consumption of Asian cloths and British textiles, see Eltis, *Economic Growth and the Ending of the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, 59–60.

16 Manuel dos Anjos da Sila Rebelo, *Relações entre Angola e Brasil, 1808–1830* (Lisbon, 1970), quadro no. 1. In the period from 1796 to 1811 Brazil itself was a heavy importer of European textiles, which made up 26 percent of the value of all imports, with Asian products adding another 17 percent. Thus a good portion of its exports to Africa were made up of these re-exported European and Asian cloths. See José Jobson de A. Arruda, *O Brasil no comércio colonial* (São Paulo, 1980), table 21.

17 Dieudonné Rinchon, *Les armements négriers au xviiie siècle* (Brussels, 1956); Jean Meyer, *L'armement nantais dans le deuxième moitié du xviiie siècle* (Paris, 1969); Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade;* Stein, *French Slave Trade;* Coughtry, *Notorious Triangle;* and finally Carreira, *As Companhias Pombalinas*.

18 Meyer, *L'armement nantais*, 161–3. Two independent sources (as presented in Klein, *Middle Passage*, 169) show that the outbound cargo for Africa on late eighteenth-century ships amounted to 65 percent of total costs.

Moreover, two recent studies of the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century trade have shown that the terms of trade between Africa and Europe were progressively moving in favor of the Africans as the price of slaves rose and the price of European textiles (which by the end of the trade were of equal quality to the East Asian products and were replacing them) steadily fell, along with the price of all European manufactures.[19] Though the two studies differ somewhat on the timing and intensity of the trends, both are in total agreement that the barter terms of England in its trade with Africa dropped by over 50 percent from 1701 to 1800. This same trend was also repeated in the nineteenth century between the 1810s and the 1840s.

Not only was there a trend in favor of the African sellers of slaves throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but in all their dealings with Europeans the multiple groups of African traders did everything possible to prevent the Europeans from monopolizing any one source of slaves or any one route. Although Africans could not prevent the Europeans from eliminating each other from a given region – usually through armed conflict – they could prevent the victors from exercising exclusive control on the coast itself. This was a consistent response to European monopoly efforts over all regions of western Africa. The European forts in West Africa and even the Portuguese coastal and interior towns in southwest Africa were ineffective in excluding competing buyers from entering the local market. The forts exercised dominion for only a few miles inland and were more designed to fend off competitors than to threaten suppliers. As for the unique Portuguese settlements, these were unable to prevent the French and English from obtaining Congo and Angolan slaves on a massive scale. Yet these supposedly were domains totally monopolized by the Portuguese.

It should be stressed that trading was a complex affair, involving everything from fixed coastal fort or port locations to open boat traders who sailed the rivers and coastal waters. African traders up and down the coast also varied considerably, from mulatto middlemen, to state trading monopolies, to noble or royal trading arrangements. Some states were strong enough to tax the trade heavily; in other areas a free market existed. But everywhere it was the Africans who controlled the volume of slaves and determined the type of slaves who would be offered. And it was they who determined the prices.

19 See David Eltis and Lawrence C. Jennings, "Trade between Sub-Saharan Africa and the Atlantic World in the Pre-Colonial Era: A Comparative Overview" (unpublished paper, 1987); and Gemery, Hogendorn, and Johnson, "A Tentative Terms of Trade for Africa and England in the Eighteenth Century."

Some economists have even gone so far as to argue that the resulting market was open, with little effective monopoly activity over a long period of time even on the part of sellers.[20] Although this seems a more questionable proposition given the need for a strong military establishment to be able to capture or tax for slaves, it is possible that the existence of so many competing sources may have created some local free market conditions in terms of even suppliers of slaves in some of the more heavily exploited regions.

Although trading was profitable at the microlevel of the individual, group, or class doing the trading, the question remains of the societal costs of the trade. The slave raids against agriculturalists and subsequent abandonment of good croplands, the stress on defense or militaristic activity, and the draining of young adults from the labor force, all had their long-term economic costs. But for those engaging in the trade and for the vast majority of Africans who consumed the imported Asian and European goods, the trade was a profitable development.[21]

Another major area where Africans dominated the structure of the trade was in terms of the selection of persons offered for sale in the Atlantic market. As studies from all trades have shown, there was a consistent bias against women and children among the slaves offered for sale on the Atlantic coast. Women represented on average a third to a quarter of the Africans forced to migrate, and children represented on average less than 10 percent. Though there were fluctuations over time and space, in general it would appear that these figures were surprisingly consistent. To many researchers this suggested special American demand factors to explain this lack of random selection. Support for this view was found in the contemporary discussions, quite extensive in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature, about the good or bad qualities of different African groups in terms of working habits. But just as the perception of European dominance has been challenged in terms of purchasing slaves and their cost, so too have recent studies questioned American demand factors

[20] Two attempts to provide a model for estimating the profits of the trade in relation to Africans are those by H. A. Gemery and J. S. Hogendorn, "The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Tentative Economic Model," *Journal of African History* 15 (1974): 223–46, and Robert Paul Thomas and Richard Nelson Bean, "The Fishers of Men: Profits of the Slave Trade," *Journal of Economic History* 34 (1974): 885–914.

[21] John Thornton, "The Slave Trade in Eighteenth Century Angola: Effects on Demographic Structures," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 14 (1980): 417–27; and the two studies of Patrick Manning, "The Enslavement of Africans: A Demographic Model," ibid., 15 (1981): 499–526; and "The Impact of Slave Trade Exports on the Population of the Western Coast of Africa, 1700–1850," (paper presented at the Nantes Colloquium).

as the primary influence in determining the type of slaves transported.

Clearly the timing of the migration of these Africans and the places to which they were delivered were determined to a significant extent by American conditions. An American region, even with the credit universally supplied by all traders, could not enter the trade without a crop marketable in Europe. Equally, the actual movement of slaves across the Atlantic was seasonal in nature, owing both to prevailing currents and winds that influenced the crossing and to the seasonality of American demand considerations. Though the sailings from East Africa around the Cape of Good Hope were more dependent on local weather conditions, the West African routes seemed to respond to planters' harvesting needs in America.

If seasonality in the movement of slaves was influenced by American demand factors, the nationality, sex, and age of the slaves entering the transatlantic trade were primarily determined by African conditions. All studies show that except for the Portuguese in Angola and Mozambique, Europeans had little idea of the nature of the societies they were dealing with. In most cases Africans were simply designated by the ports from which they were shipped rather than by any truly generic language, group, or national identity. Most traders had no conception of what went on even a few miles inland from the coast, and even those who established forts and fixed settlements essentially dealt with only local governments. While Europeans fought among themselves to protect a special section of the West African coastline, interlopers from both other European and other African groups went out of their way to guarantee that no monopolies were created. Attempts by any one African group to monopolize local trade often led to the opening up by their competitors of new trading routes. Some American planters may have thought "Congolese" hardworking, and others thought them lazy, but it made little difference what they wanted. They got whatever group was then entering the market in Africa. A few American ports had close contact with a given region of Africa over a long period of time, the connection between Salvador in Bahia and the Bight of Benin being the best known. On a few occasions, such as the collapse of a large state or after a major military defeat, whole nations of well-defined and clearly delineated groups entered the slave trade and were known by their proper names in America. But these cases were the exception rather than the rule.

The sexual imbalance in the departing Africans was also more determined by African supply conditions than by American demand. Though there was a price differential between males and females in

America, this was insufficient to explain the low ratio of females in the slave trade.[22] Women performed almost all the same manual tasks as men on the plantations of America and in fact made up the majority of most field gangs in sugar, coffee, and cotton fields.[23] Nor did they experience any differences in mortality in the Atlantic crossing than men, which might have explained European reluctance to ship them. The answer appears to be that Africans simply presented far fewer women for sale in the coastal slave markets than they did men.

African women, both free and slave, were in high demand locally, and it was this counterdemand that explains why fewer women entered the Atlantic slave trade. In some African societies women were highly valued because they were the means of acquiring status, kinship, and family. One of the distinguishing features of West African societies was their emphasis on matrilineal and matrilocal kinship systems. Since even female slaves could be significant links in the kinship networks, their importance in the social system was enhanced. Also slave women were cheaper to acquire than free local women in polygynous societies and were therefore highly prized in societies that practiced this marriage arrangement. Even more important was the widespread West African practice of primarily using women in agricultural labor. For all of these reasons women had a higher price in local internal African markets than did men.[24]

Aside from the high incidence of males, the trade also exhibited a very low incidence of children. Although children suffered no higher mortality rates in crossing than any other group of slaves, their low sale prices and their costs of transportation (equal to adults) discouraged slave captains from purchasing them. Also it seems that children were more prized than adult males in the internal slave trade and may not have appeared on the coast in great numbers because of local supply considerations.

The demographic makeup of the Africans transported to America had a profound impact on both African and American labor market conditions. Clearly the high retention of women and children in Af-

[22] For a survey of American slave prices by sex see Manuel Moreno Fraginals, Herbert S. Klein, and Stanley L. Engerman, "Nineteenth Century Cuban Slave Prices in Comparative Perspective," *American Historical Review* 88 (1983): 1201–18.

[23] For nineteenth-century Jamaica see Barry W. Higman, *Slave Population and Economy in Jamaica, 1807–1834* (Cambridge, 1976), 161, 194, 197; for eighteenth-century Saint Domingue see Gabriel Debien, *Les esclaves aux Antilles françaises (xviie–xviiie siècles)* (Basse-Terre and Fort-de-France, 1974), chap. 8.

[24] Herbert S. Klein, "African Women in the Atlantic Slave Trade," in Claire Robinson and Martin A. Klein, eds., *Women and Slavery in Africa* (Madison, 1983), 29–38; and David W. Galenson, *Traders, Planters, and Slaves: Market Behavior in Early English America* (Cambridge, 1986), 105ff.

rica tended to reduce the long-term negative impact of the loss of so many young adults to the Atlantic trade. The retention of women guaranteed higher birthrates for the remaining cohorts than for those who left. Thus the overall population growth rate in Africa suffered less than it would have had this massive out-migration been more sexually balanced. But at the same time, the immediate impact on the African work force was negative because of the withdrawal of so many adult males of working age. This drain on active workers would have tended to increase the dependency ratios and decrease the productivity of the population as a whole, as fewer workers had to provide for more dependents.[25] There were also many negative consequences due to the internal traders carrying disease across epidemiological frontiers and thus often causing epidemics in previously protected populations. At the same time the high incidence of the use of force in the trade tended to significantly influence settlement patterns in western Africa. Thus much fertile but unprotected and open farmland was abandoned by peasant populations unable to defend themselves from slave raiders. This in turn must have had a long-term negative impact on regional economic growth. Given the poor quality of precolonial African population and economic statistics, it is difficult to fully evaluate all of these factors, though recently a number of imaginative reconstructions have been carried out.[26]

As much as the new scholarship has concerned itself with the economic impact of the trade for the Africans, equally pervasive have been the new debates about the overall economic benefits of the slave trade to the Europeans themselves. These debates began with Eric Williams and have continued on into the most current journal articles.[27] The discussion can be divided into two general questions. Was the slave trade profitable at the firm level and were these profits ex-

[25] One estimate on the productivity lost because of the workers forced to leave Africa in the eighteenth century finds it equal to, if not greater than, the gains made by Africans from the sale of slaves (Henry A. Gemery and Jan S. Hogendorn, "The Economic Costs of West African Participation in the Atlantic Slave Trade: A Preliminary Sampling of the Eighteenth Century," in H. A. Gemery and J. S. Hogendorn, *The Uncommon Market: Essays in the Economic History of the Atlantic Slave Trade* [New York, 1979], 143–61).

[26] A useful set of papers on this topic by Joseph Inikori (pp. 283–314), Patrick Manning (pp. 371–84), and John Thornton (pp. 691–720) is found in Christopher Fyfe and David McMaster, eds., *African Historical Demography, II* (Edinburgh, 1981). Also see the interesting computer simulations of population loss and models of regional settlements and abandoned villages in the recent work of Manning, "Enslavement of Africans"; and his essay "The Impact of Slave Exports on the Population of the Western Coast of Africa, 1700–1850" (paper presented at the Nantes Colloquium).

[27] Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill, 1944).

cessive; and what impact did the slave trade and its profits have on the economic growth of Europe?

From the work of the European economic historians, it is now evident that slave trade profits were not extraordinary by European standards. The average 10 percent rate obtained in studies of the eighteenth-century French and English slave traders was considered a good profit rate at the time but not out of the range of other contemporary investments.[28] From a recent detailed study of the nineteenth century, it would seem that profits doubled in the next century largely as a result of rising slave prices in America, which in turn were due to the increasing suppression of the trade by the British navy. On average (except for some extraordinary voyages to Cuba in the 1850s), the rate of profit for nineteenth-century slavers was just under 20 percent.[29] Thus, while profits in the special period of suppression in the nineteenth century were quite high, even these profits were not astronomic.[30]

But if presuppression trading profits were not extraordinary, was the trade an open one or a restricted one that created concentrated oligopolistic profits that could then possibly serve as a fundamental source for capital investments in the European economy? It has been suggested that high initial costs of entrance plus the long time period needed to fully recover profits (up to five years on some slaving voyages) meant that only highly capitalized firms could enter the trade. Most merchants spread their costs around by offering stock in slaving voyages and otherwise trying to insure themselves from catastrophic loss on one or more lost voyages. But the costs of entrance, the experience of contacts, and the international nature of the complex negotiations suggest that there were limits on the number of merchants who could enter the trade. Although this specialization seems to have taken place (and there are cases of quite major houses operating in

[28] Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, chap. 2; David Richardson, "The Profits in the Liverpool Slave Trade: The Accounts of William Davenport, 1757–1784," in R. Anstey and P. E. H. Hair, eds., *Liverpool; the African Slave Trade and Abolition* (Liverpool, 1976); Stein, *French Slave Trade*, 137ff.; Meyer, *L'armement nantais*, 204ff.

[29] Eltis, *Economic Growth and the Ending of the Transatlantic Slave Trades*, appendix E.

[30] One of the most difficult problems related to profits was the long-term payoff in the trade. A very high percentage of all sales in America were for credit, and though a markup on the price occurred, the long repayment period and the resulting discounting of notes and failed installment payments reduced profits or drew out the completion of a sale for two to three years. On the selling of slaves, the best single study is Galenson, *Traders, Planters, and Slaves;* and for an interesting document of price differentials on credit sales see António Carreira, *O tráfico portuques de escravos na costa oriental africana nos começos do século xix* (Lisbon, 1979), 40ff.

both England and France),[31] it is also impressive just how many independent merchants participated in the trade and how many ships were outfitted for the trade in any given year.[32]

This debate on the relative rates of merchant participation and control has generated a lively analytical literature.[33] In this debate, however, no current scholars have been able to show that the gains from the trade were directly invested in the earliest industrial enterprises of Great Britain. All the studies of the sources of industrial capital in England suggest local origins from agriculture or European commerce or both.[34] Nevertheless, the Williams thesis has come in for some support on the question of Africa as a market for European manufactures, especially of the more basic sort. It has been suggested that the French armaments industry was completely dependent on the African trade (which was paid for by slave exports) during times of European peace. Several other industries on the Continent and in England can also be shown to have been highly dependent on the African market. Because much of early industrial activity involved production of crude and popularly consumed products, it has been argued that the African market played a vital part in sustaining the growth of some of Europe's newest infant industries.[35] This part of the trade has yet to be fully studied, but recent work does suggest a need to reevaluate the role of European exports to Africa in this crucial period of the early Industrial Revolution.

A subtheme of this debate about the use of slave trade profits has

[31] See, e.g., the studies on the house of Walsh by Jean Suret-Canale, "De la traite négriere a l'aristocratie foncière: Les Walsh-Serrant" (paper presented at the Nantes Colloquium); Gomer Williams, *A History of the Liverpool Privateers . . . with an Account of the Liverpool Slave Trade* (London, 1897); Richardson's study on Davenport ("Profits in the Liverpool Slave Trade"); and James Rawley, "Humphry Morice: Foremost London Slave Merchant of His Time" (paper presented at the Nantes Colloquium).

[32] Thus, e.g., to move the estimated 90,000 slaves per annum in the 1780s (the highest decadal figure of the trade) required the use in any year of between 180 and 360 ships, assuming a 2.5 slaves per ton average and ships ranging from 100 to 200 tons.

[33] See Joseph E. Inikori, "Market Structure and the Profits of the British African Trade in the late Eighteenth Century," *Journal of Economic History* 41 (1981): 745–76. A critique of this position is found in two articles by B. L. Anderson and David Richardson, "Market Structure and Profits of the British African Slave Trade in the Late Eighteenth Century," *Journal of Economic History* 43 (1983), and ibid. 45 (1985).

[34] Stanley L. Engerman, "The Slave Trade and British Capital Formation in the Eighteenth Century: A Comment on the Williams Thesis," *Business History Review* 46 (1972): 430–43.

[35] Pierre H. Boulle, "Slave Trade, Commercial Organization, and Industrial Growth in Eighteenth Century Nantes," *Revue Française d'Histoire de Outre-Mer* 59, no. 214 (1972): 70–112; and idem, "Marchandises de traite et développement industriel dans la France et l'Angleterre du XVIIIe siècle."

only just been suggested in the literature. This concerns the role of profit for American merchant participants in the trade: the West Indians, the North Americans (above all, the New Englanders), and especially the Brazilians. In terms of volume and capital generated, there is little question that few regions compare to those of Bahia, Rio de Janeiro, and Rhode Island. The number of ships provisioned for the African trade in these areas suggests a major growth of local capital. Who these merchants were and what their relationship was to both the plantation economy and the new industrial mills are still to be determined.[36]

In terms of the larger patterns of Europe's international trade, the role of the Atlantic slave trade can be analyzed with a bit more precision. In general, in terms of volume of shipping and relative exports, the trade absorbed at most a fifth of any major European nation's ships or resources. Among the French, for example, exports to Africa amounted to 25 percent of total exports to the colonies in the 1770s and 20 percent in the 1780s.[37] They took up 15 percent of the ships and 13 percent of the tonnage devoted to these trades in 1788.[38] If all foreign trade were included, the relative importance of the trade to Africa would drop by over half, though it would still represent a substantial 10 percent of the value of all French intracontinental and overseas foreign trade.[39]

Among the British the same general pattern held true. We know, for example, that British exports and re-exports to Africa averaged around 4.5 percent of total British exports in the last quarter of the eighteenth century.[40] In terms of the number of ships employed, the African trade was even more important. Thus at the height of its slave trade, Bristol slavers accounted for 14 percent of all ships cleared from that port, whereas a third of the Liverpool ships clearing port were

[36] The best study to date is that of Coughtry, *Notorious Triangle.* Nothing comparable yet exists for Brazil, though there are some suggestive ideas given in Luiz Felipe de Alencastro, "Le commerce des vivants: Traite d'esclaves et 'Pax Luistana' dans l'Atlantique sud" (doctoral thesis, University of Paris X, 1986).

[37] Tarrade, *Commerce colonial,* 2:740.

[38] Ibid., 1:654.

[39] An estimate for all French Foreign Trade in the 1770s is given by Paul Butel, "French Foreign Trade from 1359 to 1750" (paper presented at the Minnesota Conference on "The Rise of Merchant Empires," October 1987), 38 (Editor's note: Professor Butel has not included this table in the revision of his paper published in Chapter 4, but cf. his Table 4.2). It should be stressed that when the African trade is combined with that of the French West Indian trade, they together form a very substantial 42 percent of the total trade figure.

[40] Phyllis Deane and W. A. Cole, *British Economic Growth, 1688–1959* (Cambridge, 1967), 87.

slavers in the 1770s.[41] Finally, from contemporary figures provided by Bryan Edwards it would appear that slaves represented just under a fourth of the value of all persons and goods imported into the British West Indies.[42]

In the case of Brazil the value of slave imports did not differ that much from the British West Indies. In the period from 1796 to 1808 slaves represented between 23 and 33 percent of the value of all imports into the colony.[43] Although the trade was a crucial component of Brazilian imports as it had been in the West Indies, it played a much lesser role in the trade accounts of Portugal itself because of the Brazilian control over a large percentage of the carrying trade.

To make a definitive judgment of the relative weight of the Atlantic slave trade in the total picture of Europe's overseas trade would require a full estimation of the value of slave imports, slave-produced colonial exports, and European consumption and re-exportation of these slave-generated products. This is a difficult set of calculations. The few attempts to undertake such an estimate have led to lively debate among scholars of the West Indian economy but have resulted in no definitive conclusions.[44] Though there is considerable debate about the meaning of the numbers and which estimates to accept or reject, both major authors in this debate agree that the profits of the slave trade are rather a small part – less than 10 percent – of the entire wealth generated from Britain's possession of its American sugar colonies.[45] Furthermore, a recent attempt to estimate the impact of Great Britain's relations with the non-European world and its influence on British capital formation has suggested (again, with some controversy) that only 15 percent of Britain's gross investment capital ex-

[41] Walter Minchinton, "The British Slave Fleet, 1680–1775: The Evidence of the Naval Office Shipping Lists" (paper presented at the Nantes Colloquium).

[42] Edwards gives an estimate of 21,023 slaves imported into the British West Indies in 1787 and estimates the value of all goods imported into the islands at £3.1 million, excluding the African slaves. If one uses an average price of £35 per slave (taken from estimates of slave values in Richard Sheridan, "The Wealth of Jamaica in the Eighteenth Century," *Economic History Review*, 2d ser., 18 [1965]: 303), the relative importance of slaves runs from 19 to 24 percent of the value of all goods, including slaves, entering the islands in 1787 (Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British West Indies*, 2 vols. [London, 1793], 2:55, 365).

[43] See Klein, *Middle Passage*, 62–3, for the details of these calculations. During the height of the European trade crisis of the Napoleonic wars in 1807, the value of slave imports jumped to 64 percent.

[44] See Sheridan, "The Wealth of Jamaica in the Eighteenth Century," 292–311; R. P. Thomas, "The Sugar Colonies of the Old Empire: Profit or Loss for Great Britain?" *Economic History Review*, 2d ser., 21 (1968): 30–45; and P. R. Coelho, "The Profitability of Imperialism: British Experience in the West Indies, 1768–1772," *Explorations in Economic History* 10 (1973): 253–80.

[45] Thomas, "Sugar Colonies," 36.

penditures during its Industrial Revolution could have come from the profits on all Great Britain's overseas trades, including that of the Atlantic slave trade.[46]

Though clearly the slave trade was in all respects a profitable and important trade, it evidently was not the single largest capital-generating trade of the Europeans even within the context of their American empires. Even if the part of the Asian trade that went to Africa is added to these calculations, along with the value from slave-produced American goods, the figures are still not a significant addition to potential European savings available for investment in the Industrial Revolution, nor do they match the figures for the most economically profitable of Europe's overseas trades, at least according to recent macroeconomic calculations of the New Economic Historians. If these estimations hold up under critical review, they will be a significant challenge to an important element in the Eric Williams thesis on the importance of the slave trade and American slavery in providing the capital savings for the Industrial Revolution in England.

The Atlantic slave trade was unique in the product it transported and in its impact on labor market conditions on several continents. In this last section of this essay, I would like to examine these two issues: the economics of shipping slaves and the impact that the demographic characteristics of the transported slaves had on the makeup of the American and African labor markets.

The conceptions prevalent in the popular literature about the relative costs of African slaves have their corollary hypotheses about the economics of their transportation. It was assumed that the low cost of the slaves made it profitable to pack in as many as the ship could hold without sinking and then accept high rates of mortality during the Atlantic crossing. If any slaves delivered alive were pure profit, than even the loss of several hundred would have made economic sense. But if the slaves were not a costless or cheap item to purchase, then the corresponding argument about "tight packing" also makes little sense. In fact, high losses on the crossing resulted in financial loss on the trip, as many ship accounts aptly prove.[47]

Even more convincing than these theoretical arguments against

[46] See Patrick O'Brien, "European Economic Development: The Contribution of the Periphery," *Economic History Review*, 2d ser. 35 (1982): 1–18. This conclusion is in sharp contrast to the recent restatement of the Williams hypothesis by Joseph E. Inikori, "Slavery and the Development of Industrial Capitalism in England," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 17 (1987): 771–93.

[47] Robert Stein estimated that "the death of each slave on a 300-slave expedition theoretically cut profits by .67 percent, and the average mortality rate of 10 to 15% reduced gains by 20 to 30 percent" (*French Slave Trade*, 141–2).

reckless destruction of life is the fact that no study has yet shown a systematic correlation of any significance between the numbers of slaves carried and mortality at sea. Thousands of ship crossings have now been statistically analyzed, and none show a correlation of any significance between either tonnage or space available and mortality.[48]

This does not mean that slaves were traveling in luxury. In fact, they had less room than did contemporary troops or convicts being transported. It simply means that after much experience and the exigencies of the trade, slavers only took on as many slaves as they could expect to cross the Atlantic safely. From scattered references in the pre-1700 period it seems that provisioning and carrying arrangements were initially deficient. But all post-1700 trade studies show that slavers carried water and provisions for double their expected voyage times and that in most trades they usually carried slightly fewer slaves than their legally permitted limits.

This increasing sophistication in the carrying of slaves was reflected in declining rates of mortality. In the pre-1700 trade, mean mortality rates over many voyages tended to hover around 20 percent. In turn this mean rate reflected quite wide variations, with many ships coming in with very low rates and an equally large number experiencing rates of double or more than double the mean figure. But in the post-1700 period the mean rates dropped, and the variation around the mean declined. By midcentury the mean stood at about 10 percent, and by the last quarter of the century all trades were averaging a rate of about 5 percent. Moreover the dispersion around these mean rates had declined, and two-thirds of the ships were experiencing no more than 5 percent variation above or below the mean rate.

These declines in mortality were due to the standardization increasingly adopted in the trade. First of all there developed a specialized and specifically constructed vessel used in the slave trade of most nations. By the second half of the eighteenth century slave ships were averaging two hundred tons among all European traders, a tonnage that seemed best to fit the successful carrying potential of the trade. Slave traders were also the first of the commercial traders to adopt copper sheathing for their ships, which was a costly new method to prolong the life of the vessels and guarantee greater speed. It should be stressed that these slave trade vessels were much smaller ships than Europeans used in either the West Indian or East Indian trades. This in turn goes a long way to explaining why the famous model of

[48] For the most recent survey of this question see Charles Garland and Herbert S. Klein, "The Allotment of Space for African Slavers Aboard Eighteenth Century British Slave Ships," *William and Mary Quarterly* 42 (1985): 238–48.

a triangular trade, long the staple of western textbooks, is largely a myth. This myth was based on the idea that the slave ships performed the multiple tasks of taking European goods to Africa, transporting slaves to America, and then bringing back the sugar or other slave-produced American staple for Europe all on the same voyage. In fact, the majority of American crops reached European markets in much larger and specially constructed West Indian vessels designed primarily for this shuttle trade; the majority of slavers returned to Europe with small cargoes or none at all; and in the largest slave trade of them all – that of Brazil – no slavers either departed from or returned to Europe.

All traders carried about two and a half slaves per ton, and although there was some variation in crew size and ratios, all slave trade ships carried at least twice the number of seamen needed to man the vessel, and thus double or more than that of any other long-distance oceanic trade. This very high ratio of sailors to tonnage was due to the security needs of controlling the slave prisoners. All the European slave traders were also using the same provisioning, health, and transportation procedures. They built temporary decks to house the slaves and divided them by age and sex. Almost all Europeans adopted smallpox vaccinations at about the same time, all carried large quantities of African provisions to feed the slaves, and all used the same methods for daily hygiene, care of the sick, and so on. This standardization explains the common experience of mortality decline, and it also goes a long way to rejecting contemporaneous assertions that any particular European trader was "better" or more efficient than any other.[49]

Although these firmly grounded statistics on mortality certainly destroy many of the older beliefs about "astronomic" mortality and tight packing, there does remain the question of whether a 5 percent mortality rate for a thirty- to fifty-day voyage for a healthy young adult is high or low. If such a mortality rate had occurred among young adult peasants in eighteenth-century France, it would be considered an epidemic rate. Thus, although Europeans succeeded in reducing the rate to seemingly low percentages, these rates still represented extraordinary high death rate figures for such a specially selected population. Equally, although troop, immigrant, and convict mortality rates in the eighteenth century approached the slave death numbers, in the nineteenth century they consistently fell to below 1 percent for transatlan-

[49] For a detailed discussion of these questions see Klein, *Middle Passage*, chap. 4, 7, and 8.

tic voyages. For slaves, however, these rates never fell below 5 percent for any large group of vessels surveyed. There thus seems to have been a minimum death rate caused by the close quarters during transport, which the Europeans could never reduce.[50]

Death in the crossing was due to a variety of causes. The biggest killers were gastrointestinal disorders, which were often related to the quality of food and water available on the trip, and fevers. Bouts of dysentery were common and the "bloody flux" as it was called could break out in epidemic proportions. The increasing exposure of the slaves to dysentery increased both the rates of contamination of supplies and the incidence of death. It was dysentery that accounted for the majority of deaths and was the most common disease experienced on all voyages. The astronomic rates of mortality reached on occasional voyages were due to outbreaks of smallpox, measles, or other highly communicable diseases that were not related to time at sea or the conditions of food and water supply, hygiene, and sanitation practices. It was this randomness of epidemic diseases that prevented even experienced and efficient captains from eliminating very high mortality rates on any given voyage.

Although time at sea was not usually correlated with mortality, there were some routes in which time was a factor. Simply because they were a third longer than any other routes, the East African slave trades that developed in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were noted for overall higher mortality than the West African routes, even though mortality per day at sea was the same or lower than on the shorter routes. Also, just the transporting together of slaves from different epidemiological zones in Africa guaranteed the transmission of a host of local endemic diseases to all those who were aboard. In turn, this guaranteed the spread of all major African diseases to America.[51]

Along with the impact of African diseases on the American populations, the biases in the age and sex of the migrating Africans also had a direct impact on the growth and decline of the American slave populations. The low ratio of women in each arriving ship, the fact that most of these slave women were mature adults who had already

50 This may explain the recent findings from some ninety-two selected voyages in the 1790s showing a correlation between "crowding" and mortality due to gastrointestinal diseases (Richard H. Steckel and Richard A. Jensen, "New Evidence on the Causes of Slave and Crew Mortality in the Atlantic Slave Trade," *Journal of Economic History* 46 [1986]:58–78).

51 See, e.g., Kenneth F. Kiple and Virginia H. King, *Another Dimension to the Black Diaspora: Diet, Disease, and Racism* (Cambridge, 1981); Kiple, *The Caribbean Slave: A Biological History* (Cambridge, 1984); and Frantz Tardo-Dino, *Le collier de servitude: La condition sanitaire des esclaves aux Antilles françaises du XVIIe au XIXe siècle* (Paris, 1985).

spent several of their fecund years in Africa, and the fact that few children were carried to America were of fundamental importance in the subsequent history of population growth. It meant that the African slaves who arrived in America could not reproduce themselves. The African women who did come to America had lost some potential reproductive years and were even less able to reproduce the total numbers of males and females in the original immigrant cohort, let alone create a generation greater than the total number who arrived from Africa. Even those American regions that experienced a heavy and constant stream of African slaves still had to rely on importation of more slaves to maintain their slave populations, let alone increase their size. Once that African migration stopped, however, it was possible for the slave populations to begin to increase through natural growth, so long as there was no heavy out-migration through emancipation.

It was this consistent negative growth of the first generation of African slaves which explains the growing intensity of the slave trade to America in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As the demand for American products grew in European markets because of the increasingly popular consumption of tobacco, cotton, coffee, and above all sugar, the need for workers increased and this could be met only by bringing in more Africans. It was only in the case of the United States that the growth of plantation crop exports to Europe did not lead to an increasing importation of African slaves. This was largely due to the very early North American experience of the local slave population achieving a positive growth rate and thus supplying its increasing labor needs from the positive growth of its native-born slave population.[52] Although most demographic historians have shown that

[52] There is a major debate about the relative impact of "treatment" of slaves and the causes for the extraordinary growth rates achieved earliest by the slaves in the United States. Although the relative marginality of North American exports to European markets prior to 1800 explains the low volume of migration of African slaves and the consequent earlier domination of native-born slaves in the work force, the ultimate population explosion can be explained only by more complex demographic variables. Since the period of potential fertility of slave women in all America has been found to be approximately the same, and since the length of fertility is directly related to differing health conditions, food supplies, and work experience, the fact that there was no difference leads to a rejection of the argument for better treatment. Recent scholars have argued that the primary difference is to be explained by shorter periods of lactation, with the U.S. slaves adopting the northern European practice of breast-feeding children for only one year, while the slaves of the rest of the Americas maintained traditional African practices of on-demand breast-feeding for two years. The contraceptive affects of breast-feeding in turn explain the longer child spacing of the non-U.S. slaves and thus their lower reproduction rates (Herbert S. Klein and Stanley L. Engerman, "Fertility Differentials between Slaves in the United

the creole slave populations had positive growth rates from the beginning and that it was the distortions of the African-born cohorts that explain overall decline, more traditional historians have tried to explain the increasing demand for slaves as due to the low life expectancy of the Afro-American slave population. Much cited is the contemporary belief found in the planter literature of most colonies that the Afro-American slave experienced an average working life of "seven years." This myth of a short-lived labor force was related to the observed reality of slave population decline under the impact of heavy immigration of African slaves. Observers did not recognize the age and sexual imbalance of these Africans as a causal factor for the negative population growth of the slave labor force. Rather, they saw this decline as related to a very high mortality and a low life expectancy. Yet all recent studies suggest both a positive rate of population growth among native-born slaves and a life expectancy well beyond the so-called average seven working years in all American societies.[53]

The average life expectancy of slave males was in the upper twenties in Brazil, for example, and in the midthirties for the United States, which might suggest an average working life of at least twenty years in Brazil and twenty-five years in the United States. But this average figure, of course, takes into account the very high infant mortality rates. For those slaves who survived the first five years of life – and these are the only ones we are concerned with here – the comparable life expectancies was in the midthirties for the Brazilians and lower forties for the U.S. slaves. This suggests that the average working life was, at a minimum, twenty-five years for Brazilian slaves and thirty years for the U.S. ones – both figures far from the supposed seven-year average postulated in most histories.[54]

A final aspect of the trade worth considering is the debate about its abolition. Though having most of its impact in the early nineteenth

States and the British West Indies: A Note on Lactation Practices and Their Implications," *William and Mary Quarterly* 35 [1978]: 357–74).

[53] See Jack E. Eblen, "On the Natural Increase of Slave Populations: The Example of the Cuban Black Population, 1775–1900," in Stanley R. Engerman and Eugene D. Genovese, *Race and Slavery in the Western Hemisphere: Quantitative Studies* (Princeton, 1975), 211–47; and Barry W. Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807–1834* (Baltimore, 1984).

[54] At first glance the difference in life expectancies might appear to support the argument for the "better treatment" of U.S. slaves. But in fact, it appears that the same difference in life expectancies could be found among free coloreds and whites in all American societies. That is, white Brazilians lived comparatively shorter lives than white North Americans. Thus it was the general differences in overall health conditions that explain the differences in life expectancies and not special treatment afforded slaves.

century, the abolitionist movement began in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, and in both its causes and consequences it would have a profound economic impact on American, African, and European trade. A major literature has appeared that has tried to examine the economic background to abolition as well as its economic impact. It is well known that the campaign to abolish the Atlantic slave trade, which began in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, is considered to have been the first peaceful mass political movement based on modern political propaganda in English history, if not for Europe as a whole. The traditional literature viewed this campaign as a moral crusade that was successful at the economic cost of profits and trade.[55] Once having abolished this trade to the English colonies in 1808, the British then attempted to force all the other major European slaving countries to desist from the trade. This campaign in turn was a costly one in terms of lost trade, alienation of traditional allies, and the very high costs of naval blockade.[56]

Though English statesmen and writers portrayed their campaign as a moral one from the beginning, there was a large contemporary literature attacking their motives. Cubans, Spaniards, and Brazilians, the objects of most of the post-1808 attacks by the British abolitionists, argued that the nineteenth-century campaign was motivated by fears of competition, especially after the abolition of slavery in 1834, when sugar became a free labor crop in the British West Indies. Later historians went even further and argued that the British West Indies plantations by the last quarter of the eighteenth century were in decline, and that it was economic motivation which explained the wellsprings of the British abolition campaign against the foreign slave traders, because the British West Indian plantations could not compete with the French, Spanish, and Brazilian ones.[57]

In contrast to this economic causal model, recent scholars have argued that the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century economy of the British West Indies was in fact a thriving one. Even after aboli-

[55] The standard works include F. J. Klingberg, *The Anti-Slavery Movement in England* (New Haven, 1926); and R. Coupland, *The British Anti-Slavery Movement* (London, 1933).

[56] Phillip LeVeen, *British Slave Trade Suppression Policies, 1821–1865* (New York, 1977), examines the economic costs of this effort. For detailed recent analyses of the complex maneuverings of the Brazilian and Spanish governments to defend their trades see David R. Murray, *Odious Commerce: Britain, Spain, and the Abolition of the Cuban Slave Trade* (Cambridge, 1980); Arturo Morales Carrión, *Auge y decadencia de la trata negrera en Puerto Rico (1820–1860)* (Rio Piedras, 1978); and Leslie Bethell, *The Abolition of the Brazilian Slave Trade* (Cambridge, 1970).

[57] L. J. Ragatz, *The Fall of the Planter Class in the British Caribbean, 1763–1833* (New York, 1928).

tion of the trade, the older and newer islands were competitive on the European market, and it was only slave emancipation itself that sent a shock wave through the local economy. Though the campaign for abolition is no longer seen as simply a great moral crusade by any major group of scholars, the economic determinism argument of Williams and his supporters is being challenged.[58]

It should also be stressed that many of the issues that I have presented in this preliminary essay are far from resolved in one way or another. A lively industry has developed critiquing even the numbers provided by Curtin.[59] Nevertheless enough of the basic economic structure of the trade is known to disprove many of the long-held assumptions about the trade. There are, of course, numerous areas that still need to be explored. Little is known about the economics of the Brazilian trade or about the patterns of investment of slave trade profits. Long time series of trade accounts, on the order of those developed by a Marion Johnson, must also be constructed for the other slave trades. Finally more work must be done on placing the slave trade in the context of all trades and alternative investments in the eighteenth century to be able to prove or disprove the famous Williams thesis. But whatever the current state of the debate, or the degree to which any particular argument may be considered closed, it is obvious that our understanding of the scale, importance, and impact of the Atlantic slave trade has been profoundly changed by the recent massive research effort that has taken place in the past twenty-five years.[60]

[58] See Anstey, *Atlantic Slave Trade;* the two works by Seymour Drescher, *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition* (Pittsburgh, 1977) and *Capitalism and Anti-Slavery* (New York, 1986); and David B. Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress* (New York, 1984). The most complete restatement and reanalysis of this aspect of the problem is contained in the new work of David Eltis, *Economic Growth and the Ending of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New York, 1987).

[59] Much of this new literature is summarized in Paul E. Lovejoy, "The Volume of the Atlantic Slave Trade: A Synthesis," *Journal of African History* 23 (1982): 473–501; and in David Eltis, "The Nineteenth Century Transatlantic Slave Trade: An Annual Time Series of Imports into the Americas Broken Down by Region," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 67 (1987): 109–38.

[60] Though no definitive study has yet appeared covering all of these topics, recent surveys of the trade have finally begun to incorporate much of this new research. See Hubert Deschamps, *Histoire de la traite des noirs* (Paris, 1971); Pierre Pluchon, *La route des esclaves, négriers et bois d'ébène au xviiie siècle* (Paris, 1981); James A. Rawley, *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade* (New York, 1981); and Françoise Renault and Serge Daget, *Les traites négrières en Afrique* (Paris, 1985).