A respectable trade? Slavery and the rise of capitalism

By Gary McFarlane

The transatlantic slave trade in Africans, reaching its height in the 200 years between 1650 and 1850, was of world historic importance. The rise of capitalist classes—eventually to be ruling classes—in the so-called Western countries was in no small part due to the outlet the slave trade opened up for the investment of the cash surpluses accrued by merchants, as well as monarchs, aristocrats, guilds and clergy. The slave trade and its consequences still lie at the heart of the class antagonism behind the American dream: a country which, in its formative years was practically built by slave labour, also hailed itself as the first free republican government in the world and a haven for freedom loving Christians.

In Britain its legacy is there for all to see in the churches and wealth in the square mile of the City of London. Many of Britain's greatest institutions made their start on the back of the trade in Africans. The Atlantic ports of England, Bristol and Liverpool, acquired their economic importance and municipal grandeur as the direct instruments of the trade. London was the dominant port before the mid-17th century and remained the financial centre of the trade. But many smaller ports also had a hand in the trade, such as Lyme Regis, Portsmouth, Poole, Dartmouth, Falmouth, Exeter, Deal and Lancaster. The investors in the South Sea Company, which in 1720 won the much prized asiento—the royal monopoly to trade 48,000 slaves annually for 30 years in the Spanish Empire—include many leading figures of the English ruling class of the day. 'Most of the House of Commons (462 members) and 100 members of the House of Lords (out of its total of 200) were included. So were Alexander Pope, Sir John Vanburgh, John Gay and all the royal family, including the bastards. The speaker of the House of Commons, Black Rod in the House of Lords and the Lord Chancellor were all on the list.' Isaac Newton lost £20,000 when the South Sea bubble burst, although the company went on to make fabulous fortunes for those not ruined by the speculative frenzy.

For such a monumental subject The History of the Atlantic Slave Trade 1440-1870 is a very superficial book. Certainly Thomas is aiming to provide posterity with a definitive work on the subject. But from the introduction alone it soon becomes apparent that it is not so much a work of history as a political statement in defence of the British role in the trade. Indeed, we are asked to believe that the overthrow of the slave trade to the Americas was the result of the most moral foreign policies in British history, a policy implemented by the Royal Navy in the wake of the British abolition of the trade in 1808 and of slavery itself in 1833. Undoubtedly, Thomas has brought together a mass of material for the first time but it is in the cause of a bankrupt idea. The author fails to provide any real explanation for why the trade persisted in the age of freedom and reason except to claim that in the minds of Europeans it was merely a continuation of the traditions of Ancient Greece and Rome. In chapter two during a brief discussion of slavery in antiquity he repeats myths about Hamitic peoples in Africa and implicitly denies that the basis of Egyptian civilisation came from the interior of Africa:

Slavery was a major institution in antiquity. Prehistoric graves in lower Egypt suggest that a Libyan people of about 8000BC enslaved a Bushman or Negro tribe. The Egyptians later made frequent attacks on their neighbours to the south.

He accepts that the Greeks and Romans were unprejudiced on grounds of race, but only provides examples of black people as slaves in the ancient world with the exception of a black herald who accompanied Odysseus to talk to...
Achilles, and a certain Aethiops, 'perhaps a black African freeman.. present at the founding of Corinth.' Yet these are all mythical characters!

However, the crux of his argument is that it was the moral progressiveness of the north Europeans, in particular the British political establishment, which brought the trade to an end. Specifically, he states that it was a combination of a free press, the Quakers and the work of individuals from Montesquieu to Wilberforce. For Thomas the end of the slave trade came not because, as the French historian Claude Meillassoux put it, slavery as a means of production hindered agrarian and industrial growth, but because of the work of decent individuals.6

Thomas's interest in the subject began 30 years ago at a dinner where he met the Marxist historian Eric Williams and consequently was invited to read Williams's Capitalism and Slavery. Later in his own book Thomas tells us what he thinks of Williams's conclusions:

The memory of Dr Eric Williams may haunt the modern study of the Atlantic slave trade, but his shocking argument that the capital which the trade made possible financed the industrial revolution now appears no more than a brilliant jeu d'esprit. After all, the slave trading entrepreneurs of Lisbon and Rio, or Seville and Cadiz, did not finance innovations in manufacture.7

Strangely, Thomas then provides in the next sentence a list of some of those who grew rich from slavery and did invest in industrial production.

There are some problems with Eric Williams' analysis but it still successfully nails the birth of capitalism to the banner of African slavery. Williams argues that Britain's 'triangular trade' provided a critical underpinning for the industrial revolution. He focuses on the British West Indies and not the entire system of slavery in the Americas. This has allowed Thomas, and others before him, to narrowly assess the level of profits made from slaving operations and conclude that this area alone could not have had such a critical impact on economic development. After all, foreign trade as a percentage of national wealth has been estimated at 10 percent for the mid-18th century. Profit rates derived from the plantations were massive, running at around a million pounds a year for the same period—a huge sum for the time but surely not enough to be the seed corn for what was to be the workshop of the world one hundred years later? But if we look a bit more carefully at the figures provided in Robin Blackburn's The Making of New World Slavery we discover that the profits in question tripled between 1770 and the end of the century, precisely the span of years in which it is generally agreed that the industrial revolution began. In 1770 profits from the plantations contributed between 20 and 50 percent of the funds of fixed capital formation in the metropolis, depending on the estimates. Slavery was the major contributor to the primitive accumulation of capital no matter how shocking Thomas finds the idea. As Marx remarked in Capital:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment of the aboriginal population in mines, the beginning of the conquest and the looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black skins, signalled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation. On their heals treads the commercial war of the European nations, with the globe for a theatre. It begins with the revolt of the Netherlands from Spain, assumes giant dimensions in England's Anti-Jacobin War, and is still going on in the opium wars against China, etc.8

Adam Smith, who did not mention slavery in his Wealth of Nations, was against the institution for sound reasons of political economy which would have found him broadly concuring with Williams and the Marxists, as Thomas unwittingly shows:

Smith argued that the institution was just one more artificial restraint on individual self-interest. If a man had no hope of property, Smith thought, he would obviously work badly, for 'it appears... from experience of all ages and nations... that the work done by freemen comes cheaper in the end than that performed by slaves.' That sentence was immensely influential, but it was even less sustainable than Smith's contention that Irish girls had good complexions because they ate potatoes.9

But Marxists have to be careful not to assume the automatic superiority of wage labour from the point of view of the
productivity of labour. In fact, for the sugar islands the balance may have been in favour of slavery up until the mid-19th century. It is important to see how capitalist relations battened on to and transformed a pre-capitalist mode of production. However, from the outset the sugar plantations in particular expressed organisationally the demands of generalised commodity production—the new, fledgeling and distant capitalist market. The six month harvest time in the Caribbean sugar fields brought forth the regimentation of the slave gangs to allow maximum production and maximum vigilation. The process of refining the sugar itself required machinery and a power source—namely a mill, be it water, wind or horse driven, all co-ordinated in great detail. The whole business of running a plantation depended on credit. Planters were open to any innovation that might enable them to raise productivity, such as Eli Whitney’s cotton gin, but they were selective. Ploughs, for example, never replaced hoes in the fields partly because of the relative cheapness of slaves measured against the surplus extracted but also because of the difficulties that slave control posed. The bills of exchange issued by planters and held by merchant creditors would be sold on, making them a principal financial instrument. In their turn manufacturers were to become the largest suppliers of credit to merchants in slaving ports like Liverpool and Bristol. In short, the plantation economy was concentrated at the heart of the new industries and commercial relations and was a primary motivator for the huge infrastructure developments such as harbours, docks and canals. The plantations’ inputs (iron manufacturers, shipping) and outputs (cotton, sugar, tabacco) fertilised, in Williams’s words, 'the most advanced areas of the economy' and the wealth it generated became the major source of working capital for an extended period.

At every turn Thomas reveals how the slave trade was vital to an immature British capitalism. In the decade of the 1730s Thomas estimates British ships carried 170,000 slaves to the Americas, overtaking the Portuguese. He shows how London then Bristol and, by the end of the 18th century, Liverpool are boosted, if not transformed, by the success of slaving. Thomas admits, 'The rise of Liverpool is a remarkable history, in which the slave trade played an important, perhaps even a decisive part'.

The Bridgewater canal built between Liverpool and Manchester and opened in 1772 was made possible with slave money. Liverpool had already become an outlet for Manchester's manufactures such as cotton checks, a principal item of trade with west Africa. It had the effect, as intended by the merchants of both cities, of lowering transportation costs from 40 shillings by road to six shillings by canal for a ton of goods:

The consequence was remarkable: Manchester's export trade was negligible in 1739, standing at £14,000 a year. Twenty years later it had increased to over £100,000, and by 1779 it stood at over £300,000. A third of this business went to Africa, principally items exchanged for slaves.

Forgetting his implicitly anti-Marxist position, Thomas is forced to consider the possibilty of capitalist development through slavery.

So it was that in 1780 the African trade in slaves seemed an essential part of the economies of all advanced countries, both a traditional thing and one which was being adjusted to meet all modern opportunities: the cotton cloth of Lancashire—above all Touchett's cotton checks, the very symbols of the new industrial process—were exported to secure African slaves.

Throughout the 800 pages of this book you will not find any discussion of racism, surely a glaring omission given that the era bequeathed us the uniquely modern notion of discriminating against people on the basis of inherited characteristics. Thomas gives us the following justification:

The slave trade was an iniquity. All the same, every historian must recall Hugh Trevor-Roper's warning: 'Every age has its own social context, its own climate, and takes it for granted. To neglect it—to use terms like "rational", "superstitious", "progressive", "reactionary", as if only that was rational which obeyed our rules of reason, only that progressive which pointed to us—is worse than wrong: it is vulgar'.

Thomas seeks to offer no explanation as to how the ruling class, and others with a direct hand in the business, actually justified their actions. He looks almost in vain for critics of the trade among the educated classes of the day and concludes from the dearth of opposition that it was merely because it was almost a natural outgrowth of an old institution given a filip by the need to solve the labour shortage in the Americas: '... the reason why these humane
A respectable trade? Slavery and the rise of capitalism

doubts had no effect is surely to be accounted for by the memory of antiquity which dominated education and culture for the next three centuries'. It is incredible that Thomas does not find it necessary to consider the development of racism as an ideology of justification and control created by a hugely exploitative system. It was the ideological expression of the shift from an ancillary slavery predominant in the Spanish Empire and in the early days of the English colonies, where slave labour was employed in a variety of endeavours, to systemic slavery centred exclusively on intensive plantation production of commodities.

Moreover, Thomas's assessment of the legacy of the trade for Africans and their descendants in the Americas and beyond is even more reactionary:

Like slaves in antiquity, African slaves suffered, but the character of their distress may be more easily conveyed by novelists such as M'me than by a historian. No doubts, though, the dignity, patience, and gaiety of the African in the New World is the best of all memorials.

In Thomas's account history becomes a chronology of events; pure empiricism stripped of analysis, and the voices of the direct producers. This is achieved by hiding behind an apparently value-free method, not seeking to impose 20th century ideas and models on the past, but just telling the story as it is. So the Atlantic slave trade is far removed from any discussion of racism because, supposedly, it was not an issue in the slaving countries of the day. Thomas concedes that Enlightenment thinkers such as Montesquieu and Rousseau were deeply hostile to slavery but nevertheless invokes the Enlightenment as part of the moral impulse that underlay the later undoing of the trade.

Despite his neutrality Thomas makes his prejudices clear enough in this assessment of the French Revolution and the real unity of interest that could be forged, albeit briefly, at the height of the revolutionary struggle, as the bourgeoisie, forced into desperate measures, aroused the majority at the bottom of society, including black people, against the aristocracy and the church: 'At the beginning of the revolution there were enough nègres in Nantes for a black battalion, Les hussards de Sainte Domingue: they were a band of executioners, assassins, and pillagers who helped to make the city at that time one of the most bloody in France. Similar small populations of blacks survived in Bordeaux and La Rochelle.'

The notion of slave rebellion undermining slavery is foreign to Thomas's outlook. In fact the San Domingo Revolution of 1792 in present day Haiti, which encompassed all the fears of metropolis and planters alike, struck the most powerful blow at slavery in conjunction with the unfolding revolution in France, but for Thomas it is just an aside to the parliamentary debates.

What ordinary people thought or did about the slave trade is not seriously considered by Thomas although, as he points out at the end of the book, the free press played an indispensable role in the abolition movement. However, the most consistently abolitionist element of this press came out of the tradition of pamphleteering and radical papers such as the Political Register, the Black Dwarf and later the Chartist Northern Star, which was the legacy of a revolutionary history from the mid-17th century. That tradition manifested itself in the most unlikely circumstances, such as in the slave crew riots in Liverpool:

The crew of the Derby, given only 20 shillings when offered 30, rioted and were sent to jail. But that evening 3,000 sailors assembled, broke open the jail, released their friends, and stopped all ships, even the slave ships, from sailing. In the meantime, constables fired-seven were killed and 40 wounded. The sailors this morning again assembled, upwards of 1,000, all with red ribbons in their hats, and.. about one o'clock assailed.

Four were killed and the house of a big slave merchant, Thomas Ratcliffe, was ransacked.

Abolitionism in Thomas's account is ripped from its real place in history. This is paradoxical, given his attempt to ordain abolition's parliamentary leaders, and ultimately the British ruling class, with the laurels for victory over slavery. He fails to see how British mercantile and political interests were advanced by banning the trade: it was a statement of world hegemony, albeit not fully consolidated until the defeat of Napoleon. Nor does Thomas see the way political power was contested in Britain, which meant abolitionism became a rallying point for those at odds with the ruling order. The fact that the propagators of freedom at home were the enslavers of Africans abroad was not lost on
the exploited labourers of England or France.

Robin Blackburn has offered a far more convincing analysis of the real motives of the British ruling class. They were involved in what they saw as a life and death struggle with revolutionary France. Napoleon's reintroduction of slavery in 1802 should have reassured the British as it was just one example of how he was shearing the popular revolution of its radical implications. But for the British it provided the opportunity to pose as being against the slave trade and, by association, the French. After the war with France began, middle class reformers, of which the abolitionists were a section, had become afraid of raising issues of parliamentary reform lest they be condemned as traitors. The parliamentary abolitionists virtually dropped their campaign.

Napoleon's revival of slavery gave parliamentary abolitionists the chance to raise their heads without being seen as traitors. Britain could now pretend to be the enemy of the slave trade and block French attempts to re-establish their Caribbean sugar plantations, primarily San Domingo. As Robin Blackburn puts it, 'The vision of a pacified global system of commerce, so often proclaimed by abolitionists, had become the realisable objective of a single power'.

Blackburn shows that in order to weld the population to their interests the Hanoverian oligarchy (ie the block of merchant capital and landed wealth that came together to install a monarchy agreeable to parliament in the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688) was forced to look for popular legitimacy-this was the era of the birth of patriotism. Former enemies of abolitionism and reform now ran to its banner. In addition the period of the Napoleonic Wars saw a rising level of class struggle. The hundreds of thousands of signatures collected by the reborn abolition movement following Napoleon's reintroduction of slavery are testament to anti-slavery's ability to act as a lightning conductor for the latent and open antagonism between capitalists and landowners on the one side and independent producers and wage labourers on the other.

Wilberforce's victory, or more precisely the co-option of abolitionism, far from securing support for the ruling class at home, in fact led to a rising level of struggle from the growing class of wage labourers. Up until the first defeat of Napoleon in 1814 the government had to garrison 12,000 troops in the north of England. The fight against wage and chattel slavery went hand in hand. Centres of working class agitation were also abolitionist strongholds. Parliamentary, or middle class, abolitionism had a double-edged impact on these struggles:

Just as the abolitionist legislation helped the oligarchy to assert its right to rule and deflect middle class agitation for reform, so in the industrial districts middle class abolitionism helped manufacturers to outface menacing combinations, cement ties with other respectable persons and assert their social conscience. The Luddites sought to halt or deflect capitalist industrialisation by threats of violence; the abolitionists proclaimed the need to pacify relations and base them on a minimum respect for personal inviolability and autonomy. Abolitionism did not solve the problems of either government or employers, but it lent a more hopeful aspect to national sacrifice and discipline.

Thomas furnishes us with much evidence to support the Marxist position as developed by Williams and Blackburn but draws none of the conclusions.

Notes

3 Ibid, p590.
5 Ibid, p27.
6 Ibid, p798.
7 Ibid, p795.
8 K Marx, Capital, vol I (Lawrence & Wishart 1977) p703.
9 H Thomas, op cit, p476.
10 Ibid, p246.
11 Ibid, p249.
A respectable trade? Slavery and the rise of capitalism

13 Ibid, p11.
14 Ibid, p795.
16 Ibid, p254.
17 Ibid, p283.
19 Ibid, p315.