From 1807 – 1833, Impediments to the Process of Slave Emancipation in the British West Indies

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The Abolition Act of 1807 declared British involvement in the Atlantic slave trade illegal. Slavery itself remained, however, condoned by the British government and exploitation of Negroes continued in the British West Indies until the Emancipation Act of 1833. If Britain deemed the slave trade to be too immoral, then it is puzzling that the institution of slavery remained firmly in place in British colonies for another twenty-six years. Were there not the same humanitarian reasons for ending slavery as there were for ending the slave trade? By looking at Britain in the first part of the nineteenth century, it is clear that emancipation of West Indian slaves was not regarded as a natural corollary of abolition of the slave trade. In Britain, there existed strong overtones of racism even in the outlook of many anti-slavery advocates, and assumption of an anti-slavery stance did not preclude notions that blacks were inferior. Such prejudices were especially predominant in the British Parliament, where West Indian planters enjoyed much influence. The process of emancipation was painfully slow because of the conservative British Parliament with its extraordinary respect for private property; the financial burden of providing compensation to West Indian planters; opposition from commercial merchants and working class radicals; and fears, compounded by widespread slave revolts, that slaves were incapable of dealing with freedom. Ultimately, however, the most formidable obstacle to emancipation was not a human agent; rather, it was the entrenched British prejudice toward people of African descent that was evident even in the minds of abolitionists. An examination of the intervening years between the Abolition Act of 1807 and the Emancipation Act of 1833 demonstrates that it was this prejudice, which delayed slave emancipation.

Paradoxically, the abolitionists account, in part, for the twenty-six year gap between trade abolition and slave emancipation because their mandate did not include demands for immediate emancipation. Thus, the following question must be asked: why were abolitionists, self-proclaimed humanitarians, not pressing for immediate emancipation? Abolitionists did not include immediate emancipation in their mandate because they believed that the moral degradation caused by enslavement was so severe that slaves would be unable to deal with freedom. While stressing that their ultimate goal was always the eradication of the system of slavery, the famed founder of the British anti-slavery movement, William Wilberforce, explicitly declared that preparation of slaves for freedom must occur prior to emancipation. To grant them freedom immediately, he maintained, would be unwise. Of utmost necessity were "preparatory measures that would be requisite for enabling them [the slaves] to render acquisition of liberty either safe for their owners or beneficial to themselves." Even in the 1800s, abolitionists were criticized for what appeared to be a contradictory and ambivalent stance. Wilberforce responded to accusations that he and his fellow abolitionists were satisfied merely with suppressing the slave trade by claiming that true emancipation was beyond their strength, as they found their adversaries too many and too strong. Accusations abounded that abolitionists had stopped short of their professed goal of eradicating slavery, but that they continued to assume an air of moral loftiness while emancipation remained merely a chimera.

A second reason why abolitionists did not press for immediate emancipation was because they naively assumed that slave conditions in the West Indies would improve as a natural consequence of ending the slave trade. Abolitionist logic was that planters, unable to import new slaves, would ameliorate their habitual brutal treatment so their slaves could reproduce healthy families and ensure them a continued labour supply. Abolitionists predicted that planters would increase food provisions, reduce the intensity of labour and the severity of punishment, and facilitate religious and moral development. In hindsight, such idealistic beliefs are certainly difficult to appreciate. Nevertheless, because abolitionists held such convictions, they deemed it unnecessary to push for immediate emancipation. Obviously, what transpired in the West Indies was contrary to the abolitionists' hopes: the

slave system persisted unabated in its traditional nature despite abolishment of the trade. Wilberforce did not ignore the fallacy of his initial assumptions and in 1823 he acknowledged the abolitionists' short-sightedness:

"I will frankly confess, that we greatly deceived ourselves by expecting much more benefit to the plantation Negroes from the abolition of the Slave Trade than has actually resulted form that measure…We were too sanguine in our hopes as to the effects of abolition in our colonies; we judged too favourable of human nature; we thought too well of the colonial assemblies; we did not allow weight enough to the effects of rooted prejudice, and inveterate habits…"

A sense of disillusionment is evident in the above passage. Such disillusionment resulted from failed predictions that slave conditions would improve following trade abolishment, but also from of the dismal outcome of the Amelioration Acts. A system of gradual emancipation had been adopted, detailed through the Amelioration Acts, because immediate emancipation was considered too rash to be enacted. The Amelioration Acts promised to emancipate the slave by degrees: improved working conditions would allow for moral and religious growth, ultimately rendering the slave fit for freedom. While recognizing the worst abuses of slavery, the amelioration decrees were nevertheless very conservative. British Prime Minister Canning is credited with creating the resolutions, some of which were: banning the flogging of female slaves, a six-day week, a nine-hour day, acceptance of slave testimonies in courts, and provision for religious and moral improvements by outlawing Negro Sunday markets. Even such cautious measures as these, however, were met with animosity from planters. A proposal that female children born to enslaved mothers should henceforth be free was rejected because the white population in the West Indies was considered too small to cope with a large free black population. Measures which were considered appropriate were to be put in place immediately in all the crown colonies as well as the colonies annexed after the wars with France: British Guiana, Trinidad, and St. Lucia. The caution of the measures was compounded by the British government's decision to leave administration to colonial legislatures. This ensured the ultimate failure of the measures. Wilberforce claimed that the Amelioration Acts were, "I fear, worse than nullities," that they

were accepted by the colonial legislatures simply to "avert the interference of the mother country in the management in slaves," and that in reality they were not recognized in a single island. Perhaps if the British government had enforced the Amelioration Acts more effectively, emancipation would have been hastened.

As debates regarding the terms of amelioration measures became more vocalized, the rhetoric of the anti-slavery movement made its way across the Atlantic and entered the minds of plantation slaves. There developed among slaves a suspicion that the British government supported emancipation but that their owners were withholding it. This idea became such a certainty that slaves interpreted every change of governor as a sign of imminent emancipation. The results of this misunderstanding were devastating. Slaves, understanding that an end to their enslavement apparently loomed on the horizon, refused to wait and instead were determined to claim their rightful freedom. Consequently, major slave revolts coursed through the British Caribbean. A letter from a general in the colony of Demerara to the British government dated 24 August 1823, read:

"I [General Murray] returned to ascertain their views, which they [the slaves] stated to be unconditional emancipation…I expostulated the beneficent views of His Majesty for bettering their condition; explained the abolition of the flogging of female slaves and the carrying of whips in the field as but the first steps to the intended measures. These things, they said, were no comfort to them; God had made them of the same flesh and blood as the whites; they were tired of being slaves; their good King had sent orders that they should be free, and they would not work any more."

What followed was an uprising in Demerara which was violently suppressed, causing the death of hundreds of slaves. It was concluded that the rebelling slaves had been inspired to revolt by white missionaries, and blame was placed on abolitionists because of their connections with missionary societies. Similar conclusions were drawn from uprisings in British Guiana in 1808 and 1823, in Barbados in 1816, in Jamaica in 1823 and 1831, and in Antigua in 1831. Such insurrections reinforced racist ideas that slaves were incapable of living in a civilized matter and thus the process of emancipation slowed to a trickle. Planters feared subsequent revolts and inflicted on slaves "the horrors attendant on the existence of

martial law, with all its accompanying severity." The memory of the successful rebellion in Saint Domingue lingered, assuring that every West Indian planter lived in dread of another Touissant L'Ouverture. Colonial authorities went to great lengths to dispel rumours that slavery was to end. As late as 1832 a colonial general addressed a slave community: "some wicked persons have told you the King has made you free, and that your masters withhold your freedom from you. In the name of the King I come amongst you to tell you that you are misled. Surrender yourselves." The amelioration measures tragically backfired and the process of emancipation was temporarily reversed. Also impeding emancipation was Wilberforce's perception that because of the extensive unrest in the West Indies, the political climate of Britain was unsuitable for the continued vocalization of his cause.

As the political climate relaxed in the 1820s, the emancipation campaign strengthened, peaking in 1830 and 1833 with over 1300 local associations involved in the cause. Realization of the failure of the Amelioration Acts prompted younger, bolder, and more radical abolitionists to assume leadership of the movement and push for more expedient emancipation. In 1824, an anonymous pamphlet entitled *Immediate Not Gradual Emancipation* was received well by abolitionist groups, evidencing the new focus of the movement. Emancipation became an increasingly political issue and in the 1832 Parliamentary elections nearly all successful candidates included anti-slavery sentiment in their campaigns. Since it is undeniable that the emancipation movement was enveloping the British populace to an unprecedented degree, why did slavery remain recognized legally in British colonies?

Despite mass popular support of emancipation, significant sectors of society remained vehemently opposed to slave emancipation. The waning era of slavery was, of course, also the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, which unleashed upon Britain its own set of human rights abuses: the evils of factory labour, the expanding urban slums, and all the dangerous effects of unbridled capitalism. The anti-slavery movement was attacked most vigorously by pressure groups comprised of working-class radicals who were concerned predominantly with alleviating domestic suffering. Such radicals acknowledged the injustices of Negro slavery but they stressed that charity must begin at home and that industrial child

labour was as deplorable as plantation slavery, and possibly even worse. Renowned humanitarians such as Wilberforce and Buxton were branded as being indifferent to the misery of factory labourers and were accused of financing their anti-slavery crusade by increasing exploitation of "white slaves." The most vociferous attack on the anti-slavery campaign came from the outspoken William Cobbett. His animosity toward abolitionists was extreme:

"If they [the abolitionists] can busy themselves with compassion for the Negroes, while they uphold the system that makes the labourers of England more wretched, and beyond all measure more wretched, than any Negro slaves area, or ever were, or ever can be, they are unworthy of anything but our contempt."

Abolitionist pleas to regard the Negro as equal were thrown back in their faces by Cobbett's pointed interrogations: "do you call such men [British labourers] free on account of the colour of their skin"? The rhetoric of the time was relentless; radicals termed slave emancipators as the drivers of white slaves, and as being nothing more than "showers-off." There was also an economic slant to the argument of the working-class radicals: they claimed cynically that slaves would be worse off if emancipated because they would then be employed under a system of wage labour and would be exposed to the "deadly effect of competing with themselves as labourers." The sad irony is that both factions were fighting for causes equally as legitimate but each condemned the other for having different priorities. By arousing the hostility rather than the support of individuals equally devoted to humanitarian causes, abolitionists estranged a politically influential layer of British society which could have potentially added weight to their emancipation cause.

In addition to working-class radicals, the anti-slavery movement faced formidable opposition from West Indian planters, commercial merchants, and the conservative British Parliament. Britstol merchants prophesied 'doom and depression' if slaves were freed because they predicted that, upon emancipation, slaves would resort to crime and violence. Planters insisted that slavery was an economic necessity and they highlighted the profitability of the institution, and the British government could not ignore such economic arguments. Fears that eradicating slavery in British colonies would be economically disadvantageous, because

slavery was continuing in Dutch and Spanish colonies, kept Parliament decidedly pro-slavery. The British government was an obstacle to emancipation for two main reasons: one, West Indian planters possessed considerable influence in Parliament, especially in the House of Lords, and two, the unreformed Parliament was not responsible to the multifaceted British populace and did not allow for adequate middle-class representation. Slavery would persist for as long as the British government was answerable only to the commercial and ruling elite. The Parliamentary Reform Act of 1832, however, effectively reduced West Indian influence. Even though this Act did not transform the British government into a truly democratic institution, it did weaken the old political order and allow for the penetration of popular opinion into Parliament. The Reform Act though, did not completely pave the way for emancipation because there were many other equally urgent issues that simultaneously demanded governmental attention, such as the renegotiation of the Poor Laws and the need for factory and child labour legislation. Nevertheless, that the Emancipation Act of 1833 was passed by the reformed Parliament is not mere coincidence; the Reform Act was definitely a necessary precursor to the Emancipation Act.

Also related to the hindrances caused by the British government was the intrinsic British value of the sanctity of private property. Slaves, of course, were considered private property. This value was too entrenched in British culture to be relinquished simply through the legislation that reformed Parliament, and was a major impediment to slave emancipation. The oligarchic disposition to protect private property of all types ensured that there was never any doubt among Parliamentarians that West Indian planters should receive some form of compensation in exchange for freeing their slaves. Despite this consensus, the looming financial burden was so immense that it was reason enough for the House of Lords to postpone emancipation. Furthermore, once the intent to emancipate was declared, the price of slaves would naturally decrease; hence, the longer the British government postponed emancipation, the more the financial burden of compensation would be reduced. The logistical details of how compensation should be granted, whether planters should be compensated by loans, by entitlement to some form of subsequent forced labour, or by a concession from taxation, dragged on for months. Ultimately, planters were granted a very

substantial sum in pounds and were also assured continued labour through the system of apprenticeship. While humanitarians must have decried that a monetary value could not be placed on human freedom, working class radicals were outraged for a different reason. They realized that compensation would increase taxes and that the burden of increased taxes would fall on impoverished labourers. Regardless of who footed the bill, the extensive compensation debate assured that slaves would remain tied to West Indian plantations for a while yet.

Thus, hindrances to slave emancipation were varied, entrenched, and enduring. The most fascinating aspect of the entire process is how abolitionists paradoxically impeded a movement to which they proclaimed their devotion. Because of the abolitionists' failure to initially commit themselves to immediate emancipation, the humanitarian element of the British anti-slavery movement has been questioned, and such famed abolitionists as Wilberforce and Brougham have been termed racist, hypocritical, and ineffective by subsequent historians. While such claims do have a limited validity, it is crucial to examine the cultural context of eighteenth and nineteenth century Britain. Racial prejudice, whether subtle or outright, was a hallmark of British culture and could not be dispelled merely through anti-slavery campaigns. The reasons for this are two-fold: first, such beliefs were deeply ingrained in British culture, and second, abolitionists themselves subconsciously possessed such beliefs. This is not to condone abolitionist claims such as the "slave is not ripe for liberty," but rather it is to stress that all historical figures, and their actions, must be evaluated in the context of their cultural milieu. Thus, the single most powerful force that kept slaves in servitude was not necessarily a human actor, but rather the prevailing mentality that perceived blacks as inferior. This mentality manifested itself in the inclinations of West Indian planters, commercial merchants, and British Parliamentarians to protect their economic interests at any human cost, and prevented them from recognizing the humanity of blacks. Slave emancipation was drawn out so painfully because the political and social environment which would accept true emancipation still had to be developed. Thus, Buxton's notorious quip, "the slave is not ripe for emancipation," can be subverted: yes, the slave was most definitely ripe for emancipation, but British society, including most abolitionists, was not ripe to allow for it.

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****Note from the Media Editor:** The print version of this paper originally came with endnotes written at the end of piece; however, none of these endnotes were actually incorporated into the written format of the paper, making it difficult to assume where they would have been originally placed. They have been left out as a result.