UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE MINAS GERAIS
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ESSAYS ON POLITICAL ECONOMY AND ANTISLAVERY IN THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH EMPIRE, c. 1740-1780

Belo Horizonte
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Belo Horizonte, 10 de abril de 2024.

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Para Maria e Célio

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RESUMO

Esta tese investiga as conexões entre antiescravismo e economia política nos debates públicos setecentistas sobre a política imperial britânica. A pesquisa se baseia em fontes primárias publicadas entre 1740 e 1780, período que precede a consolidação dos movimentos abolicionistas organizados no mundo anglo-americano. A tese é dividida em três ensaios independentes que, em conjunto, reexaminam a importância de discursos econômicos para o desenvolvimento do antiescravismo anglo-americano. Dois deles analisam a emergência de distintos argumentos econômicos contra a escravidão, tais quais: (i) o tráfico de pessoas escravizadas inibe o desenvolvimento de um comércio civilizado, humano e lucrativo em produtos agrícolas e matérias-primas africanas; (ii) o trabalho livre é mais produtivo que o trabalho escravo. O terceiro ensaio discute planos de abolição que emergiriam na esteira da Revolução Americana para argumentas que os abolicionistas raramente conseguiriam escapar da tarefa de repensar a organização político-econômica de sociedades escravistas. Acolhendo a pluralidade de discursos econômicos existentes, esta pesquisa não assume que a economia política setecentista era uma ortodoxia liberal impondo suas descobertas ao movimento abolicionista. Nem que economia política era um campo teórico independente ao qual abolicionistas poderiam ocasionalmente recorrer. Em todas suas variações, a economia política era parte integrante do esforço abolicionista.

Palavras-chave: economia política; antiescravismo; abolicionismo; império britânico; tráfico de pessoas escravizadas; comércio africano; comércio legítimo; superioridade do trabalho livre.

ABSTRACT

The dissertation investigates the connections between antislavery and political economy amid public debates on eighteenth-century British imperial politics. The research focuses on primary sources published roughly between 1740 and 1780, a period that preceded the consolidation of organized abolitionist movements in the Anglo-American world. The dissertation is divided into three independent essays that, when taken together, reassess the importance of economic discourses to the development of Anglo-American antislavery. Two of the essays investigate the emergence of distinguishable economic arguments against slavery: (i) the slave trade hindered the development of a civilized, humane, and profitable commerce in African staple crops and natural produce, and (ii) free labor was more productive than slave labor. The third analyzes emancipation schemes that emerged during the American Revolution to show that rethinking the political-economic organization of slave-based societies was an inescapable part of the abolitionist endeavor. Embracing the existence of a plurality of economic discourses during the eighteenth century, I do not assume that political economy was a liberal orthodoxy impinging its beliefs onto the antislavery movement. Neither was it a separate theoretical field to which late-eighteenth century abolitionists eventually resorted. It was, in all its variations, part and parcel of the abolitionist endeavor.

Keywords: political economy; antislavery; abolitionism; British empire; slave trade; African trade; legitimate commerce; superiority of free labor.

SUMMARY

1. INTRODUCTION: POLITICAL ECONOMY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF ANGLO-AMERICAN ANTISLAVERY

By the end of the American War of Independence (1776-1783), organized abolitionism was still in its infancy in the Anglo-American world. Local abolitionist initiatives gained some strength in North America during the revolutionary period, but they would not coalesce into a national social and political movement until much later (see DAVIS, 1999, p. 255–342; HARROLD, 2019, p. 13–32; SINHA, 2016, p. 34–96). If North American settlers petitioned colonial assemblies and the British Parliament to restrict the imports of enslaved Africans to the colonies in the early 1770s, the first metropolitan petition for slave trade abolition was sent to the House of Commons in 1783. The first abolitionist society in Britain, the *Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (henceforth London Abolitionist Society), was formed only in 1787, by a group of London-based activists.

My research focuses precisely on the period that preceded the consolidation of organized abolitionism in the Anglo-American world. I investigate primary sources published between the 1740s and the 1770s, a period that encompasses important transformations in the British Empire, such as the Seven Years' War and the American Revolution. This is, therefore, a study of early antislavery history. More specifically, a study of the connection between political economy and early antislavery.[1] By the early eighteenth century, those engaged in the public debate virtually agreed that the prosperity of British American and Caribbean colonies relied on the enslavement of Africans. If slavery "apologists" continued to emphasize the same point in the late eighteenth century, antislavery writers had been reassessing the political economy of slavery.

Antislavery opinion gained strength from the mid-eighteenth century. Before the 1780s, a handful of writers had already reconsidered the political economy of American and Caribbean slavery. Some pointed to the unexplored economic potential of African territories as a way out of the slave trade (Chapter 2), while others insisted on the superiority of free labor (Chapter 3). A few abolitionists designed emancipation plans that, while gradualist, dealt with pressing economic

[1] Throughout the dissertation, I use antislavery to define any public manifestation opposing the traffic of African men, woman, and children or their enslavement in the American and Caribbean colonies. Antislavery, in this sense, encompasses publications with non-abolitionist content. Several authors criticized slavery without explicitly defending it should be abolished. The term antislavery captures these nuances.

matters such as compensation and redress (Chapter 4). In so doing, these Anglo-American writers gave rhetorical ammunition to the later abolitionist movement.

This subject, notwithstanding, remains relatively unexplored by the scholarship on Anglo-American antislavery. A prominent English abolitionist, Thomas Clarkson, published the first historical account of British antislavery right after the Parliament's decision to outlaw the transatlantic slave trade in 1807. His *History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade* (1808) attributed that political victory to the success of Anglo-American humanitarian campaigns. Clarkson's (1808, p. 32) narrative portrayed those who belonged to the London Abolitionist Society as the "principal actors" in the struggle to abolish the African slave trade.

Nevertheless, he conceded the society's efforts "would never have been so effectual, if the minds of men had not been prepared by others, who moved before them" (p. 32). For him, "those who favoured the cause of injured Africans" before the foundation of the society in 1787 were "necessary precursors" for its achievement (p. 32). Clarkson developed a narrative in which early antislavery manifestations would ultimately lead to organized abolitionism in the late 1780s. Each early antislavery publication was like a tributary stream feeding the abolitionist river:

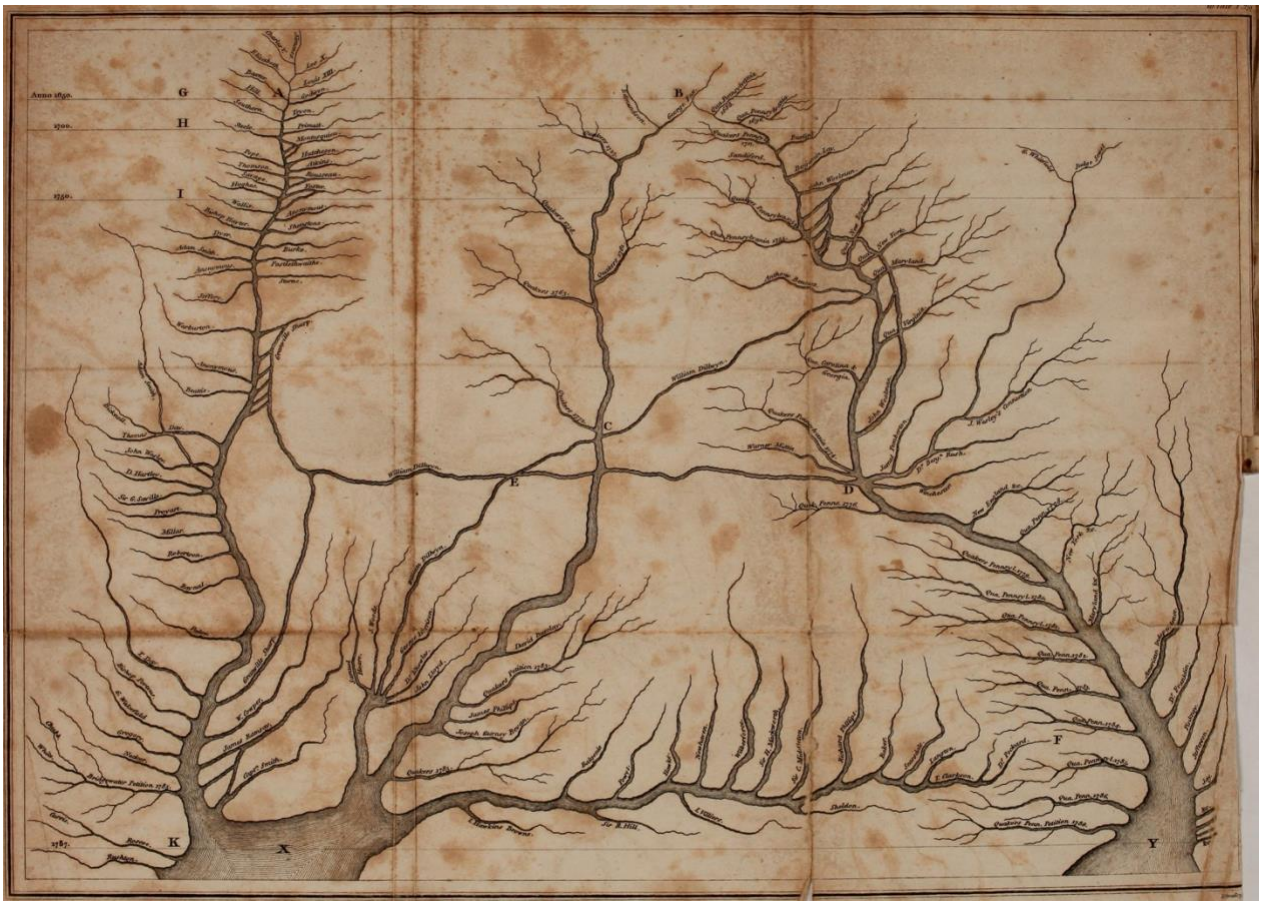
> It would be considered by many, who have stood at the mouth of a river, and witnessed its torrent there, to be both an interesting and pleasing journey to go to the fountain-head, and then to travel down on its banks downwards, and to mark the different streams in each side, which should run into it and feed it. So I presume the reader will not be little interested and entertained in viewing with me the course of the abolition of the slave-trade, in first finding its source, and then in tracing the different springs which have contributed to its increase. (CLARKSON, 1808, p. 30)

Clarkson illustrated this analogy using a map, reproduced below (Figure 1). X represented the convergence of several trends with the foundation of the London Abolitionist Society in 1787, while Y depicted a similar process in North America. The streams (A, B, C, D, E) corresponded to different groups of precursors. At the same time, each "spring or rivulet" illustrated the contribution of a "forerunner or coadjutor" who "assisted in making and swelling the torrent which swept away the slave-trade" (CLARKSON, 1808, p. 259).

According to Clarkson, the gradual progress of Anglo-American abolitionism evidenced that "no good effort is ever lost" (p. 265). All who rose against the enslavement of Africans ultimately contributed to ending the transatlantic slave trade. Despite privileging religious sources,

Clarkson included eighteenth-century philosophers and pamphleteers among the forerunners of abolitionism. In so doing, he established the canon of early antislavery literature.

Figure 1. Clarkson's abolitionist map



Source: Thomas Clarkson (1808), *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade.*

If contemporary scholars remain interested in the early history of antislavery, they no longer follow Clarkson's interpretation of the emergence of British abolitionism. To this day, Christopher Brown's *Moral Capital* (2006) provides the most comprehensive account of the development of British antislavery up to 1787. Criticizing the dominant interpretation since Clarkson, Brown (2006, p. 30) argued that "organizing against the slave trade" was neither "a natural consequence of late-eighteenth-century trends" nor an "inevitable outcome of moral and cultural progress." There was nothing inevitable about the national abolitionist campaigns of the late 1780s:

> For an antislavery movement to develop in Britain, then, four things had to happen. In the first place, the enslavement of Africans had to be considered, in the abstract, a moral wrong. Second, that moral wrong had to attain political significance; it had to attract sustained interest and become a cause for concern. Third, those concerned needed a way to act, a way to address the concerns that had emerged. And, fourth, specific individuals and groups had to make a confrontation with the slave system a personal and collective mission, a priority that lasted beyond initial protests and could sustain itself with coherent organization and institutional commitment. (BROWN, 2006, p. 29)

By the mid-eighteenth century, an increasing number of Anglo-American writers would agree that slavery was morally wrong, at least in the abstract (BROWN, 2006, p. 33–101). Slavery only became a sustained political problem, however, during the imperial crisis culminating in the War of American Independence (p. 105-153). Once the enslavement of Africans was perceived not only as a moral but also a political problem, those attempting to end it would search for solutions and develop plans for action (p. 209-330). In so doing, they would have to reimagine an empire without slavery and the slave trade. The proposed solutions, nevertheless, did not necessarily generate "a sustained campaign to reform" (p. 29). For this to happen, some would have to make abolition their personal and collective mission (p. 333-450). Brown carefully reassessed the importance of Quaker and evangelical antislavery organizers and evidenced how "abolitionism came to serve the more specific concerns of these groups in the years after the American war" (p. 29).

If political economy was not among *Moral Capital's* main concerns, I learned important lessons from Brown's account. First, early antislavery publications were often politically oriented and lacked abolitionist content. Accordingly, one could oppose slavery and the slave trade without supporting any political agenda for the emancipation of enslaved people in the British Atlantic. Second, the imperial crisis that followed the Seven Years' War helped *politicize* the institution of slavery in the British Empire. The conflict between Britain and North America gave *political meaning* to antislavery opinion. Criticizing the enslavement of Africans, and assigning blame for it, became a powerful rhetorical tool in making the case for or against the independence of North America (see Chapter 4). This process turned the very existence of slavery into a political problem – and, consequently, into a target for political action.

Brown (2012, p. 612) maintained the American Revolution was a "crucial fact" to antislavery organizing in the Anglo-American world: "The political crises that caused the war, and that followed from it, produced an extraordinary outpouring of commentary from both sides of the Atlantic on the proper meaning of liberty and the precise definition of slavery." Once slavery

became a political problem, the concerned parties started to actively search for solutions. Building on Brown's interpretation, I will show how political economy played an essential role in this search. Before presenting the dissertation's content, however, I must discuss the existing literature on the relationship between political economy and antislavery.

1.1 Political economy in the history of Anglo-American abolitionism

Brown's *Moral Capital* touched upon important political-economic matters. Its objective, nevertheless, was not to explain the connection between economic and early antislavery discourses. Similarly, recent historical accounts of early American antislavery have not focused on political economy.[2] Historical debates about the relationship between political economy and slavery often privilege a later period, concentrating on the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. This section contains a summary account of these debates, focusing on their implications for the study of the pre-1780 period.

Eric Williams' *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944) brought economic considerations to a historiography that had unashamedly praised British humanitarians' central role in political abolition.[3] His book instigated revisionist accounts, inaugurated a prolonged controversy about the economics of abolition, and shaped the debate about political economy and antislavery in the British Empire. It also impacted the study of antislavery discourse. Some historians insisted that liberal political economy and antislavery went hand in hand in legitimating the free trade and free labor ideologies that would serve industrial capitalism. Others would question the association between laissez-faire capitalism and abolitionism.

1.1.1 Capitalism and Slavery

Williams (1944) connected the emergence of both slavery and abolitionism to Britain's economic development. In so doing, he associated the genesis of the modern capitalist system with the massive enslavement of Africans in the Americas. According to him, the revenue from the plantation and slave trades provided part of "the capital which financed the Industrial Revolution" in England [4] (WILLIAMS, 1944, p. vii). Conversely, "mature industrial capitalism" was

[2] See Sinha (2016, p. 34–96), Harrold (2019, p. 13-32), Carey (2012).
[3] See, for instance, Sir Reginald Coupland's *The British Antislavery Movement* (1933).
[4] It is worth mentioning that several economic historians reacted to Williams' claim that slave trade and slavery financed the Industrial Revolution. For critical accounts, see Engerman (1972) and Morgan (2000). The journal

responsible for destroying the "slave system": emancipation was less a political victory of humanitarianism than the result of a broader offensive against monopoly and the rise of a free trade agenda (p. vii, 126-52).

The American Revolution would be the turning point that shifted the "mercantilist" colonial system into the free trade industrial order. In Williams's (1944, p. 120) words, "American independence destroyed the mercantile system and discredited the old regime." It represented the dissolution of both political and economic ties within the British Empire, being "the first stage in the decline of the sugar colonies" (p. 121). In his interpretation, Britain had pursued an imperial policy grounded on the economic specialization of the American colonies from the very beginning of colonization (p. 112-113). The Caribbean islands produced sugar and imported almost everything else from the mainland colonies, while North American planters obtained most of their revenue from the trade with the sugar colonies. Nevertheless, two conditions were necessary to conciliate the economic interests of both West Indians and North Americans: "island production of sugar and molasses must be sufficient to satisfy mainland consumption," while "island consumption of mainland staples must keep pace with mainland production" (p. 112). This would prove hard to achieve "because of the relative size of the two independent areas" (p. 112).

Considering that British Caribbean colonies did not consume everything produced by North American planters, it was necessary to increase sugar crops in the existing colonies or acquire new ones to avoid economic disputes between the demands of North Americans – who wanted a larger consumer market – and West Indians – who wanted to keep high prices for its products and avoid colonial expansion. Williams highlighted that both solutions would engender "a greater supply of sugar in the British market and a consequent reduction of price," thereby decreasing the revenues of West Indian planters (p. 113). The profitability of sugar plantations relied on the maintenance of monopoly because slave-based cultivation exhausted the soil and increased production costs. For these reasons, West Indians opposed each imperial attempt to incorporate new sugar colonies and expand the cultivation: "The whole empire was to be brow-beaten into paying tribute to the sugar planters and accepting sugar at a monopoly price because it was British grown" (p. 115).

Slavery and Abolition recently published a special issue proposing a reassessment of this subject: *Revisiting the impact of slave-based activities on European Economics, 1500-1800*. See Combrink & van Rossum (2021).

Under these circumstances, the mainland colonies started to violate the "British imperial scheme" by trading with French and Spanish sugar colonies (p. 116). In response, West Indians pressed the Parliament to approve laws restricting the mainland trade outside the British Empire. The Molasses Act of 1733 prohibited North American exports to foreign colonies and "imposed high duties on foreign sugar and molasses" (p. 119). Despite being approved, the act was not adequately enforced by imperial authorities. Three decades later, the Parliament passed the Sugar Duties Act (1764) to reinforce the previous measures and "prevent smuggling" (p. 119). To Williams, "the attempt to render the Act effective and stamp out smuggling led directly to the American Revolution" (p. 120).

The independence of the mainland colonies seriously affected the British Caribbean economy. With the end of the Anglo-American war, the United States became a foreign territory subject to the commercial restrictions imposed by the Navigation Laws. Consequently, British sugar colonies were "deflected from their natural market in accordance with the world historical situation" (p. 121). Relying on the imports of North American supplies, West Indians "begged for the creation of free ports" (p. 122). Provisions from the mainland "continued to penetrate the British Isles by devious routes," which only increased the cost of production to the planter. Since British sugar could not compete with the French colonies' sugar, Caribbean planters became even more dependent on mercantilist restrictions.

Meanwhile, industrial development was turning mercantilism obsolete (p. 126-52). The American Revolution coincided with "the first stages of the Industrial Revolution" and stimulated a "growing feeling of disgust with the colonial system" (p. 120). Free trade thus became a requirement for industrial expansion: the commercial restrictions that characterized the old colonial system restricted the acquisition of supplies (American cotton, for example) and the potential consumer market for British manufactures.

Thus, Williams (1944, p. 136) concluded that "the rise and fall of mercantilism is the rise and fall of slavery." The process of building and dismantling the monopolistic sugar market in the British Atlantic was indissociable from the history of slavery and antislavery. Since the profitability of the British slave-based plantations relied on the preservation of mercantilism, the West Indians became the natural enemies of humanitarians and capitalists:

> The attack [on the West Indian interests] falls into three phases: the attack on the slave trade, the attack on slavery, the attack on the preferential sugar duties. The slave trade

> was abolished in 1807, slavery in 1833, the sugar preference in 1846. The three events are inseparable. (...) The humanitarians, in attacking the system in its weakest and most indefensible spot, spoke a language that the masses could understand. They could never succeed a hundred years before when the important capitalist interest was on the side of the colonial system. (WILLIAMS, 1944, p. 136).

Williams believed "the reason for the attack was not only that the West Indian economic system was vicious but that it was also so unprofitable that for this reason alone its destruction was inevitable." The economic decline of British sugar colonies led not only to the abolition of slavery but also to a reorientation of imperial policy: "The center of gravity in the British Empire shifted from the Caribbean Sea to the Indian Ocean, from the West Indies to India"[5] (WILLIAMS, 1944, p. 135). Abolitionism was connected to the development of British industrial capitalism and the shift of imperial policy towards free trade.

1.1.2 Political economy and abolitionism after Williams

Capitalism and Slavery (1944) launched a lasting controversy on the historiography of British abolitionism. Several scholars contested Williams' thesis from the vantage point of economic history. Seymour Drescher's *Econocide* argued that prohibiting the slave trade in 1807 was equivalent to committing economic suicide. By the turn of the nineteenth century, slavery was expanding in the British Empire "in terms of both capital value and overseas trade" (DRESCHER, [1977] 2010, p. 24). Thus, it was the abolition of the slave trade that led to the economic decline of the British West Indies. Williams' argument that "the secular decline of slave colonies within the imperial political economy" started before the "abolitionist successes" would be "a statistical illusion created by ignoring the period 1783-1815" (p. 24-25).

Overall, according to Drescher, Williams interpreted British abolitionism from a "free labor theory" perspective (p. 4-5). This framework, allegedly introduced in Adam Smith's *Wealth of*

[5] Vincent Harlow's two volume *The Founding of the Second British Empire* (1952; 1964) placed the turning point in British imperial history at the conclusion of the Seven Years' War, which established the British worldwide naval superiority and the emergence of "new expansionist forces based on incipient industrialization" (CAIN; HOPKINS, 2015, p. 75). After the American Revolution, imperial policy would shift from territorial acquisition to a free-trade expansion towards the East. Cain & Hopkins (1986) challenged the idea that, by the late-eighteenth century, British imperial administration moved from the mercantilist policy of territorial acquisition to the industrial-guided policy of free trade, from formal techniques of control to informal ones. Christopher Bayly's *Imperial Meridian* (1989) criticized Harlow's scholarship and redefined the concept of a Second British Empire. From 1780 to 1830, British imperial policy moved towards the establishment of overseas despotisms based on hierarchy and racial subordination. Britain imposed an aristocratic-military government in its dominions legitimized by "the patronage of indigenous landed elite" (BAYLY, 1989, p. 8). See also Gallagher & Robinson's *The Imperialism of Free Trade* (1953).

Nations (1776), postulated "the long-run superiority of wage over slave labor" (p. 4). Accordingly, *Capitalism and Slavery* was "linked to a much broader theory of economic development (...) which explains the abolition of slavery as a profit-maximizing and loss-minimizing operation by specific economic groups in a given society" (p. 5). Accepting the superiority of free labor, Williams would have mistakenly assumed the unprofitability of Caribbean slavery by 1807.

By contesting the decline theory, Drescher added another layer to Roger Anstey's argument, who had previously criticized Williams' interpretation. Anstey (1968, p. 318–319) argued that *Capitalism and Slavery* failed to prove the primacy of economic forces in the process of abolition:

> (...) to assert the predominance of economic forces when their impingement on the political process, on opinion-forming, on decision-making has not been studied is invalid. When the impingement has been studied it has, at the very least, not been proved. Nor is it admissible to assert the predominance of those economic forces when no serious attempt has been made to consider the relative importance of the humanitarian impulse. (ANSTEY, 1968, p. 319)

For Anstey, one could only ascertain what ultimately determined the abolition of slavery after analyzing how economic and humanitarian pressures affected the political process of abolition. Anstey, however, somehow accepted the decline thesis (p. 313-318), while *Econocide* and subsequent scholarship questioned this very aspect, intertwining British economic growth with slavery further into the nineteenth century.[6] Thereafter, Drescher ([1977] 2010, p. xxvi) could go beyond Anstey's critique and categorically affirm that "economic motives, whether mercantilist or laissez-faire, were not the primary incentives in the terminations of the transatlantic slave trade or of slavery." Throughout his works, he highlighted the significance of public opinion and popular mobilization on the politics of abolition in Britain (see DRESCHER, 1986; 2007; 2012).

Capitalism and Slavery's analytical content was thereby criticized, but its significance remains undeniable. By placing the massive enslavement of Africans at the genesis of the modern world, Williams intertwined the history of slavery with that of capitalism.[7] Accordingly, several historians have since explored the connection between capitalism and antislavery. Even if Williams' "formulation of the argument has proven vulnerable," Thomas Bender (1992, p. 2) remarked, "the

[6] See also David Eltis' *Economic growth and the ending of transatlantic slave trade* (1987).

[7] The New History of Capitalism (NHC) reassesses the connection between slavery and capitalism, insisting on the importance of slave-produced cotton to nineteenth-century industrial development. See Sven Beckert's *Empire of Cotton* (2015) and Edward Baptist's *The half has never been told* (2014). For critical surveys on the NHC's approach, see Olmstead & Rhode (2018) and Burnard & Riello (2020).

larger issue of identifying the relationship between the rise of capitalism and the decline of slavery has remained stimulating."

Accordingly, intellectual and cultural historians have also addressed the connections between antislavery and capitalism. David Brion Davis' *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* ([1975]1999, p. 13) investigated the "role of antislavery in creating a free-labor ideology." Davis acknowledged that "economic trends did not explain the politics of British abolitionism" (p. 56). But he believed one could "insist that the decline of mercantilism did not bring the automatic fall of slavery" and still "agree with Eric Williams that no abolitionist movement could have succeeded in the mid-eighteenth century, when all the forces of interest were on the other side" (p. 63). If economic trends did not lead to abolition, what might be the connection between antislavery and the "emerging capitalist and industrial order"?

> The emergence of an international antislavery opinion represented a momentous turning point in the evolution of man's moral perception, and thus in man's image of himself. The continuing "evolution" did not spring from transcendent sources: as a historical artifact, it reflected the ideological needs of various groups and classes. (DAVIS, [1975]1999, p. 42)

"[A]s a social force," Davis argued that antislavery was "a highly selective response to labor exploitation" (p. 251). American and Caribbean slavery "provided an outlet for demonstrating a Christian concern for human suffering and injustice, and yet thereby gave a certain moral insulation to economic activities less visibly dependent on human suffering and injustice" (p. 251). At bottom, antislavery would help legitimize the exploitation of free labor in the emerging industrial order: "British leaders had much to gain, in ensuring stability, if reform energies could be channeled outward toward a symbol of unparalleled oppression," such as colonial slavery (p. 347). Over the decades, the antislavery movement ended up sanctioning a competitive labor market, even if oppressive, by postulating free labor as the ultimate solution for the oppression of enslaved Africans and African Americans.

Both the antislavery movement and late-eighteenth century political economy, he continued, unconsciously "reflected the needs and values of an emerging capitalist order" (p. 350). Davis addressed the relationship between economic theory and antislavery, starting from Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (p. 351-362). But he was less careful in discussing "economic theory"

compared to the history of antislavery, leaving us with an overly simplistic picture of late-eighteenth century political economy.

Davis suggested that "Smith and his disciples" saw the slave system as the epitome of "those artificial market conditions which multiplied conflicts of interest" (p. 352). For them, "abolition of the slave trade and gradual emancipation could be justified on the same grounds as the removal of other artificial restrictions on enterprise, such as the Poor Laws and Laws of Settlement, or regulations governing wages, apprenticeship, food price, and usury rates" (p. 353). Free trade advocacy – and the defense of an unprotected (or free) labor market – reflected the needs of the hegemonic class (p. 361). The popular movement against the African slave trade "served as a vehicle for the economic doctrines of Smith's disciples," even "if few of the early abolitionists were advocates of unqualified laissez-faire" (p. 356). In the end, antislavery as a social movement helped to style "an end to economic protectionism" and the emergence of a free labor market as "the ultimate emancipation" (p. 361).

Davis's book opened what Thomas Bender (1992) called the "Antislavery Debate," which addressed the precise connection between capitalism and slavery. "Classical" political economy and its alleged laissez-faire agenda were among the topics under scrutiny. Howard Temperley's *Capitalism, Slavery and Ideology* (1977, p. 105) wondered how politicians "could go along with the abolitionists" if slave labor served industrial development "by providing cheap raw materials." Capitalism, as an "ideology or system of beliefs" (p. 106), helped to explain "why men of independent judgement who did not share the abolitionists' moral repugnance were prepared, on occasion, to go along with them" (p. 117).

By capitalism, Temperley (1977, p. 106) meant "the ideology (…) of those who believed in the encouragement" of a free market economy. Capitalist ideology would be coextensive, therefore, with the ideas advanced by "classical economists." They reflected a "general hostility towards slavery" and established that "freedom meant prosperity" (p. 107-109). Classical economists - most notably, Adam Smith - promoted a free labor ideology because they believed prosperity was a direct consequence of economic freedom. These arguments "served the abolitionists well" (p. 114).

Abolitionists relied on the "capitalist ideology" advanced by classical economists to create a persuasive narrative. If the slave trade were abolished, planters "would be compelled to behave more humanely" towards the enslaved worker. This, in turn, "would cause production to rise so

that, stage by stage, greater liberality being followed by larger yields, piecemeal and ultimately complete emancipation would occur" (p. 109). Temperley (1977, p. 110-112) reminded his readers that this prophecy never actually materialized. Yet, abolitionists kept insisting on free labor ideology, and the politicians went along. Since these arguments were a transposition of the English successful experience with free labor to plantation societies, British politicians could easily relate to them (p. 116). This provided a connection between political economy, capitalist ideology, and antislavery.

Seymour Drescher (1986, 1990, 2002) questioned several aspects of Davis' and Temperley's interpretations. In *Capitalism and Antislavery*, Drescher (1986, p. 162) emphasized that "linking the rise of antislavery to the evolution of capitalism alone leaves us far short of explaining the dynamic of abolitionism." Acknowledging that abolitionism was "embedded" in the "social and economic world," he decided to portray its history as a "power struggle rather than a display of hegemonic symbol manipulation" (p. 162). Accordingly, he pointed to the limits of unequivocally associating abolitionism with a free labor ideology:

> In discussing the abolitionists, it is assumed that theirs was primarily an ideology of free labour, not of freedom, and that they as well as the planters were obsessed by the problem of staple production and labour discipline. It would not be difficult to demonstrate that many abolitionists, both conservative and radical, were far less certain of the validity of the free-trade or free-labour ideologies in colonial than in metropolitan areas. There is also abundant evidence that abolitionists explicitly rejected the proposition that abolition of the slave trade or emancipation should be contingent upon the maintenance of levels of British or plantation staple exports. (DRESCHER, 1986, p. 162–63)

The history of British abolitionism could be framed then as the power struggle between a social movement, abolitionism, and the economically powerful West Indian interests. Between 1787 and 1820, antislavery advanced *despite* the economic relevance of slavery to the imperial economy. Drescher (1990) would later argue that popular campaigns and parliamentary debates did not rely on 'free labor ideology', or on economic considerations in general, as the literature suggested. Davis' and Temperley's "cultural interpretations of abolition," Drescher (1990, p. 262-63) continued, selected a "few putatively representative ideologists" and extrapolated their conclusions to provide the "links between capitalism and abolition." But the "rhetorical strategies of abolitionists and antiabolitionists," he stressed, evidence that "a universalized free labor ideology was not as hegemonic in Britain as historians have assumed" (p. 563).

Unlike what historians have commonly assumed, the arguments of political economists and abolitionists did not converge in the late eighteenth century. From the mid-seventeenth century onwards, an identifiable rhetorical profile emerged. While the economic literature insisted on the central role of slavery for the empire's prosperity, early antislavery focused on moral and religious arguments:

> The preabolitionist era affords valuable evidence concerning ideological positioning. Long before there was any demand for political action against the overseas slave system, the scattered abolitionist arguments clearly revealed a preference for spiritual and moral grounds of appeal. (…) **By contrast, to those writers who treated economic behavior as an autonomous human activity for maximizing material well-being slaves were factors of production contributing to national wealth.** Such writers paid little or no attention to slavery as a moral category. This moral/material dualism is abundantly documented for a century after the Stuart Restoration, when overseas slavery was encouraged by the most libertarian polity in Europe. (DRESCHER, 1990, p. 564, emphasis added)

This "rhetorical pattern remained unchanged" through the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Drescher's (1990, p. 565-576) survey of petitions and parliamentary discourses showed the moral/economic dichotomy was still present in the period of political mobilization (1787-1808). Quantitatively, he concluded, abolitionists overwhelmingly stressed moral and religious calls for action, and their opponents insisted on the dangerous economic consequences of abolition. The rhetorical profile was thus established: abolitionists focused on morality, not political economy.

If Drescher showed that free labor ideology was less widespread than previously assumed, he did not dismiss the importance of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776). His later work *The Mighty Experiment* (2002, p. 6-7) discussed the "intrusion of social science into the politics of slavery." Here, Drescher argued that "political economy was the most popular source of authority among abolitionists" because "it directly provoked and answered questions about the relative superiority of free versus slave labor" (DRESCHER, 2002, p. 6–7). '[W]ithin the metropolis," he remarked, "the inferiority of servile labor was a truism long before the emergence of either abolitionism or classical economics" (p. 18). But before the 1770s, metropolitan political economists usually remarked on the benefits of free labor at home without challenging slavery overseas (p. 15-18). This would change with Smith's argument about the universal superiority of free over coerced labor (p. 20-32).

The *Wealth of Nations*, Drescher (p. 20-21) admitted, would provide "a distinctive economic argument to the British abolitionist movement." But while abolitionists "invoke[d] Adam Smith's principle of the superiority of free labor" in their "preliminary tracts," they did not rely on it during the first decades of antislavery mobilization (p. 34-35). Drawing on the findings of his previous study, Drescher argued that free labor ideology was "held in abeyance while the African slave trade remained the focus of political debate" (p. 54). Smith's "invaluable legacy" would be critically revived in the 1820s when "abolitionists began their mass campaigns for emancipation" (p. 54).

If Smith's "free labor ideology" only impacted the 1820s debates, Drescher's former conclusion still held – there was no inevitable convergence between economic and antislavery discourse during the first decades of organized abolitionist campaigns in Britain. Drescher's research offers an invaluable lesson: there was no unequivocal connection between antislavery and economic decline, capitalist ideology, or laissez-faire political economy. He correctly criticized the over-emphasis on the economics of abolitionism, pointing to the importance of popular mobilization and parliamentary struggle in prohibiting the slave trade. Nevertheless, Drescher would ultimately deny political economy any role in the antislavery debate and reinforce the dichotomy between moral and economic interests that had prevailed before Eric Williams.

1.1.3 Protestant theology and enlightenment: the economic case against slave trade

Philip Gould's *Barbaric Traffic* (2003) likewise criticized the association between antislavery and laissez-faire capitalism. Questioning Davis's interpretation and the historiographical debate that followed (see Bender, 1992), Gould (2003, p. 12-42) reinterpreted the meaning of "free trade" for antislavery reform. Focusing on the period between 1770 and 1807, he argued that antislavery literature framed the African slave trade as "barbarous" and, in so doing, made other "forms of commerce seem civilized and legitimate" (p. 2-4). If the antislavery "discourse of feeling included the subject of commerce itself," commerce meant more than an economic activity and represented a "moral and cultural form of exchange" (p. 3-4).

Gould (2003, p. 10, 14-20) showed how the "commercial arguments against slave trading," which had initially focused on biblical precepts, would incorporate the "cultural norms of enlightenment" by the late eighteenth century. By "cultural norms of enlightenment," Gould meant the "widespread cultural belief that trade socialized humanity" (p. 16). This was not, however, the

case of the slave trade. Such a "barbaric traffic" defied the idea that commerce and civilization went hand in hand, that Europeans were civilized and Africans barbarous (p. 19-20). Antislavery rhetoric somehow reflected contemporary uncertainty about "the long-term effects of commercial development upon civilized society" (p. 20). If the eighteenth-century "world of letters" believed in the civilizing power of commerce, it was also concerned with the effects of the "social and historical volatility of trade" upon English society (p. 20-21).

In this intellectual context, antislavery literature attempted to "demarcate the boundary between virtuous and vicious commerce" (p. 21). Malachy Postlethwayt, the most "influential authority opposing the slave trade during the era before widespread antislavery political organization," turned the African slave trade into a "negative model of commerce" that legitimized "more enlightened forms of trade" (p. 21-22). Gould remarked that Postlethwayt proposed a program to promote humane and civilized commerce with Africa instead of the slave trade (p. 22). Assuming that "the context for our common humanity is commercial exchange," Postlethwayt framed a virtuous African trade that would bring civilization to the "presumably uncivilized world" and rescue "those Britons and other Europeans who have debased themselves by participating in barbaric trade" (p. 24).

Late-eighteenth century antislavery would build on Postlethwayt's ideas, claiming that "to 'free' the African trade" was "to regulate it – and to thereby liberate *everyone* involved" (p. 24). Gould (2003, p. 34) concluded: "By 'freeing' trade, antislavery did not argue for the unfettered market of laissez-faire capitalism but rather was calling for its regulation in order to make it more enlightened." The interplay between antislavery and liberal capitalism was thus more nuanced than historians had previously assumed. Antislavery literature illustrated contemporary uncertainty towards capitalism: if late-eighteenth century writers believed commercial exchange could bring civilization, they were also worried about the outcomes of commercial expansion. To solve this tension, antislavery writing relied on "the syncretic language of the moral market" (p. 25). Gould stressed that "sentiment played a crucial rhetorical role in configurating the enlightened commercial capitalism that the African slave trade endangered" (p. 25). The solution, therefore, was the moral regulation of a market economy rather than unregulated trade.

Gould (2013, p. 39-40) argued the "antislavery project of establishing 'free' trade with Africa proposed new forms of imperial control," reimaging "Africans as consumers of European goods other than rum and firearms that presumably had corrupted these societies for centuries." At

the bottom, if antislavery helped legitimize other forms of commercial capitalism, it was not by supporting unregulated markets:

> Eighteenth-century antislavery writing refers to two kinds of enslavement: the persecution of Africans and the cultural depravity of Anglo-Americans. Both peoples are enslaved to the same kind of commercial relations; each finds itself in a kind of "bondage." Antislavery writing made such an evaluation in an era when liberal capitalism was just emerging. It sentimentalized commerce for its own political purposes by dichotomizing civilized and barbaric kinds of trade. It thereby legitimated the larger field of commercial capitalism, especially the imperial activity of "free" trade with sub-Saharan Africa. (GOULD, 2003, p. 42)

If Gould was more concerned with showing how the sentimentalization of commerce created "rhetorical conventions and tensions that affected a wide variety of antislavery genres" (p. 30), he somehow reconciled moral and political-economic discourses. Focusing on the moral and cultural aspects of commercial exchange, antislavery writers portrayed the slave trade as a threat to the development of an enlightened commercial capitalism. Thus, Gould implied that antislavery did reconcile political economy and morality through the "discourses of commerce, manners, and enlightenment" (p. 42). This framework may help to understand the categories mobilized by literary antislavery in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. Still, it does not account for important features of early antislavery history.

Between 1740 and 1780, Anglo-American writers often expressed antislavery opinions while discussing different aspects of imperial politics. A typical example is the aforementioned Malachy Postlethwayt, who went from a virtual justification of the slave trade to the recognition of its barbarity in less than a decade. Postlethwayt's commercial case against the slave trade, Gould suggested, reflected "the cultural norms of enlightenment." Even if this were the case, one can only fully grasp the meaning of Postlethwayt's antislavery when considering the broader political issue surrounding the divestment of the Royal African Company in the late 1740s (see Chapter 2). Simply referring to the enlightenment's commercial discourse, in other words, is not enough to explain the "antislavery" position embraced either by Postlethwayt or other early antislavery writers.

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Historians criticized several aspects of Williams's explanation and, in so doing, attributed different roles to political economy in the development of Anglo-American abolitionism. Davis and Temperley insisted on the connection between liberal "economic theory" and early-nineteenth century abolitionism. Their accounts typically focus on Adam Smith and dismiss the plurality of eighteenth-century political economy. Drescher and Gould criticized the association of laissez-faire capitalism and abolitionism. Drescher insisted on the moral/economic dichotomy in antislavery debates, while Gould stressed the moral aspects of the economic case against the slave trade. If all accounts focus on the post-1780 period, they somehow generalize their findings to the period preceding the political organization of abolitionism in Britain.

Critically engaging these interpretations, I reassess the importance of political economy to the development of Anglo-American abolitionism. If Protestant ideology and Enlightenment discourse were essential in establishing the commercial critique of slave trade, antislavery literature also benefited from previous political-economic disputes regarding the management of the African slave trade (Chapter 2). If historians have previously exaggerated the importance of a "free trade ideology," antislavery writers gave political significance to arguments about the superiority of free labor before Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. If economic considerations were less prominent in the antislavery literature than moral or religious ones, they were still there. Ultimately, the political process of abolition could not simply dismiss economic considerations – after all, abolition meant a complete economic reorganization of the British Empire (Chapter 4). If abolitionists wished to convince the Parliament to change imperial policy, they needed alternatives to the enslavement of Africans.

1.2 Eighteenth-Century Political Economy

Most accounts discussed in the previous section share, to some extent, a narrow definition of eighteenth-century political economy. Eighteenth-century economic writers hardly "treated economic behavior as an autonomous human activity for maximizing material well-being" (DRESCHER, 1990, p. 564). Drescher's definition is thus at odds with the contemporary understanding of political economy and the self-perception of political economists even by the early nineteenth century. To investigate the connections between economic discourses and antislavery in the Anglo-American public debate, I must start with a broader definition of political economy.

I shall start by emphasizing that political economy was not a clearly recognizable disciplinary field by the late eighteenth century. Neither was it a common subject of treatise-length publications in English, with the noteworthy exceptions of Sir James Steuart's *Inquiry into the Principles of Political Œconomy* (1767) and Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776). As Keith Tribe brilliantly summarizes,

> 'Economic activity' as we today generally understand it – the exchange of labour, time, goods, and money in the process of sustaining human lives, families, and communities – has certainly existed for much more than two millennia, but its conceptualisation as a discrete domain of human activity dedicated to these ends dates at most from the early nineteenth century, and in its current sense is much less than a century old. (TRIBE, 2015, p. 23)

Thus, "economic activity" was not widely recognized as a separate domain of human life by the early nineteenth century. Neither was political economy a distinguishable theoretical field, an autonomous science, or a profession. Ryan Walter (2021, p. 11–14) argues that political economy at the time of Thomas Robert Malthus (1766-1834) and David Ricardo (1772-1823) was still a "subordinate element" of the "sciences of politics," a subfield without "a vocabulary of its own." Publications dealing with economic activity were evaluated by their "ability to act as political counsel" (p. 18-20). Since a "piece of political economy articulated in abstract terms was vulnerable to being perceived as theoretical enthusiasm," its legitimacy did not rely upon "producing elegant theories for their own sake" (18-20).

By the turn of the nineteenth century, most reflections about economic matters in Britain were politically oriented. Economic literature often engaged ongoing parliamentary debates or addressed pressing social issues to change the course of political affairs. Between the 1790s and 1820s, political economy as a science was still "fighting for its place in the world of politics" (WALTER, 2021, p. 21). Walter shows how political economy was not an independent science with its own method or vocabulary for the generation following the publication of the *Wealth of Nations* (1776).

Julian Hoppit (2017, p. 165) agrees that "political economy as a branch of intellectual inquiry was in its infancy" by 1800. Accordingly, economic literature was far from consensual: "Arguments for free trade sat alongside those for regulation; some viewed agriculture as the foundation of the economy, others trade; a labour theory of value was employed by some, a land theory by others; and to some a greater population was crucial, for others a positive balance of

trade" (p. 165). Hoppit even refers to Britain's *political economies* to stress the plurality of eighteenth-century economic thought. His work critically scrutinizes historical narratives according to which a liberal economic agenda had overthrown the existing mercantilist intellectual and political consensus by the early nineteenth century (see HOPPIT, 2017, p. 13).

The history of eighteenth-century political economy is at once more complex and more interesting than the mere dispute between two opposed theoretical orthodoxies. All too often, as the publications analyzed throughout this dissertation illustrate, the same author might combine seemingly contradictory economic arguments. On one hand, contemporaries sometimes saw no inconsistency in defending a freer trade in specific markets and commercial regulations in others. On the other hand, as Walter has shown, economic writers were not judged by the internal consistency of their economic theory but by their ability to establish a dialogue with pressing political concerns. Theoretical principles were constantly confronted with their practical application.

The characteristics of seventeenth and eighteenth-century economic literature corroborate this point. Hoppit (2006; 2017, p. 171–72) has shown that treatise-length publications such as Smith's *Wealth of Nations* were relatively rare. The typical printed works on political economy were shorter, ephemeral, and written anonymously. The bulk of economic literature privileged immediate political issues, often polemical, over abstract questions. Throughout the eighteenth century, those reflecting on economic activity were closely influenced by social and political events and, at the same time, helped forge the course of practical action. To summarize, political economy was neither an independent science nor a consensual field. Assuming the existence of an intellectual consensus guiding British policymaking, be it laissez-faire or mercantilist, is both misleading and at odds with the historical record of political economy literature at the time.

1.3 Political economy and antislavery in the eighteenth-century British Empire

Starting from a deliberately broad definition of political economy and antislavery opinion has at least two benefits. First, I can account for the existing plurality of economic discourses and, more importantly, their political uses. Second, by allowing a wide range of publications to fall within the "antislavery literature," I can incorporate sources that have been overlooked. If such an approach helps to avoid scholarly commonplaces and encourages digging deeper into topics often mentioned but seldom explored, it also requires paying close attention to the historical context

underlying these publications. With this in mind, I aim to provide as much context as possible to substantiate my arguments. The reader should not, however, expect a comprehensive account of the socio-economic and political debates surrounding the mid- to late-eighteenth century British Empire. I will rather confine myself to the immediate context relevant to understanding the publications under scrutiny, adjusting the level of detail to the objectives pursued in each chapter.

The main subject is the interplay between antislavery and political economy amid public debates about eighteenth-century British imperial politics. The dissertation deals mainly with politically motivated pamphlets and tracts, which typically address topical controversies and issues of immediate political relevance. Even when published anonymously, such works were designed to sway the opinion of influential subsets of the Anglo-American public. The dissertation is divided into three independent essays that, when taken together, reassess the importance of economic discourses to the development of Anglo-American antislavery.

The second and third chapters investigate the emergence of two distinctive economic arguments later appropriated by British abolitionists: (i) that slave trade hindered the development of a civilized commerce with Africa; (ii) that slave labor was less productive and more expensive than free labor. If historians have debated how these arguments affected British abolitionism in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, they did not fully explore their origin.

The second chapter analyzes how the mid-eighteenth century debate about how to manage the British commercial empire, particularly with respect to the African trade, became a source of antislavery ideas through Malachy Postlethwayt's *Universal Dictionary of Trade and Commerce* (1751-55). Well-known abolitionists like Anthony Benezet, James Ramsay, Thomas Clarkson, and Olaudah Equiano relied on Postlethwayt's suggestion that the commerce in African staple crops and natural products could be at least as lucrative as the slave trade. Reappraising the historical context of Postlethwayt's publications, I showed how the argument for a legitimate commerce with Africa emerged amidst the mid-eighteenth-century debates surrounding the divestment of the Royal African Company.

The third chapter reassesses the controversial history of "free labor ideology." Stepping aside from discussions about the existence of a free labor ideology in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, I investigate how general notions about the superiority of free labor were articulated with antislavery opinion before Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776). Since at least 1746, colonial and metropolitan writers mobilized variations of this argument to support specific

political agendas, not all of them necessarily abolitionist. In so doing, they helped disseminate the idea of the superiority of free labor. When Smith published his version of the argument, antislavery writers had already given political meaning to the idea that free labor was a viable and more productive alternative to colonial slavery.

The fourth chapter turns to the abolitionist debate *per se*. Building on the literature that discusses how slavery became a political problem in the revolutionary era, I argue that abolitionists designing emancipation schemes during the 1770s could hardly escape political-economic considerations. Amid the political conflict that preceded the American Revolution, several activists explored the limits and possibilities of revolutionary ideology to propose emancipation schemes in a few North American provinces. When engaging in political action against slavery, abolitionists had to deal with economic questions such as compensation and redress, even if they mainly relied on moral arguments to justify emancipation.

By exploring the emergence of two important economic arguments against slavery and arguing that abolitionists could not evade questions about political economy, I contribute a new perspective to early antislavery history. Embracing the existence of a plurality of economic discourses during the eighteenth century, I show that political economy was not an orthodoxy impinging its beliefs onto the antislavery movement or the anti-abolitionist reaction. Neither was it an independent science to which late-eighteenth-century abolitionists eventually resorted. It was, in all its variations, part and parcel of the abolitionist endeavor.

2. THE 'IMPOLICY' OF SLAVE TRADE: MALACHY POSTLETHWAYT, TRADING COMPANIES, AND THE PROSPECTS OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE IN AFRICA

2.1 Introduction

Malachy Postlethwayt (1707-1767), the English political economist who edited the influential *Universal Dictionary of Trade and Commerce* (1751-1755), would become a well-known figure among Anglo-American antislavery writers. Born in a "middling merchant" family, Postlethwayt started as an apprentice of the writer and accountant Charles Snell in the early 1720s (BENNETT, 2011, p. 188–90). In the 1730s, Postlethwayt was among those hired to write pro-administration propaganda during Walpole's tenure as prime minister. Walpole's correspondence provided evidence that Postlethwayt wrote several pieces defending his plan to create excise taxes (p. 188). Two decades later, Postlethwayt claimed in a letter to Elder Pitt, then prime minister, that he had been in Walpole's service for twelve years (p. 191). It remains unclear, however, whether Postlethwayt was hired occasionally as a propagandist or became a reliable political advisor during the Walpole administration.

In 1743, Postlethwayt acted as umpire in the arbitration between John Wyatt and the Royal African Company (henceforth RAC) (TNA, T 70/95). The following year, he was elected a member of the RAC's Court of Assistants, which was equivalent to a board of directors (TNA, T 70/95). Postlethwayt remained a RAC director in 1745 but then failed to be reelected (BENNETT, 2011, p. 191). During these years, he often wrote, anonymously, on behalf of the company.[8] Even after leaving the RAC's board of directors, Postlethwayt would continue to devise several plans to regulate and further develop British trade with Africa.

Thereafter, Postlethwayt likely remained without office. In the late 1740s, he was commissioned to edit the *Universal Dictionary of Trade and Commerce.* The first edition, issued between 1751 and 1755, was a success. Postlethwayt became a well-known commercial writer but did not secure a long-term patron or public sponsor (BENNETT, 2011, p. 191–92). Postlethwayt would later complain bitterly for being treated "as an upstart, idle schemist or projector, who has

[8] Postlethwayt remained in contact with the RAC's Court of Assistants, likely hoping to be reelected or receive some sort of compensation. For instance, in December 1746, he sent "some schemes and proposals for paying off the Company's debt and better carrying on their affairs" to the Court. The Court decided to "acknowledge the favour of his good intentions therein to serve the company: but as the book as ordered to be shut, and the Company's election is so near, they cannot therefore enter into consideration until the next election is settled." (TNA, T 70/97).

never given proof of any talents that might deserve public regard or attention" (POSTLETHWAYT, 1757b, p. lxi–lxii). Convinced of the contrary, Postlethwayt repeatedly stated how his proposals would promote national interest. The audience was not always sympathetic. According to a *Monthly Review* (1757, p. 307) article, Postlethwayt's commercial knowledge did not justify "his nauseating egotism, and his unbounded vanity and presumption."

Postlethwayt died in 1767, "relatively poor" and feeling "unrewarded" (BENNETT, 2011, p. 193). Nevertheless, he would become an authority on commercial matters to at least one group – the antislavery writers. How did a former RAC director and propagandist become a source of antislavery thought? From the mid-1740s to the early 1750s, Postlethwayt went from an apologist of the slave trade – arguing that enslaved people in the British colonies worked in the same conditions as "colliers and miners in all Christian Countries" – to calling it "unjust, inhumane, and unchristian-like traffic" (POSTLETHWAYT, 1746b, p. 5; 1751-55, vol. 1, p. 727).

Such change, impressive at first sight, did not escape Thomas Clarkson's notice in his *An Essay on the Impolicy of the African Slave Trade* (1788). Exploring the weight of Postlethwayt's conclusion that a commodity trade with inland Africa could be as profitable as the slave trade, Clarkson (1788, p. 21) recalled the author's journey to corroborate the economic viability of an abolitionist agenda. Accordingly, some scholars have placed Postlethwayt among the precursors of what would later be called "legitimate commerce" with African territories. Others briefly discussed Postlethwayt's shift towards antislavery. But, as section 2.2 will soon show, this topic remains rather unexplored.

This essay provides a more comprehensive account of Postlethwayt's remarkable change of heart, exploring the political context of his writings and the continuities in his analysis over the 1740s and 1750s. I analyze Postlethwayt's "antislavery" against broader ongoing political debates about slave trade regulation. Accordingly, section 2.3 briefly accounts for the RAC's history, focusing on its political and economic position during the mid-eighteenth century. The following three sections investigate Postlethwayt's writings on the African trade between 1744 and 1755, exploring changes and continuities. The last section discusses how Postlethwayt's economic proposals furnished ammunition to the early abolitionist movement in Britain. Early antislavery writers selectively used the *Dictionary* to build their case against the slave trade. In so doing, they ultimately portrayed Postlethwayt as a precursor of abolitionism.

Before proceeding, I must acknowledge the challenges inherent in researching Postlethwayt's thought. First, I have scarce biographical information, and it is difficult to trace whatever may have survived from his correspondence. Second, Postlethwayt is famously known as a "literary pirate" – a writer who deliberately reproduced other people's works without acknowledgment. Therefore, one may question whether Postlethwayt's proposals for the African trade were original or even his own. As we will see, the political proposals were likely his own – but it is hard to ascertain the originality of his broader political-economic arguments with the available material. This problem affects my argument less than it might seem, nonetheless. On this point, I follow Greene's (2013, p. xi) assumption "that authors and speakers in polemical arenas do not normally advance arguments that they think unlikely to persuade their audience." Postlethwayt mobilized arguments he believed would convince the public, no matter their originality. In this sense, his choices evidence which modes of political economic discourse a mid-eighteenth-century writer thought better fit to persuade his readers.

2.2 Changing attitude towards slavery?

Between 1744 and 1755, Malachy Postlethwayt contributed with several publications to the public controversy surrounding the slave trade regulation. At first sight, there seems to be a striking contrast between the *Universal Dictionary of Trade and Commerce* (1751-55) and his previous writings. In less than a decade, Postlethwayt moved from justifying the slave trade to placing it as the main obstacle to developing a "civilized" commerce with the inland territories of the African Continent. In 1746, he answered those who believed the slave trade was a "barbarous, inhuman, and unlawful traffic" by arguing that enslaved Africans were not in a worse condition in the British plantations than they were in their home countries (POSTLETHWAYT, 1746b, p. 4). Five years later, Postlethwayt would wonder "whether the greatest hindrance" to "cultivating a humane and Christian-like commerce" with African countries "has not wholly proceed from that unjust, inhumane, and unchristian-like traffic" he had previously attempted to justify (POSTLETHWAYT, 1751-55, p. 727).

Thomas Clarkson (1788, p. 21) cleverly transformed Postlethwayt's change of heart into an abolitionist testimony. Clarkson told the story as follows: Postlethwayt realized the slave trade hindered the development of a civilized and profitable commodity trade with Africa after carefully examining the subject (p. 21). For this contribution to the antislavery cause, Postlethwayt deserved

a place among the forerunners of British abolitionism (CLARKSON, 1808, p. 60). Since Clarkson, few scholars have attempted to offer other explanations to Postlethwayt's shift towards antislavery.

David Brion Davis ([1966]1988, p. 160) argued that Postlethwayt's attitude towards the African trade provided "a significant index" to broader changes in how contemporaries understood the economic priorities of the British Empire. Realizing "that the system of slave trade and West Indian slavery was an inadequate weapon in the economic contest for world power," his focus changed "from the triangular trade to a grandiose vision of developing markets for British goods in the interior of Africa" (p. 159-161). Postlethwayt's shift towards antislavery, according to Davis, had little to do with humanitarian concerns and reflected his changing opinions about the economic prospects of the British Empire.

Postlethwayt's antislavery comments were indeed related to his imperial views but also reflected his practical experience with attempts to regulate the slave trade. Additionally, it does not seem like he was reacting to a foreseeable economic decline of the sugar plantation system, as Davis implies. Postlethwayt argued that increasing prices and declining profits in the slave trade – which compromised the plantations' economic future – resulted from competition among separate traders and the RAC on the African Coast (POSTLETHWAYT, 1751-55, vol 1, p. 924).

Philip Gould (2003, p. 20-22) discussed Postlethwayt's publications in light of contemporary anxieties about the further development of a commercial society. Eighteenth-century writers celebrated commerce as a civilizing force and, at the same time, feared the instability of commercial states. According to Gould, the tension between virtuous and vicious commerce becomes evident in antislavery writing. Postlethwayt dealt with that tension by describing the slave trade "as a negative model of commerce, one which, by implication, legitimates other, more enlightened forms of trade" (p. 21). The vicious and corrupted slave trade would become the antithesis of the legitimate (and virtuous) commerce in African natural products. Gould's interpretation, however, reflects late-eighteenth century antislavery discourse more than Postlethwayt's own views. Despite suggesting the slave trade frustrated a better commercial relationship with inland Africa, Postlethwayt (1751-55, p. 25, 685-86) advanced a plan to promote the latter without abolishing the former (see section 2.6).

Gould (2003, p. 21) also claimed that Postlethwayt turned "against the slave trade and the mercantilist apparatus supporting it." He does not explain what this apparatus might be, illustrating a tendency among historians of antislavery to use a very loose concept of mercantilism to describe

"pre-classical" political economy. Scholars have long questioned the existence of a mercantilist consensus and even the power of early modern states to enforce a "mercantilist apparatus."[9] Additionally, as we will see, Postlethwayt continuously defended the expedience of a regulated trade with Africa between the 1740s and 1750s.

Jack P. Greene (2013, p. 156–199) addressed Postlethwayt's shift while discussing how metropolitan Britons came to question colonial slavery. From the mid-eighteenth century onward, he argued, metropolitan writers increasingly employed the languages of humanity and justice against the system of slavery and the slave trade, while defending colonization. Greene stressed that Postlethwayt combined the "symbiotic languages of commerce and civility" to justify his project to colonize African territories (p. 160). Europeans "had long employed" these languages "to justify the exploitation of peoples who lived in societies seemingly less sophisticated or developed than those of Europe" (p. 160). Therefore, the novelty of Postlethwayt's *Dictionary* was the mobilization of the language of humanity – even "if only little more than an aside" (p. 160).

According to Greene (2013, p. 160-61), Postlethwayt's suggestion to "eliminate the slave trade within Africa may have been related to his conclusion" that colonial slavery was "nationally disadvantageous." The *Dictionary* would indicate a revival of "ancient metropolitan reservation" about the effects of slavery and the slave trade on national security (p. 161). Eighteenth-century writers became increasingly concerned with the disproportion between free and enslaved people in some of the colonies, especially its impacts on colonial defense. Nevertheless, Postlethwayt's shift towards antislavery did not seem to arise from a concern with the effects of slavery – or the slave trade – upon colonial security. He was more concerned with the impact of the slave trade on Africa. Unlike other mid-eighteenth-century writers troubled by colonial security, Postlethwayt did not devise a scheme to increase the number of free people in the West Indian colonies.[10]

Christopher L. Brown provided a more detailed assessment of Postlethwayt's account of the slave trade. His interpretation highlights the continuities between Postlethwayt's writings – namely, a belief that only "chartered companies" could enhance the commodity trade with Africa

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[9] See Heaton (1937), Judges (1939), and Coleman (1957) for seminal revisionist accounts. See Magnusson (1994, chap. 2) for an overview of the debates on mercantilism. See also Pincus (2012) and Stern & Wennerlind (2014).

[10] The *An Essay concerning slavery, and the danger Jamaica is expos'd to from the too great number of slaves* (1746, p. 48–51) proposes a manumission scheme to increase the number of free people in Jamaica. William and Edmund Burke (1757, vol. 2, p. 116–119) devised a scheme to settle the inland parts of Jamaica with the English poor. The settlement of Georgia, designed to be a military buffer between the Carolinas and Florida, was motivated by the same concern with security in an enslaved-based society – see James Oglethorpe ([1932] 2021, p. 165) and Betty Wood (1984, chap. 1). I will develop this theme further in Chapter 3.

– and the limits of his antislavery discourse (BROWN, 2006, p. 274; 2013, p. 149). Brown emphasizes that Postlethwayt "contemplated antislavery measures (…) as a means of enlarging the British Empire more than of promoting a revolution in attitudes toward slavery" (2006, p. 274). Besides, Postlethwayt's case for the "traffic in staple crops" with Africa "echoed what the patrons of the Royal African Company had argued for nearly half a century" (2013, p. 149). The novelty in Postlethwayt's proposal, according to Brown (2013, p. 150), was the suggestion that "legitimate commerce" could supplant the slave trade.

Brown's interpretation informed my understanding of Postlethwayt's shift towards antislavery. I also stress the limits of his antislavery discourse and focus on the continuity between his different writings. However, my research discusses publications not incorporated in Brown's account, such as the *Considerations on the Revival of the Royal-British-Assiento* (1749b) – one of the first publications signed by Postlethwayt. Additionally, I argue that Postlethwayt's decision to abandon the issue of slave trade regulation and focus on proposals to increase the commodity trade with inland Africa reflected broader political changes, namely the creation of a new company to manage the African forts and settlements (1750) and the divestment of the RAC (1752). Accordingly, the following section introduces the history of the Royal African Company.

2.3 The Royal African Company and the transatlantic slave trade

Malachy Postlethwayt wrote his first pamphlet on the slave trade as a member of the Royal African Company's Court of Assistants. In 1744, Postlethwayt addressed the changing political conditions by mobilizing pro-company arguments developed in the previous decades. Thus, it is imperative to contextualize the position occupied by the RAC during the mid-eighteenth century to understand the background for Postlethwayt's writings. Accordingly, the following paragraphs provide a summary account of the company's history until the 1740s.

Established in 1672, the Royal African Company was the third Restoration-era attempt to charter a joint-stock company to monopolize the English slave trade. The Duke of York, later King James II, and his cousin Prince Rupert founded the Company of Royal Adventurers into Africa in 1660. This joint-stock company was initially established for "discovering golden mines and settling of plantations" in Western Africa, but it had a short life. By the end of 1662, the directors had not gathered enough money from subscriptions and "asked the king to grant a new license" (SWINGEN, 2015, p. 60-62).

King Charles II granted a new charter to the Company of Royal Adventurers of England trading into Africa in 1663 – which received the exclusive right to trade in enslaved Africans on behalf of the English Crown. As Abigail Swingen (2015, p. 62) remarked, the company "was founded with the explicit purpose of selling African slaves to English planters and Spanish merchants to divert the trade away from the Dutch." For this to happen, the company required means to enforce its monopoly. Thus, according to Swingen, restraining the access of "interlopers" (private merchants) to the slave trade would become an "official imperial policy" from 1663 onwards (p. 76).

By the end of the decade, however, the Company of Royal Adventurers was already struggling. Faced with the effects of the Second Anglo-Dutch War (1665-1667) and the company's financial weakness, the Duke of York opened subscriptions to a new company in 1671 (SWINGEN, 2015, p. 84-86). The newly established Royal African Company was awarded a "monopoly that reserved the English trade to Africa and the slave trade to the colonies solely to shareholders of the company (or to their licensees)" (KEIRN, 1994, p. 432). Additionally, the charter provided the tools to enforce the company's monopoly. In Tim Keirn's (1994, p. 432) words, the RAC had "the right to make war with 'non-Christian Princes'" and "to erect a court of judicature on the coast of Africa to assist in the suppression of interlopers (whose goods and ships the company was empowered to seize)." By these means, the power of royal prerogative was awarded to a group of people incorporated as a joint stock company.

As Steve Pincus (2009, p. 375) has shown, there was a political-economic reasoning behind the Stuart administration's approach to international trade. They believed a joint-stock company with a "mercantile monopoly" was necessary because the African trade was not "a purely commercial enterprise." If other European nations – especially the Dutch – were constantly attempting to exclude the English from the slave trade and Africans could not be trusted to honor their contracts, it was imperative to build forts and settlements in West Africa.[11] Disorganized private merchants stood no chance in a "viciously competitive" international trade.[12] Only a joint-stock company could carry on such an expensive enterprise, and the exclusive trading right was their reward for advancing the funds to secure the English share of the slave trade. But one more

[11] For an assessment of Anglo-Dutch competition in the seventeenth century, see Ormrod (2003, p. 31–59).
[12] For further discussion on late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth century views on international trade, see Hont (1990, 2005) and Reinert (2011, p. 73–128).

thing was necessary to guarantee English success in international competition: the "joint-stock companies" needed "sovereign powers to enforce their monopolies and protect their exclusive trade privileges by whatever means necessary" (PINCUS, 2012, p. 19).

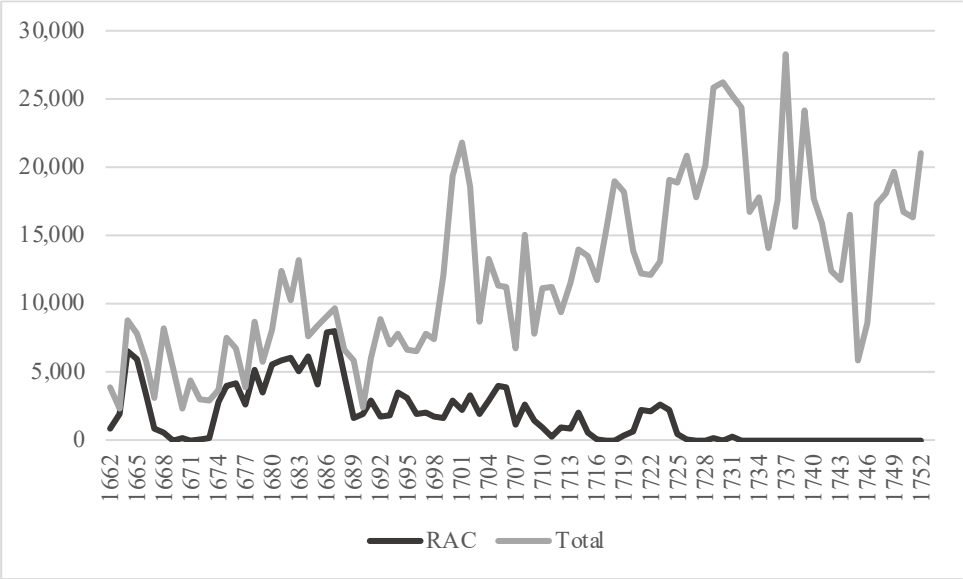
The RAC enjoyed such powers to enforce its monopoly before the Glorious Revolution. Besides confiscating enslaved Africans at sea or soon after they disembarked in the British colonies, the RAC's "power to seize slaves [already] purchased from interlopers increased dramatically during the 1680s" (SWINGEN, 2015, p. 125). Naturally, several groups criticized these actions. West Indian planters, merchants, colonial governors, and officers had opposed the enforcement of the African Company's monopoly since the 1660s (p. 84). These groups, according to Swingen (2015, p. 84), developed "imperial ideals" based "on maintaining oppressive slave regimes by opening the slave trade" to all subjects.

If the RAC "became a key component of Stuart policies of imperial control" during the 1680s, the Glorious Revolution created a political environment in which the company's critics could thrive (PETTIGREW, 2013, p. 31-33; SWINGEN, 2015, p. 139). William Pettigrew (2013, p. 31-33) showed how, after 1688, while "lawyers and politicians began to chip away at every feature of royal prerogative," the opposition developed a powerful "lobby against the company's charter." Private merchants increasingly sued the RAC and, in 1689 and 1696, Chief Justice Holt finally decided against the company's forfeiture power.

The departure of James II, RAC's director and main sponsor, took a heavy toll on the company's legitimacy. Thereafter, the company sought "parliamentary approval and statutory recognition for its discredited royal charter" (PETTIGREW, 2013, p. 33). While the RAC tried to sustain politically its exclusive trading rights, its opponents lobbied for open trade. If "parliamentary selected committees in 1693/4, 1694/5, and 1695/6 pressed for bills stressing the importance of forts and the necessity of a joint-stock organization in the African trade," the "increasingly Whig-controlled Commons" refused to recognize the RAC's charter (KEIRN, 1994, p. 435). Once the company lost the power of royal prerogative to enforce its monopoly, the slave trade became unofficially open. The RAC's market share decreased, and its financial situation deteriorated (see Figure 2).[13]

[13] Several historians have attempted to explain the Royal African Company economic downfall. See, for instance, the classical account of Davies (1957), as well as Carlos & Kruse (1996) and Herman (2011).

Figure 2. Royal African Company's share of the British slave trade



Source: Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database[14], slavevoyages.org.

The *Act for the Settlement of the African Trade* (1698) represented a statutory victory for the RAC (SWINGEN, 2015, p. 155-56). The legislation, also known as the Ten Percent Act, "allowed private merchants to trade to Africa upon paying a 10 percent duty to the African Company on all cargoes shipped to and from Africa, with slaves and gold exempted" (p. 155). On one hand, the act confirmed the slave trade was now open to all English subjects. On the other, it guaranteed funds to maintain the RAC's forts and settlements. The ten percent duty, Pettigrew (2019, p. 26) remarked, "was later interpreted as parliamentary compensation for the loss of its monopoly privileges and set a precedent for public subsidies" to the Royal African Company.

This victory, however, was to prove only temporary. The RAC lost the battle for the slave trade operation in 1712 with the expiration of the Ten Percent Act (PETTIGREW, 2013, p. 22). Despite the company's intense propaganda, which counted on writers such as Charles Davenant and Daniel Defoe, the act was not renewed. By then, "the separated traders had deployed all their lobbying resources and skills" to guarantee a free trade in enslaved Africans (p. 22). But the separate traders' ability to better navigate post-revolutionary politics was not the only factor at play: the slave trade operation expanded unprecedently after the RAC lost its monopoly. By 1712,

[14] "RAC" represents the estimated number of enslaved Africans who disembarked from British vessels owned by the Royal African Company. "Total" represents all enslaved Africans disembarked from British ships.

British planters could testify that an open trade did increase the supply of enslaved Africans to the colonies.

Since the 1690s, the RAC's sponsors and their opponents had been proposing different plans to reorganize the slave trade.[15] Two decades of public controversy helped crystallize arguments that later RAC supporters, such as Postlethwayt, would pick up. First, it worth recalling the partisan nature of the African trade debates. By the time of the Glorious Revolution, the RAC "was tory in its political composition" (KEIRN, 1994, p. 434). Exploring the complex political context of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries is beyond the scope of this essay. Nevertheless, I agree with Keirn's (1994, p. 430) argument that the African trade debates represented less of a dispute between conflicting economic ideologies (mercantilism vs. liberalism) than a political dispute between Whigs and Tories.

If the Royal African Company and its opponents disagreed about the organization and management of the slave trade, they shared the assumption that both slavery and the slave trade were "key elements of England's imperial economy" (SWINGEN, 2015, p. 145). By the late seventeenth century, asserting that the slave trade was a matter of national interest had become commonplace. The issue in dispute was how to organize it.

During the 1690s, the separate traders and their supporters framed their cause as an opposition to monopoly, a term "firmly tied in the public imagination to the royal prerogative" and "perceived as a threat to the liberties of both House of Commons and the subject" (KEIRN, 1994, p. 433). A free slave trade was tied, therefore, to the restoration of English liberty. Besides pointing to the obvious irony of defending the subjects' liberty to buy and sell enslaved Africans, I must also present the limits of their "free trade" agenda. First, it is worth highlighting that "free trade" alluded to the access enjoyed by English (later British) merchants to the African markets. Supporting free trade in this context meant criticizing the RAC's monopoly, not sponsoring a liberal agenda against any trading regulations that restricted international competition. One could defend an open slave trade and, at the same time, agree that rival European nations should not be allowed to supply enslaved Africans to the English colonies. Others, as we will see, would support creating a regulated company to substitute the RAC.

Conversely, RAC's propagandists stressed that only a joint-stock company could ensure the preservation of English forts, factories, and settlements at the Western African Coast. These

[15] For an overview of the African Trade debates, see Keirn (1994) and Pettigrew (2013, p. 83-113).

establishments, they insisted, were essential to drive away competitors and guarantee the English share of the transatlantic slave trade. Monopoly was nothing more than a reward for the company's efforts in securing the national interest. But there was also a strategic reason for focusing on the company's infrastructure on the West African coast:

> The Royal African Company fixated on its forts in public because this helped them to style their trade as important to national, military concerns. But encouraging a parliamentary audience to notice the forts also helped legislators to realize that a dissolution of the Company would mean compensation for its expensive infrastructure overseas. The difficulties of contemplating such compensation probably played a part in dragging debate about the future of the African Company out. (PETTIGREW, 2019, p. 26)

Over the course of the 1690s, as Keirn (1994, p. 434–35) noted, "most of the debate in Parliament revolved around two points of contention": monopoly and the necessity of fortifications. As we saw before, the RAC defended both. If the "company's opponents argued that monopoly restricted the supply of slaves to the islands and limited exports of manufactures," they "accept[ed] the necessity of forts" to carry on the African trade (p. 434-35). They would insist, nonetheless, that "these forts could be maintained by a regulated company as opposed to a joint-stock" (p. 434-435).

Regulated companies, Keirn explained (1994, p. 499, n. 46), "had exclusive control of their particular trades" but allowed private merchants to engage in them "after a payment of a moderate entry fine." These companies were not considered monopolistic because "trade was done on private account" and merchants did not "corporately control or restrict sales" (p. 499, n. 46). A joint-stock company, on the other hand, could act as a corporation to control the supply of enslaved Africans. Several of the RAC's opponents defended that a regulated company was the best way to organize the African trade because it guaranteed, at the same time, an open trade and the necessary funding to maintain fortifications through the "proceeds from entry fines" (p. 435).

The Ten Percent Act (1698) offered a third way: the RAC would no longer monopolize the slave trade, but private merchants should pay a duty to support its forts and settlements. The company's opponents brought back the idea of a regulated company from time to time, but the RAC remained the sole guardian of African forts until the 1740s. Tellingly, when the company was finally divested in the early 1750s, the administration of its forts was taken over by a regulated company.

As debates continued during the early eighteenth century, the RAC "broadened the discussion beyond the narrow consideration of the management of the trade to the treatment of Africans" (PETTIGREW, 2013, p. 180). Accordingly, the company's propagandists would begin to "reconceptualize African barbarity" (p. 186-87). Africans were no longer regarded merely as "barbarous despots" but as people who could *be civilized* through commerce - though not through the "barbaric commerce of the separate traders." Pro-company writers portrayed the separate traders, in the "free pursuit" of their "self-interest," as "one of the principal obstacles to the development of a civilized commerce with the African interior" (p. 187-88). From the first decades of the eighteenth century, RAC sponsors would picture the monopolistic joint-stock corporation "as a potential means to rein in the slave trade's unique brutality," as an agent of civilization instead of barbarity (PETTIGREW, 2013, p. 180, 186–88). Postlethwayt would explore similar ideas himself in the early 1750s (see section 2.6).

By 1710, the RAC was struggling to keep its commercial operations viable. Two years later, it lost revenues from the duty imposed by the Ten Percent Act. Nevertheless, the company's participation in the transatlantic slave trade would briefly increase once the South Sea Company was granted the Assiento in 1713. Launched in 1711, the South Sea Company "was an ambitious attempt" to solve the ongoing crisis of public credit[16]:

> The South Sea Company undertook a debt-for-equity and private-for-public swap, exchanging company stocks for a set of deeply discounted unsecured government bonds in hopes of reviving public credit and once again making it affordable for the Treasury to borrow. In order to make this transaction appealing to the bondholders, the government committed to paying 6 percent interest on the debt absorbed by the company and, most importantly, granted the company a monopoly on Britain's commerce to the South Seas. (WENNERLIND, 2011, p. 197)

The company was chartered "to undertake England's trade in African captives to Spanish controlled South America" (p. 197). Convinced that Britain would obtain the Assiento contract in the peace negotiations ending the War of Spanish Succession, the administration granted the company a commercial monopoly to attract investors[17] (p. 200-201). The Assiento "conferred the

[16] For further discussion on the 1710s crisis of public debt and the solution presented by the South Sea Company, see Carl Wennerlind (2011, p. 161-245). According to him, the "company successfully resolved the financial crisis" and "fulfilled its primary purpose remarkably well" (p. 199). For classical historical accounts of the South Sea Company, see John Carswell (1960) and John Sperling (1962).

[17] Postlethwayt would later defend the South Sea Company monopoly (see Section 2.5).

right to carry African slaves to Spanish ports, as well as opportunities to sell British goods, legally and illegally, in this vast colonial market" (p. 201).[18] Between 1713 and 1718, the South Sea Company was granted the Assiento (p. 218-223).

In August 1713, the RAC became a supplier of enslaved Africans to the South Sea Company (WENNERLIND, 2011, p. 219-220). Both companies were connected commercially and politically, since the RAC supported the Tory agenda behind the South Sea Company enterprise (see PETTIGREW, 2013, p. 155–162). But this connection "would become a poisoned chalice for the [Royal] African Company" (p. 162). Facing competition with independent traders, the RAC struggled to fulfill its contractual obligations of supplying enslaved Africans. Additionally, the South Sea Company was already in debt with the RAC by 1714. In sum, this commercial contract did not significantly alter the RAC's position in the transatlantic slave trade.

Unable to compete in the slave trade, the company attempted to divert its commercial enterprise to the commodity trade with inland African territories. In 1716, its directors formally indicated the "desire to favor commercial contracts with the African interior over its participation in the slave trade" (PETTIGREW, 2013, p. 165). By then, its advocates had already begun to stress the benefits of expanding British commerce beyond the African Coast. James Brydges, the first Duke of Chandos and a patron to Charles Davenant, attempted to put these ideas into practice as a member of the Royal African Company's Court of Assistants in the early 1720s.

"A group of gentry and aristocrats surrounding" the Duke of Chandos purchased a "controlling stake" in the Royal African Company (MITCHELL, 2013, p. 546). This represented a shift not only in ownership but also in the Company's management. The new "managing clique" forged under Chandos' influence envisioned a different business model for the RAC. The company would refrain from the slave trade to focus on the bilateral commodity trade between Britain and Africa. According to Mitchell (2013, p. 575), Chandos believed the company's assets "could serve as the foundation of a new and profitable system of Atlantic trade based on the exchange of European and African Commodities."

Under Chandos' leadership, the company's directors also commissioned expeditions hoping to "identify new opportunities to exploit mineral and botanical resources in Africa" (MITCHELL, 2013, p. 560). The RAC, according to Pettigrew (2013, p. 166), attempted to "reinvent itself" as an "agent of inland penetration and conquest," a "territorial entity" aiming to

[18] For more on the British slave trade to Spanish America, see Palmer (1981).

promote gold mining and establish plantations in African territories. Chandos' plan, he continues, represented an "amalgamation" of "Britain's imperial experience up to that point" (PETTIGREW, 2013, p. 170). His scheme for the African trade combined attempts to develop "a market for English goods" and to provide "a resource for extracting precious metals and importing raw materials for the British and European markets" (PETTIGREW, 2013, p. 170).

Between 1720 and 1724, the Royal African Company experienced its final revival. Once Chandos' overoptimistic scheme failed, the company virtually ended its commercial operations. Despite being a failure, this experience showed that someone could – at least rhetorically – point to the unexplored resources of African inland territories as a profitable alternative to the slave trade. The company's propagandists, however, would choose a different strategy in the following years.

In 1730, the company petitioned for a parliamentary subsidy to secure its trading forts on the African Coast.[19] The company's case relied on the national significance of its trading forts. Its propagandists argued the separate traders would lose access to enslaved Africans with the decline of the company's forts and stressed their strategic relevance in building "diplomatic relationships with commercial and military élites beyond the coast" (BROWN, 2007, p. 32). The campaign was successful, and the RAC was granted a subsidy of £10,000.

The fact that Parliament granted the RAC a subsidy did not mean the separate traders had lost their political influence. On the contrary, once the "separate slave traders had helped to garner public enthusiasm for the slave trade," the Parliament "felt comfortable providing public support to it" (PETTIGREW, 2013, p. 175). Additionally, "such was the force of the public's countenance for deregulated slave trading by the mid-1730s that the African Company had to spell out each time it made an appeal to a public body that a free trade in slaves represented the best means to manage the slave trade" (PETTIGREW, 2013, p. 174).

The company continued to request the annual subsidy, and Parliament authorized it until the mid-1740s. Apart from 1744, when "Parliament increased the subsidy to £20.000" after "the

[19] The anonymous pamphlet *The Case of the Royal African Company of England* (1730) stated the arguments for a Parliamentary subsidy. In Kennet Morgann (2003, p. 59–60) words: "The pamphlet accepts that there should be a free trade to Africa and that the upkeep of the forts must be paid either by the Royal African Company alone, by the company in conjunction with private traders, or by the English public. The company has probably expended £851,000 on the forts since receiving its charter, but it is unfair that it should be expected to bear sole responsibility for the costs now that the trade is free and open. The pamphlet rejects arguments for a duty upon traders for this end, because profits in the trade are not as easily accrued as they were in the later seventeenth century. Instead, it argues for the central role of the slave trade in promoting the plantations, commerce and wealth of the mother country, and concludes that the African forts should be financially supported by the public."

declaration of war with France," the company received £10.000 annually (BROWN, 2007, p. 33). Postlethwayt became a member of the RAC's Court of Assistants precisely when the company was lobbying to increase this subsidy.

2.4 Malachy Postlethwayt and the Royal African Company, 1744-1746

Malachy Postlethwayt was elected as RAC director on January 19, 1744. One week later, he attended his first meeting of the Court of Assistants (TNA, T 70/95). Since the 1730s, the company had sent petitions to the Parliament every year requesting a public subsidy. During Postlethwayt's first meeting on January 26, the board approved the draft of a petition requesting a public allowance of £20,000 instead of the usual £10,000 (TNA, T 70/95/174). As we saw, the company indeed received a larger subsidy that year.

Nevertheless, this was not enough to put the company at ease. The next RAC petition, sent to the House of Commons in December 1744, assumed an alarmist tone to assert that even £20,000 was insufficient to pay the company's debts and maintain the African forts in years of war (TNA, T 70/174). In April 1745, Parliament approved the usual amount of £10,000 – but the company would not receive it until June 1745 (TNA, T 70/174).

Postlethwayt remained on the board of directors until the end of 1745, and despite not regularly attending the meetings, he seemed aware of the company's economic situation and wrote extensively on its behalf. Later, Postlethwayt (1751-55, vol. 1, p. xiii) would claim that he sought a position on the RAC's board of directors "to have an insight into the management and direction of public companies." He acquired the "practical knowledge" of the African trade despite the company being "in a declining state at his admission" (p. xiii). Having a "tolerable knowledge of the nature and constitution of the company, and of the commerce they were capable of carrying on in Africa," he "printed and published several tracts upon the subject" (p. xiv).

Here, I will discuss three of these tracts: *The Importance of Effectually Supporting the Royal African Company of England* (1744), *The African Trade, the Great Pillar and Support of the British Plantation Trade in America* (1745), and *The National and Private Advantages of the African Trade Considered* (1746).[20] The RAC's immediate concern with securing a larger public

[20] Although published anonymously, Postlethwayt acknowledged authorship in later publications. See "Of the usefulness of this work" in the *Dictionary*'s preface (1751-55, vol. 1, p. xiv) and *The Importance of African Expedition Considered* (1758, p. xviii).

allowance and Postlethwayt's expectations about the unexplored commercial potential of the African trade informed all of these writings.

By the mid-1740s, the RAC's official position was "that the trade to the Coast of Africa ought always to continue free and open, for the benefit of all his Majesty's subjects trading to those parts" (POSTLETHWAYT, 1744, p. 1). Accordingly, Postlethwayt proposed different strategies to reconcile the company's interests with those of the independent traders. While writing on RAC's behalf, he would not defend either monopoly or exclusive commercial rights.

Despite offering slightly different solutions, the three tracts follow the same argumentative strategy. Postlethwayt placed the slave trade as central to the imperial economy to argue that the empire's prosperity required the good management of the company's forts in Western Africa. To him, colonial and metropolitan economic growth depended on the slave trade's success (POSTLETHWAYT, 1744, p. 4–5, 1745, p. 6–15, 1746b, p. 1–7). The economic growth of British colonies was contingent on their ability to purchase cheap enslaved workers, and metropolitan progress increased in proportion to the quantity of manufactures exported to both Africa and America:

> If the preservation and improvement of the British Colonies and Plantations in America, depend upon the preservation of the trade to Africa, as they are supply'd with Negroe-Servants only from thence, to cultivate and improve their plantations with sugars, tobacco, rice, rum, cotton, ginger, &c. &c.; if upon the preservation of the trade to Africa and the West Indies, the consumption, as has been allow'd by the best judges, of above one half of our manufactures, and the employment of above one half of our shipping and navigation depend; if the value of lands in Britain, do, and always must rise and fall in proportion as our manufactures and navigation prosper or decline; and if the national revenue must encrease or diminish, as the trade to Africa, and our plantations is better or worse protected and supported. (POSTLETHWAYT, 1744, p. 4–5).

The African trade was portrayed as the utmost source of the empire's wealth and naval power. It not only guaranteed the cultivation of West Indian and continental plantations but also created an important market for British manufactures. By focusing on the consumption of manufactured goods, Postlethwayt reminded his audience of the domestic benefits of the slave trade: it encouraged British manufacturers and the shipping industry, creating jobs and increasing land value. Therefore, RAC's future mattered not only to British merchants but also to producers,

laboring poor, and landowners.[21] Besides, according to him, the African trade did not withdraw "money" from Britain since enslaved workers were usually exchanged for British or East Indian commodities (1746b, p. 3).

Accordingly, France's ability to supply the colonies with cheaper slave labor was the leading cause of its economic and military success (1744, p. 7-9; 1745, p. 5-10; 1746b, p. 78-79). Enjoying an exclusive commercial right, the French African Company had no other "bidders against them" and "make their own market," thereby being able "to set their own price" (1745, p. 9). Conversely, British independent traders "have to bid against each other" and the RAC. Competition increased the cost of enslaved workers "to separate English traders in general" (1745, p. 9). Therefore, he concluded, the French African companies could sell human beings almost fifty percent cheaper than British traders. Postlethwayt would restate this supply-demand analysis to discuss the price of slave labor several times in his later writings.

Postlethwayt concluded the organization of the British slave trade benefited France because the country profited from the quarrels between independent traders and the RAC. Besides, the French presence in Africa increased the vulnerability of the company's forts. In these publications, Postlethwayt repeatedly argued the RAC's efforts to build forts and settlements in Western Africa secured the British share in the slave trade (1744, p. 5–17, 1745, p. 19–27, 1746b, p. 20–39). Other European powers had historically attempted to exclude British merchants from the slave trade: "In those places where other nations have forts and castles, and the Royal African Company has none, there all British private traders, are either absolutely denied the liberty of trading, or their ships are actually taken and confiscated" (1746b, p. 43).

Like previous RAC sponsors, Postlethwayt highlighted the commercial, military, and diplomatic purposes of the company's settlements in Western Africa (1744, p. 18-19, 1745, p. 35-36, 1746b, p. 40-41). The forts and castles secured British commerce with Africa and facilitated the relationship with local authorities. African "princes and chiefs" usually formed alliances with whatever European nation possessed settlements in their territory, granting commercial privileges in exchange for protection (1744, p. 18, 1746b, p. 40-41). Postlethwayt guaranteed "these friendships and alliances" could not "be effectually made and cemented without the company's

[21] In Postletwahyt's (1744, p. 1–2) words: "there is not a man in this Kingdom, who in proportion to his rank in the community, does not more or less partake of the benefit and advantage of the African Company's Forts and Castles in Africa; and who would not be a sufferer in proportion, should their forts and castles be abandon'd, or fall into the hands of any other nation."

agents residing on the spot, constantly associating with the native-princes, and establishing factories many hundred miles inland, where none but small sloops and canoes can go to traffick" (1744, p. 19).

Postlethwayt thus rested his case: if the African trade was central to the imperial economy, its continuance relied upon maintaining the RAC's forts and settlements. Guaranteeing the company's future was a matter of national interest. He proposed different suggestions, however, on how exactly to proceed. In *The importance of effectually supporting the Royal African Company* (1744), Postlethwayt highlighted how the RAC had spent £100,000 above the parliamentary subsidy received between 1730 and 1741 (p. 24-25). Stressing how the company never asked to be reimbursed for its extra expenses, Postlethwayt implied that Parliament should grant £30,000 annually to support the forts (p. 42-44). He also proposed a strategy to reconcile the RAC and independent traders:

> The Company, by the situation of their forts, and by the means of navigable rivers, will naturally have it more in their power to open and extend the trade to the remotest inland parts of Africa, and thereby find a vent and consumption for larger quantities of British manufactures than can be easily imagined: And the private traders are better able to supply our plantations with negroes; because they can certainly fit out their ships cheaper than the Company; especially from the out-ports; and as they carry on a constant intercourse of General Trade with the British plantations, and have settled correspondence there of relations, friends, and partners, who will be more careful to do them justice, as well as more punctual in making returns than any agents appointed by the company would be for their account: As the private traders are thus better able to prosecute this branch of trade to Africa, and the Plantations with greater advantage than the Company, let the Company and Private Traders go hand in hand, let each party vigorously apply themselves to those branches of trade, which suits them best (…). (POSTLETHWAYT, 1744, p. 46–47)

Postlethwayt suggested the company should specialize in the commodity trade with the African inner countries - bringing back to life previous plans to increase its commercial operations – while the independent traders should focus on the slave trade – acknowledging the company's inability to operate competitively in that market. Here, he cemented the basis for the *Dictionary*'s legitimate commerce project.

Postlethwayt also proposed a conciliatory strategy in *The African Trade* (1745), arguing that "the interest of a corporation, and that of separate traders" could "be mutually subservient to each other" (p. 35-36). Unlike before, he did not indicate a specific amount for the public subsidy but suggested it must be readjusted accordingly and secured for a reasonable period (p. 33). Writing when the company was admittedly unable to pay its creditors, Postlethwayt claimed public

compensation for the £100,000 spent by the RAC above the allowance. Thereby, the company could pay its creditors, better manage its forts, and further develop the African "inland trade" (p. 33-35).

Since "the Continent of Africa is of great extent" and "the country extremely populous," the inland trade would be at least as advantageous to Great Britain as the commerce with Spanish and Portuguese America (1745, p. 35). Due support for the company's forts would help extend the trade beyond the African Coast. Expanding the inland trade, "yet in its infancy," would also boost the slave trade. Consequently, "all subjects of England will partake of the advantages, as the Company shall become prosperous in propagating British manufactures into the heart of Africa" (1745, p. 35).

Postlethwayt (1746b, p. 116-126) provided a more detailed proposal in *The National and Private Advantages of the African Trade* (1746), arguing that Parliament should grant an annual subsidy of £30,000 for 14 years to secure the maintenance of the RAC's forts and settlements. Public support would strengthen the company enough to restrain "the French within the limit of their own charter." Consequently, it would prevent French competition and increase the supply of enslaved Africans to British independent traders, lowering their price. Therefore, the allowance would benefit both the RAC and the independent traders. But Postlethwayt now introduced a different conciliatory strategy: "The Company should not carry a single Negroe to our American Plantations; in consideration, that all the separate traders purchased Negroes of the Company" (p. 119–120). Unlike the 1744 plan, Postlethwayt did not suggest the RAC should focus exclusively on the commodity trade with inland African territories. The company would use its forts to develop such commerce and procure enslaved workers for the separate traders. In any case, all three publications evidence Postlethwayt's enthusiasm for the economic possibilities of the trade in commodities – not necessarily human beings – with inland African territories.

Before proceeding, it is worth summarizing how Postlethwayt justified colonial slavery. He reiterated the slave trade was the only way to ensure American colonization: not only were Africans naturally adapted to work in tropical climate, but the number of workers required to cultivate the colonies would decrease metropolitan population and wealth. Additionally, white servants might introduce manufactures in the colonies, compromising "the dependency of our colonies in Great Britain" (POSTLETHWAYT, 1745, p. 14, 1746b, p. 4).

To answer those who criticized the slave trade, Postlethwayt (1746b, p. 4–5) argued that enslaved Africans had better lives in the American colonies than in their original countries. Underlining the alleged hypocrisy of these critics, he contended "the lives of negroes in the servitude of our plantations" were not "less tolerable than those of colliers and miners in all Christian countries" (1746b, p. 4–5). Again, Postlethwayt would abandon these arguments shortly thereafter. The hope to develop the African inland trade, however, would accompany him throughout the rest of his career.

2.5 Considerations on the Revival of the Royal-British-Assiento (1749): regulated vs joint-stock companies

During the 1740s, the independent traders came to "acknowledge the importance of the trade forts not only as marks of possession but also as political assets" (BROWN, 2007, p. 36). The War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748) and the increasing importance of France in the Atlantic economy engendered a public awareness of the strategic (not only commercial) role of the African trade in the British Empire (BROWN, 2007, p. 36; PETTIGREW, 2013, p. 176).

This was the political context in which the Royal African Company complained that not even the £20,000 subsidy was enough to maintain its African forts. The result, as Pettigrew (2019, p. 27) noted, was far from the expected: "An opinion in Parliament came to conclude that the company misused" the parliamentary allowance and "manipulated the public into investing in its stock." Facing accusations of embezzlement, the company petitioned Parliament again in 1747, "pleading the poor condition of forts and requesting the resumption of state subsidies." This initiated the process that would culminate in the divestment of the RAC.

In 1747, the House of Commons decided to create a new company without a joint stock to manage the forts and settlements. At this point, "the deliberation about the future of the [Royal African] Company and its African forts passed to the Board of Trade" (PETTIGREW, 2019, p. 28). This episode reopened the conversation about regulating the slave trade. Several pamphlets, tracts, and letters addressing the subject were published between 1747 and 1750. The relevance of maintaining forts in Africa, or the necessity to grant a public allowance to the new company, were not under discussion. Neither was free trade - even if writers such as Postlethwayt used the public controversy to promote a pro-monopoly agenda. The main point of contention was whether the new company should have a joint stock.

Pettigrew (2019, p. 28–30) shows how the Royal African Company fought on two different fronts between 1747 and 1750. Its directors and creditors participated in parliamentary deliberations to guarantee public compensation for the company's African forts. At the same time, the company's propagandists hoped to reverse previous parliamentary resolutions and campaigned for a new joint stock company.

RAC propagandists would stress two points: (i) if the government decided to establish a new company, the RAC must be indemnified, and (ii) a joint stock company was better suited to manage the Western African forts.[22] Even after the first reading of the *Bill for extending and improving the trade to Africa* (1749) in the House of Commons, the RAC would still reiterate that a "well-regulated company" with a "moderate joint-stock" was the best option to manage African forts in the context of an "open and free trade" (GREAT BRITAIN, BOARD OF TRADE, 1750, p. 9). A joint-stock company would neither "sacrifice the national interest to any private or personal views" nor choose a "temporary prospect of gain" over long-term relationships with the natives (A. Z., 1748, p. 2). The disregard of independent traders for anything but private profit was the central theme of the pro-company *Memoirs of the Young Prince of Annamaboe* (1749).

The anonymous pamphlet tells the story of an African prince sent to study in England under the care of a "certain captain" who sold him to be enslaved in Barbados (1749, p. 34–40). The captain represents the behavior of independent traders, who believed "all blacks were destined to be slaves" (p. 43). The RAC agents, on the other hand, understood that "human nature is the same in all countries" and "the brain in black heads was made for the same purpose as in white" (p. vii-viii, 20). Following the "best writers upon trade," the company knew that a "humane and generous treatment" of African natives was essential to guarantee trading privileges (p. vii-viii, 48). In Annamaboe, the company's agents negotiated the safe return of the enslaved prince to his father, who assured them that Annamaboe would cut relations with France during the War of the Austrian Succession (p. 48-49). Furthermore, as Pettigrew (2013, p. 203) argued, the *Memoirs* "made a pitch for the corporate management of civilized commerce with African interior by placing the biography of the prince of Annamaboe in the context of the broader history of the African trade."

[22] See *A letter to a member of Parliament concerning the African Trade* (1748), *Answers to the objections against the proposals of the Royal African Company for settling the trade to Africa* (1748), and *Papers laid before the Honourable House of Commons* (1750, p. 5–27).

Ultimately, the RAC failed to convince an increasingly skeptical audience that a joint-stock company was necessary to manage the Western African forts. As discussed before, the company faced severe accusations of embezzlement and misuse of public funds. The anonymous pamphlet entitled *Detection of the Proceedings and Practices of the Directors of the Royal African Company* (1749) portrayed the company's directors as corrupt agents who committed fraud. Instead of keeping the forts in a defensible state, the directors used the public subsidy to pay the RAC's debts (p. 11-25). Besides, the author continued, nothing could guarantee the case would be different with another joint-stock company. Independent traders from Bristol and Liverpool, according to the author, "always have and ever will oppose the erecting of a new joint-stock company" because these merchants "found themselves more or less oppressed, as the power of the Company on the Coast increased or diminished" (p. 28-29). The solution was to create an "open company" to receive public subsidies and administrate the African forts (p. 33).

The Parliament accepted this solution, proposing the creation of the Company of Merchants Trading to Africa in May 1749. Over the following months, the Board of Trade asked several interest groups for their thoughts on the Bill. Except for a small group of London merchants and colonial agents defending the creation of a new joint-stock company, the independent traders either agreed with the bill entirely or suggested only small changes (GREAT BRITAIN, BOARD OF TRADE, 1750). The bill was enacted in March 1750, and a new corporation without a joint stock took control of the RAC's forts and settlements.

Malachy Postlethwayt's *Considerations on the Revival of the Royal-British-Assiento* (1749b) appeared amidst these debates on the regulation of African trade. Although printed in 1749, it was originally drafted as a letter sent to the South Sea Company directors in March 1748. By then, Postlethwayt had substantially changed his views on slave trade regulation. Before summarizing his new proposal, a few considerations are in order. First, Postlethwayt was no longer a RAC director while writing *Considerations*. Accordingly, he would abandon the company's official position on preserving free trade in favor of a pro-monopoly strategy. Second, Postlethwayt seems to have designed this proposal anticipating the South Sea Company would receive the renewed Assiento contract. Being without an office at the time, he likely wrote this pamphlet seeking financial compensation or a position in the latter company.

Considering the end of the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-48) and "the restoration of peace between Great Britain and Spain," Postlethwayt assumed the *assiento* would be soon

reestablished (1749b, p. iii–iv). He began the letter by showing the advantages of the *assiento* to the imperial economy and refuting arguments advanced against it in the previous decades. An unpublished manuscript provides evidence that Postlethwayt (1746a) had been considering the advantages of the *assiento* to Britain for a few years. For my purposes, it is more important to focus on his plan to unite "the trade to Africa with the trade of the Assientists" than discussing his views about the *assiento* itself. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning Postlethwayt's defense of the South Sea Company's monopoly.[23]

The common understanding of a "monopoly of trade," according to him, "carries a frightful idea with it:" that "the *general* interests of trade are thereby sacrificed to the *particular* interest of a few" (POSTLETHWAYT, 1749b, p. 3). Postlethwayt argues, however, that the monopoly enjoyed by the South Sea Company could not harm the British trading interest. The contract to supply the Spanish colonies with enslaved workers, he continues, was not and will never be open to all British subjects (p. 3-9). The Company's exclusive trading right was not obtained at the expense of other British merchants but at the cost of those "trading subjects of France" who held the contract before 1713 (p. 4). Although not all British merchants could individually profit from the *assiento*, it greatly benefited British trade in general. He would later contend, in an unpublished manuscript, that his argument showing how the South Sea Company did not have a "monopoly in the vulgar acceptation" was well-received "from some people of great worth and candour" (POSTLETHWAYT, 1750, p. 1).

Monopoly would also be an essential element in Postlethwayt's plan to regulate the African trade. Engaging the broader public debate, he criticized plans to create a company without a joint stock or to put the Board of Trade in charge of managing the RAC forts (1749b, p. 25–29). Leaving the management of the RAC forts in the hands of independent traders would be a huge mistake. Such a "disjointed body" united in an open corporation could never wisely administer the public allowance: "the Bristol traders would struggle to appropriate great part of the allowance to support their schemes against those of Liverpool; and those of London, perhaps, would oppose 'em both" (p. 27). Besides, Postlethwayt doubted the new company's agents in Western Africa "would give satisfaction to such a disunited interest" – they would also "pursue private advantages in opposition

[23] Likewise, Postlethwayt repeated the same arguments in the *Dictionary* (1751-55, vol. 1, p. 134–35).

to" the national interest (p. 27-28). Finally, he wondered how a corporation without a joint stock could raise enough money to buy the RAC's forts and settlements (p. 28).

Like previous publications, *Considerations* portrayed France as both the ultimate threat and a model to be followed (POSTLETHWAYT, 1749b, p. 20–24). The French African Company monopoly alone, not to mention bounties and other encouragements, had given France a massive advantage over Britain in the African trade. What could Britain do to revert this? Postlethwayt (1749b, p. 24) answered categorically: "follow French measures." Only a joint-stock corporation with exclusive trading rights and proper encouragement could save the British slave trade from decline.

Wherever forts are necessary, Postlethwayt (1749b, p. 26) was convinced, "a joint-stock is no less so." According to him, the trade "among civilized nations" may be successfully regulated by commercial treaties and preserved by "Ambassadors and Consuls" (p. 26). But commercializing with "barbarous countries" such as those of Western Africa required not only "forts and castles" but also the "weight of a joint-stock" company. Postlethwayt had once believed that "such a company, with an ample public allowance (…) for the support of the forts and castles, might have answered our most sanguine hope and expectation" (p. 30). The success of his former proposals was contingent, however, on the union between the RAC's and separate traders' "reciprocal interests" (p. 30-31). Stressing his personal efforts "to promote such union" as a RAC director (p. 31), Postlethwayt argued the independent merchants continuously opposed any sort of public aid to that company:

> The truth is those Gentleman apprehend, as they always have done, and ever will, that the Company's enjoying the last degree of prosperity is inconsistent with their own: and therefore it is, that they have openly or covertly always opposed the Company's obtaining any Security from Parliament for the due support of their forts: Because truly they dread the apprehension of any joint stock company whatsoever: but if parliamentary security would soon have been raised; and therefore they have, and always will oppose the one, in order to defeat the other. (POSTLETHWAYT, 1749b, p. 36)

Opposition from independent traders convinced him that a joint-stock company, even receiving a substantial subsidy from Parliament, would never succeed while the slave trade remained open (p. 30-31). If the Parliament granted the RAC £20,000 annually, Postlethwayt was still sure the company "could never thrive while the present competition subsists between them and the separate traders" (p. 45). Only a joint-stock company with exclusive commercial rights –

a trading monopoly – could secure the British share in the international slave trade, reduce the prices of enslaved workers, and promote the inland African trade (p. 26-31).

Accordingly, Postlethwayt (1749b, p. 39–40) proposed that exclusive rights to the African trade should be granted by the Parliament to the South Sea Company for a determined period. The new Royal African Assiento Company would buy and maintain the RAC's forts at its own expense. Additionally, the company must sell enslaved workers to British colonists at a fixed price: half of the current price in times of peace and one-third during war. Lastly, "Parliament should allow the company a bounty" per enslaved person sold (p. 40). According to Postlethwayt, these regulations would grant the same privileges to the new company as those enjoyed by the French African Company. By following French measures, Britain could put the slave trade on a better footing.

By 1748, Postlethwayt was convinced the independent traders would disagree with his former conciliatory proposals. "Time and experience" gave him enough reasons to believe that a union between the RAC and independent traders was as unlikely in the present as it was "above forty years ago" (POSTLETHWAYT, 1749b, p. 31). The RAC's official position, however, had not changed. The company had to deal with public scrutiny of its monopolistic foundations and constantly reiterate its commitment to open trade. Postlethwayt had followed the same strategy while writing on the RAC's behalf. After parting ways with the company, however, he was no longer bound to free trade.

In the late 1740s, the RAC's campaign had little chance of success. The British Parliament was already inclined to create an open company controlled by independent traders. This was the context in which Postlethwayt addressed his bold proposal to the South Sea Company. He might have changed his mind in the intervening years, but one should also understand his former defense of a free slave trade within its more immediate political context. During the 1750s, Postlethwayt would abandon his attempts to regulate the slave trade altogether. He would still defend, however, that a monopolist joint-stock company should be created to conduct the commodity trade with inland Africa.

2.6 The *Universal Dictionary of Trade and Commerce* (1751-55): antislavery discourse and African colonization

The *Act for Improving and Extending the Trade to Africa*, which received royal assent in 1750, was the first step in divesting the Royal African Company. It established the Company of

Merchants Trading to Africa, a "body corporate and politick" that could not "trade to and from Africa in their corporate or joint capacity" (GREAT BRITAIN, 1750, p. 2–3). The new company assumed the management of the African trading forts and received £10,000 annually to support them.

The full statutory divestment of the Royal African Company happened in 1752, and the final compensation for its investors and creditors amounted to £112,142 (PETTIGREW, 2019, p. 32). By then, some RAC propagandists were already criticizing the new African Company. One of them recalled the late 1740s debates, arguing that Postlethwayt's plan to unite the African and South Sea Company trades "would have fully answered the intentions our ancestors erected those forts for" (J. S. G., 1753, p. 6). However, the *Considerations* had "dropped into the peaceful arms of obscurity and dust, […] unnoticed, [and] scarce consulted" (p. 6). To explain this harsh fate, the author claimed that "no monopoly was the sentiment in general, and an open trade the language of the whole" (p. 6).

The late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth century African trade debates politicized the slave trade. The lobby for free trade in human beings and the practical effects of open trade increased public distrust of the Royal African Company's monopoly. Opposing the slave trade monopoly of a joint-stock company, however, did not mean fighting against all trading regulations or sponsoring a laissez-faire agenda. As discussed in section 2.3, the underlying argument had never been about a dispute between mercantilist and liberal ideologies. After decades of political confrontation between a pre-revolutionary joint-stock company and a powerful mercantile group, a free slave trade had become "the language of the whole."

Despite believing that a joint-stock corporation with a temporary monopoly would increase the prosperity of the British slave trade, Postlethwayt would no longer pursue this agenda during the 1750s. He decided to explore another path, also opened by the debates between the RAC and independent traders. As discussed before, RAC propagandists had been associating the brutality of the slave trade with a lack of regulation since the beginning of the eighteenth century. Alternatively, they presented themselves as agents of civilization that could develop a humane commerce in staple crops and commodities with the African interior.

Pettigrew (2013, p. 180) argues that "the African Company's politicization of the transatlantic slave trade nurtured embryonic abolitionist language, ideas, and personnel." James Oglethorpe, one of the trustees who prohibited slavery in Georgia, was a RAC director during the

1730s (p. 193).[24] John Atkins, a surgeon in the Royal Navy and former employee of the RAC, wrote "the first promotional account of the African Company's activity in Africa that included an unequivocal desire to have the trade in enslaved Africans ended" (p. 196). On several occasions, the influential abolitionist Anthony Benezet quoted Atkins' *Voyage to Guinea, Brasil, and the West-Indies* (1735) (BENEZET, 1762, p. 49, 1767, p. 26, 1771, p. 124). Postlethwayt would thus not be the first person involved with the RAC to demonstrate antislavery inclinations.

Postlethwayt announced his new project of translating into English Savary de Brulons' famous *Dictionnaire Universel de Commerce* (1723) in the same year he published *Considerations on the Revival of the Royal-British-Assiento.*[25] The *Dictionary*'s first edition was published in installments between 1751 and 1755. According to Richard van den Berg (2017, p. 1172–73), "the initiative for this English version appears to have come from the London publishers John and Paul Knapton," who chose Postlethwayt because of his "great knowledge of the commercial literature."

In the Dedication appended to the first volume, Postlethwayt (1751-55, vol.1, n.p.) explained how "the plan of this work (...) is widely different from that of Savary" and "far more comprehensive." He admittedly borrowed "the facts and material" used in the *Dictionary* from other authors but included his own contributions as "remarks" to show "the application of these materials." As Brown (2006, p. 273 n.) shows, Postlethwayt "was recognized at the time and since as a 'literary pirate' who liberally appropriated the ideas of others."

This would be the case with Richard Cantillon's *Essay on the nature of trade in general*: Postlethwayt reproduced two-thirds of this book in his *Dictionary* (VAN DEN BERG, 2012, p. 879–80).[26] For instance, the first paragraphs of the entry "Labour" were extracted from Cantillon's comments on the intrinsic value of slaves (CANTILLON, 2015, p. 98-102; POSTLETHWAYT, 1751-55, vol. 2, p. 1-2). One may question, therefore, whether Postlethwayt wrote the *Dictionary*'s antislavery passages himself. Brown helped illuminate the subject:

> There are, nonetheless, at least three reasons to believe that antislavery opinions published in his work were in fact his own views. First, they also appeared in his works written to

[24] *Ibid* note 3.
[25] See Postlethwayt's *Dissertation on the plan, use and importance of the Universal Dictionary of Trade and Commerce* (1749a).
[26] For a detailed and thorough discussion of Postlethwayt's use of Cantillon's *Essay,* see van den Berg (2015, p. 15–21; 2012, 2017a). van den Berg (2017b) also addressed Postlethwayt's engagement with the Gournay Circle, particularly with the works of François Véron Duverger de Forbonnais. Nevertheless, the historian noted that Postlethwayt did not share Forbannais's "endorsement of the slave trade" (2017b, p. 37, n.106). For other "sources" of the dictionary, see Fraser (1938).

> confront specific junctures in British imperial affairs, notably *Britain's Commercial Interest, Explained and Improved*. (...) Second, the introduction to the third edition of the *Universal Dictionary* specifically identifies the passages on the African trade as the special contribution of the author. (...) Finally, those passages in the *Universal Dictionary* that were more critical of the Atlantic slave trade were featured in the sections set off as "remarks," sections in the Dictionary where Postlethwayt shifted from narrative and description to opinion and prescription, a tendency especially pronounced on topics concerned with the national interest. Postlethwayt's reasons for condemning the slave trade were complex (...), but the critique itself appears sincerely meant. (BROWN, 2006, p. 273–74 n.)

I can add two more reasons to this list. First, van den Berg (2015) shows that none of the entries discussing the British slave trade in the *Dictionary – Assiento*, Africa, East-Indian Company, and English African Company – reproduced Cantillon's *Essay.* Second, the narrative he built into these entries – restated a few years later in his *Britain's Commercial Interest* (1757a, p. 200-74) – is consistent with his previous discourse about African trade regulation. Here, I focus on the differences and similarities among Postlethwayt's publications from the 1740s and 1750s.

Except for minor changes, the content of the abovementioned four entries remained the same in subsequent editions – published respectively in 1757, 1766, and 1774 (posthumous). Throughout the *Dictionary*, Postlethwayt insisted that Great Britain should invest in improving its commercial relations with Africa. He was convinced that trading with the African interior would increase Britain's wealth and power. By introducing polite manners, customs, and even Christianity among Africans, the inland trade would supply the British Empire with valuable (and strategic) commodities and increase the exports of British manufactures. Additionally, cultivating a "natural, just, humane, and civilized commerce" with Africa might encourage the cultivation of staple crops (like sugar) in those countries. Since no other European power attempted to promote the inland trade in such proportions, Postlethwayt was convinced the British Empire would reap all the fruits of this enterprise without facing foreign competition (POSTLETHWAYT, 1751-55, vol. 1, p. 24–29, 685, 723–730, 923–928).

Nevertheless, Postlethwayt (1751-55, vol. 1, p. 25, 727) stressed that developing this profitable inland trade with African countries was unlikely if Britain's main interest remained the slave trade. The Atlantic slave trade "will ever spirit up wars and hostilities among the Negro princes and chiefs, for the sake of making captives of each other for sale." Consequently, this "unjust, inhumane, and unchristian-like traffic" would "ever obstruct the civilizing of these people, and extending the trade into the bowels of Africa, which, by the contrary means, might be easily practicable." In sum, Postlethwayt suggested the slave trade might hinder the development of a

profitable trade with the interior of the African Continent. To drive his point home, he asked, rhetorically:

> 6. Whether the greatest hindrance and obstruction to the Europeans cultivating a humane and Christian-like commerce with those populous countries, has not wholly proceeded from that unjust, and unchristian-like traffic called the Slave Trade, which is carried on by the Europeans? 7. Whether this trade, and this only, was not the primary cause, and still continues to be, of those eternal and incessant broils, quarrels, and animosities, which subsist between the negro princes and chiefs, and which they are induced to carry on, in other to make prisoners of one another, for the sake of the slave trade? 8. Whether, if trade was carried on with them for a series of years, as it has been with most other savage countries, and the Europeans gave no encouragement whatever to the slave-trade, those cruel wars among the Blacks would not cease, and a fair and honourable commerce in time take place throughout the whole country? (POSTLETHWAYT, 1751-55, p. 727)

Postlethwayt was defending the reorientation of British imperial policy towards the commodity trade with Western Africa. Britain should extend its commercial enterprises "into the very center" of those countries instead of exploring only "a trifling portion of trade upon the sea-coast" (POSTLETHWAYT, 1751-55, vol.1, p. 727). Since 1744, Postlethwayt had been highlighting the unexplored potential of African trade beyond supplying enslaved workers to the colonies. By the early 1750s, he was convinced the slave trade – more specifically, the British single-minded focus on it – prevented the development of a profitable alternative. Profitable because it would introduce European consumption patterns among African natives, thereby increasing the market for British manufactures. This could also be branded as a *virtuous* alternative to the *vicious* slave trade. For these reasons, he would abandon the common justifications of colonial slavery found in his previous writings.

First, Postlethwayt affirmed that "Europeans would make as good servants for the American planters as blacks do" (1751-55, vol.1, p. 25). He then wondered whether European nations were "not populous enough" – or could increase their population to the level necessary – "to supply their respective colonies" with free workers instead of enslaved Africans (p. 727). Lastly, he questioned "whether the British dominions in general have not an extent of territory sufficient to increase and multiply their inhabitants" and "whether it is not their own fault that they do not increase them sufficiently to supply their colonies and plantations with Whites instead of Blacks" (p. 727).

Postlethwayt was a pragmatic writer, however. He hoped his suggestions would someday "rouse some noble and benevolent Christian spirit to think of changing the [w]hole system of the

African trade," but could not foresee this happening anytime soon (1751-55, vol. 1, p. 25). Despite declaring his "disapprobation of the slave trade in general" (p. 134), Postlethwayt acknowledged it was "a very beneficial traffic to the kingdom" (p. 25). Accordingly, he advanced a plan to develop inland African commerce that resembled his 1744 proposal – the separate traders would specialize in the slave trade, and the East India Company would have an exclusive right to enhance the trade in commodities and staple crops.

In the "East Indian Company" entry, Postlethwayt (1751-55, vol. 1, p. 685) suggested the benefits of colonizing African countries: "the mere establishments of forts, settlements, and factories upon the sea-coasts, do not seem to be so well calculated for an extensive commerce, as having populous colonies under dominion." With this in mind, he proposed measures "to be brought under the consideration of Parliament" to increase British presence and trade in African territories. Postlethwayt suggests the East India Company should take responsibility for "every branch of the trade to Africa" besides the slave trade. By these means, the Company would be "instrumental" in extending British trade.

Considering how the slave trade was organized by then, Postlethwayt suggested it should be "left in the hands of the separate British Traders." Conversely, the East India Company should have an exclusive right to all other "branches" of the African trade for a certain period. This new Company – tentatively called "The Royal East-Indian and African Company" – should receive the £10,000 granted to the Company of Merchants Trading to Africa and take over the management of the forts and settlements on the African Coast. Additionally, the new Company would have to build a certain number of "inland forts and factories at their own expense, to facilitate trade between the most interior parts of Africa and the sea-Coast." Finally, half of the commodities exported to Africa "shall be of British produce and manufacture" and "the other half of the produce and manufacture of the East-Indies" (1751-55, vol. 1, p. 685–686).

Following the same reasoning of his former works, Postlethwayt argued the inland African trade would "never be increased to the degree is capable of" without the erection of "interior forts and factories" and their due administration by a "powerful company with a large trading stock." If Britain supported this new Company for "half a century only," he was convinced that "Britons" would be "as well acquainted with the interior territories of that extended country, as they are at present with the Coast" (1751-55, vol. 1, p. 686).

Postlethwayt anticipated objections to his proposals that recalled the RAC's fate. His response was to affirm the RAC had been in a "precarious situation" since the Glorious Revolution, "depending only upon the royal prerogative, without any parliamentary sanction." The £100,000 capital stock raised by that Company "was soon sunk in the purchase, repairs, and erection of forts and castles." Under "all these disadvantages and discouragements," the RAC could never "make a tolerable progress in this commerce." Postlethwayt then concludes: "As this trade yet never had a fair trial, by means of a company founded upon parliamentary authority, no man can presume to say, that what has never been tried will miscarry" (1751-55, vol. 1, p. 686). At bottom, developing an inland trade with African countries and increasing British presence in the continent were worth a fair trial.

2.7 Postlethwayt and early antislavery

From 1744 to 1749, Postlethwayt devised different plans to manage the British slave trade. With the divestment of the Royal African Company and what seemed like a definitive victory of independent traders, he gave up on regulating this specific branch of the African trade. The *Dictionary* and later publications would still acknowledge the central role of the slave trade in the imperial economy, often complaining about its declining condition. Nevertheless, his focus shifted to the commercial possibilities of trading in African commodities and staple crops.

Resonating with the RAC propagandists from the early eighteenth century, Postlethwayt suggested only a joint-stock company with exclusive commercial rights could promote a civilized and humane commerce with the African interior. In so doing, he established that a profitable African trade could be developed *despite* the transatlantic slave trade. Early antislavery writers would selectively appropriate his discourse to argue that a legitimate commerce with Africa could *replace* it.

In 1764, the Virginian-born Arthur Lee wrote a pamphlet reacting to Adam Smith's claim that slave traders and enslavers "possess the virtues neither of the countries which they come from, nor of those which they go to" (TMS V.2.9, p. 205-206).[27] The pamphlet tried to defend the character of American colonists and refute Smith's description of Africans as "heroes." The publication, as Brown (2006, p. 116) described, was "an atypical (for the time) mélange of

[27] For further discussion on Adam Smith's antislavery comments and Arthur Lee's reaction, see Chapter 3.

antislavery and racism." Lee (1764, p. 45-46) was among the first antislavery writers to nominally cite Postlethwayt:

> (…) it is the opinion of Mr. Postlethwayte, that the colonies might be more advantageously peopled from Europe; and that it would be for the interest of the Europeans, to abolish the slave-trade; which, though profitable itself, is yet an insuperable bar to other more valuable improvements in Africa. (LEE, 1764, p. 45–46)

If Lee did not "prescribe any method" to abolish the slave trade, he selectively drew upon Postlethwayt's *Dictionary* to suggest the economic expediency of abolition. As discussed in the previous section, Postlethwayt's antislavery comments were connected to a broader political context surrounding the slave trade's regulation. Besides, his own practical solution was far from abolitionist: the East Indian Company should administer the inland commerce in natural produces and other commodities while independent traders took care of the slave trade. Even so, Postlethwayt became a source of antislavery thought, and for no mysterious reasons: after all, he could be portrayed as a well-known commercial writer who suggested that ending the transatlantic slave trade might be in "the interest of Europeans."

Some abolitionists, however, were conscious of Postlethwayt's legacy and avoided a nominal quotation. This was the case of Anthony Benezet, one of the leading voices of early abolitionism, who apparently relied on Postlethwayt's *Dictionary* to compose his *Some Historical Account of Guinea* (1771), though without including any explicit references. Brown (2013, p. 156–157) compared extracts from the *Dictionary* to passages in Benezet's *Historical Account* and showed how the latter drew selectively on the arguments of the former.

James Swan, a Scottish-born merchant who emigrated to New England in the 1760s, also relied on Postlethwayt in his *Dissuasion to Great Britain and her Colonies from the Slave Trade to Africa* (1772). Swan quoted the *Dictionary* extensively while discussing the disadvantages the slave trade brought to Africa, America, and Britain and the advantages that could emerge from its abolition (1772, p. 45–60). Ultimately, he proposed an abolitionist version of Postlethwayt's plan to encourage the inland trade with Africa (p. 63-64). In 1773, a group of black abolitionists asked Swan to reprint *Dissuasion* and attached it to their petition to the Massachusetts General Court for freedom (BRUNS, 1977, p. 200; SINHA, 2016, p. 41–42).

Postlethwayt's ideas would be revived in the British antislavery debate after 1783 – when the first petition for the abolition of the slave trade was sent to Parliament by a group of Quakers.

James Ramsay's *Inquiry Into the Effects of Putting a Stop to the African Slave Trade* (1784, p. 11-24) answered concerns about the economic impacts of abolition, arguing that legitimate commerce in African staple crops was the obvious replacement to the slave trade:

> Were Africa civilized, and could we preoccupy the affections of the natives, and introduce gradually our religion, manners, and language among them, we should open a market, that would fully employ our manufacturers and seamen, morally speaking, till the end of time. And while we enriched ourselves, we should contribute to their happiness. (RAMSAY, 1784, p. 14-15)

If Ramsay developed Postlethwayt's ideas without explicit acknowledgment, the first metropolitan abolitionist society would deliberately – if selectively – promote the *Dictionary* as an antislavery piece. Among its activities, the recently founded London Abolitionist Society printed antislavery tracts and pamphlets to popularize the abolitionist cause. In 1788, the Society republished Anthony Benezet's *Some Historical Account of Guinea* (1771), adding an appendix with passages from Postlethwayt's *Dictionary* (BROWN, 2013, p. 143).

Thomas Clarkson's *Essay on the Impolicy of the African Slave Trade*, mentioned in section 2.2, appeared in the same year. At the beginning of his tract, Clarkson stresses the unexplored potential of the commodity trade with African countries and places it as a profitable alternative to the slave trade (CLARKSON, 1788, p. 5–22). He then adduces Postlethwayt's shift towards antislavery as confirmation of the viability of legitimate commerce with Africa:

> Though these conclusions are so strictly to be drawn from the facts laid down, yet it would be unpardonable to withhold the sentiments of a person on this occasion, from whom they must receive such additional weight. It is remarkable, that the late Mr. Postlethwayt, the celebrated author of the Dictionary on Trade and Commerce, should, in a pamphlet which he published in the year 1748, not only endeavour to shew the *policy* of the slave trade, but attempt at its *justification*; and that the same person having afterwards made commerce his peculiar study, and being enable to judge better of the nature of this trade, from having been a member of the African Committee, should totally alter his sentiments both with respect to the policy and justice of it.[28] (CLARKSON, 1788, p. 21)

Besides Clarkson, late-eighteenth century abolitionists such as Olaudah Equiano (1789, p. 248–54) and James Dana (1790] 1791) likewise selectively used Postlethwayt's writings to strengthen their case against the slave trade (see BROWN, 2006, p. 274; GOULD, 2003, p. 40). In

[28] By "a pamphlet he published in the year 1748", Clarkson likely means the *The National and Private Advantages of the African Trade Considered* – first published in 1746 – or a later version of that tract.

the early nineteenth century, Clarkson (1808, p. 60) would include Postlethwayt among the forerunners of abolitionism in his *History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the African slave trade*.

2.8 Conclusion

Even after abolitionism became a political agenda in late-eighteenth century Britain, few would question the importance of the slave trade (and slavery) to the imperial economy. Since the late seventeenth century, even writers with opposite political agendas agreed on the strategic role of the transatlantic slave trade to guarantee the British Empire's prosperity. Confronting these arguments required more than exposing the inhumanity of the slave trade or criticizing the practice purely on moral grounds. Accordingly, abolitionists selectively relied on commercial writers like Malachy Postlethwayt to defend that a "civilized," "virtuous," and "legitimate" commerce in African staple crops could be an *equally profitable alternative* to the slave trade. In so doing, they turned Postlethwayt into a precursor of abolitionism.

However, as Pettigrew (2013, p. 205) remarked, Postlethwayt was "the most important poster boy for" the Royal African Company's "ambivalence toward the slave trade." If the RAC fought for the exclusive right to trade in enslaved Africans in post-revolutionary Britain, it also identified free trade in human beings with barbarity and kidnapping. After losing its monopoly and market share, the company attempted more than once to redefine its enterprise as the development of a "civilized commerce with the African interior" – as opposed to the vicious free trade in enslaved Africans (p. 186-88). Whenever convenient, however, the RAC described its enterprise as complementary to the activities pursued by independent traders. This was particularly true of the period between 1730 and the mid-1740s. By then, the company's propagandists insisted that African forts were essential to guarantee not only the British share of the slave trade but also the enterprise of independent traders.

Postlethwayt's writings somehow reflected the company's ambivalent messages. The pamphlets written in 1744, 1745, and 1746 aimed to convince the public that the interest of the Royal African Company was the same as that of independent traders: to guarantee the British share in the transatlantic slave trade. Supporting the Western African trading forts – and, indirectly, the company itself – was a matter of both *private* and *national* interest. Accordingly, Postlethwayt devised schemes to conciliate the RAC's activities with those of the independent traders. His 1744

pamphlet brought back the old dream of exploring the African interior, suggesting the RAC should specialize in the commodity trade while the separate traders continued to pursue the slave trade. Two years later, he would change gears and defend that independent traders should buy enslaved Africans exclusively from the company.

The company's situation would deteriorate soon thereafter. In 1747, Parliament decided to create another company to manage the public subsidies to maintain the Western African forts. By 1748, when Postlethwayt wrote *Considerations on the Revival of the Royal-British-Assiento*, the divestment of the RAC was imminent. He now attempted to convince the South Sea Company's directors to lobby for the management of the African forts, arguing that only a joint-stock company with a temporary commercial monopoly could save the British share in the slave trade.

In the *Universal Dictionary of Trade and Commerce* (1751-55), written after the independent merchants' free trade agenda emerged victorious, he would no longer advance a plan to regulate the slave trade. Postlethwayt, who might have acknowledged the separate traders' strength and lobbying skills, devised a modified version of his 1744 proposal. The solution relied on specialization: a joint-stock company (the East India Company) would take care of the existing forts, build new ones, and be awarded a temporary monopoly of the commodity trade with the African interior, while the separate traders would take care of the slave trade. Echoing the RAC sponsors from the early-eighteenth century, Postlethwayt portrayed the inland trade as a *civilized* commerce, a legitimate enterprise, more virtuous than the slave trade, and equally, if not more, profitable.

Such was the context behind Postlethwayt's antislavery comments. If he shared the RAC's ambivalent attitudes towards the slave trade, he also repeatedly insisted on the unexplored commercial potential of African countries. By doing so, he prepared a compelling case for later abolitionists: the commerce in African natural products and staple crops would be at least as advantageous to the imperial economy as the transatlantic slave trade. Even if Postlethwayt was far from an abolitionist himself, he thus became a source of inspiration for antislavery thought. Among abolitionists, he would come to be regarded as the influential commercial writer who saw the "impolicy" of the slave trade and the expediency of abolition in the mid-eighteenth century – arguments developed amidst debates in which the centrality of slavery to British imperial political economy was taken for granted.

3. "FREE LABOR IDEOLOGY" BEFORE ADAM SMITH: FREE VS SLAVE LABOR IN THE BRITISH PUBLIC DEBATE

3.1 Introduction

In May 1787, a group of antislavery activists created a committee that would later become the London Abolitionist Society. Understanding abolitionism as a transatlantic movement, the committee corresponded with other societies from the very beginning. In July 1787, they sent a letter to Benjamin Rush, secretary of the Pennsylvania Abolitionist Society (PAS), inquiring on "what consequences have resulted to Plantations where the manumission of slaves has already taken place" (BL/Add MS21254). In October 1787, the PAS answered: "Our opinion from many observations is, that were lands to be cultivated by freemen, they would be much more productive than those cultivated by slaves. In this as in every other case the obligations of justice and interest both inculcate the same line of conduct" (PAS papers/Series I, AmS.01).

For my purposes, ascertaining whether that conclusion was drawn from concrete observations or theoretical assumptions is less important than putting in evidence how, by 1787, free labor had become, at least rhetorically, a viable alternative to the further enslavement of Africans. This would have been inconceivable a century earlier, when slavery represented a solution for metropolitan concerns about the possible reduction of English population caused by the colonization effort.[29] By the late eighteenth century, metropolitan writers designed gradual abolitionist plans presupposing not only that it was possible to cultivate the colonies with free labor but also that it would be more profitable to do so. Historians of abolitionism usually connect this tendency in the antislavery literature with the emergence of a "new political economy."

Robin Blackburn (1988, p. 51) believes "the case against slavery" was "strengthened by the fact that it could find support in the new political economy, most particularly in the central dogma concerning the productive superiority of free labor." Seymour Drescher (2002, p. 6–7) argues that "political economy was the most popular source of authority" among abolitionists because "it directly provoked and answered questions about the relative superiority of free vs. slave labor." Adam Smith, he continues, was "the most distinguished metropolitan exponent of the new view of the economics of slavery" (p. 20-21). Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776) was so "straightforward" in making an economic case against slavery that it remained "compelling to

[29] For metropolitan perceptions of colonization, population, and slavery in the 17th century, see Swingen (2014; 2015).

antislavery advocates during generations of political struggle against the Atlantic slave trade and Caribbean slavery" (DRESCHER, 2002, p. 22).

For most scholars, Adam Smith's political economy epitomized the defense of free over slave labor in the eighteenth century. Accordingly, their accounts conventionally start with the *Wealth of Nations* (WN). Despite acknowledging that references to the lower cost and superior productivity of free labor were relatively common even before Adam Smith, historians of British antislavery have not discussed them in any detail. Accordingly, this essay shows how mid- to late-eighteenth century writers compared the cost/productivity of free and slave labor while addressing different political-economic issues. Focusing on the public debate rather than the canonical political economy literature, I will discuss pamphlets and tracts published roughly between the 1740s and 1770s.

Before proceeding, it is worth clarifying that I do not claim all writers discussed below have been abolitionists (or even proto-abolitionists). Some, most notably Granville Sharp, would be later involved in the organized abolitionist movement – but this was the exception rather than the rule. Adam Smith did not participate actively in the early abolitionist movement in Scotland, dying shortly after the national petition campaigns began (WHYTE, 2006, p. 87-91). John Millar, his pupil and friend, likely wrote two petitions sent to the Parliament in 1788 and 1792 on behalf of the University of Glasgow (MULLEN; NEWMAN, 2018, p. 5). For my purposes, it does not matter whether these writers were themselves abolitionists. All of them mobilized antislavery arguments in the publications discussed below, even if instrumentally. Their intentions and political engagement with the cause are less critical than how political economy discourses were used to address the broader issue of colonial slavery.

The essay is organized as follows. Section 3.2 summarizes Adam Smith's account of colonial slavery and shows how historians approached the relationship between his political economy and British abolitionism. Taking Smith's *Wealth of Nations* as their starting point, these historians did not investigate other eighteenth-century writers who compared free and slave labor before Adam Smith. The following sections survey publications printed in England, Scotland, North America, and the Caribbean touching upon the cost and productivity of free vs. slave labor before 1776. I draw some conclusions in the last section.

3.2 Adam Smith's Political Economy and British Abolitionism

Adam Smith first criticized the enslavement of Africans in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) while discussing how people in "rude and barbarous nations" cultivated the virtues of self-command more "than those of humanity" (TMS V.2.8-9). Accordingly, Africans demonstrated a great "contempt of death and torture" and, "in this respect, possess[ed] a degree of magnanimity which the soul of his sordid master is scarce capable of conceiving" (TMS V.2.9). Smith then introduced an eloquent attack on slavery and the slave trade:

> Fortune never exerted more cruelly her empire over mankind, than when she subjected those nations of heroes to the refuse of the jails of Europe, to wretches who possess the virtues neither of the countries which they come from, nor of those which they go to, and whose levity, brutality, and baseness, so justly expose them to the contempt of the vanquished. (TMS V.2.9)[30]

These few sentences were enough to infuriate the Virginian Arthur Lee (1764, p. 31), who wondered how could "the mind of a man of sense, a philosopher, a moralist, be so strangely perverted." Reacting to Smith's description of Africa as "nations of heroes" and America as "the refuse of the jails of Europe,"[31] Lee intertwined racism and antislavery in his *Essay in Vindication of the Continental Colonies of America, From a Censure of Mr. Adam Smith in his Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1764). Accordingly, he argued that Africans were "a race of the most detestable and vile that ever the earth produced" (LEE, 1764, p. 30). Conversely, the North American settlers "descended from worthy ancestors" and were "a humane, hospitable and polished people" (p. 30). He concluded that Smith's account of the continental colonists was founded on "prejudice"[32] (p. 31).

Adam Smith would address the issue of slavery at more length in his lectures on moral philosophy at the University of Glasgow (1752-1763). The *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (LJ), published in 1978 as part of the *Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith*,

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[30] Brown (2006, p. 114–115) argued that Smith's discussion reflected a metropolitan tendency "to cast the enslavement of Africans as a colonial innovation wholly unrelated to the need and values of the more civilized metropolis, as a consequence, instead, of choices made by degenerate Britons".

[31] Klein (2020) argued that Smith was attacking the slave traders, not American slaveholders. The author, however, does not provide enough evidence to exclude colonists from the scope of Smith's criticism. Here, I assume he was criticizing both slave traders and slaveholders.

[32] Lee's criticism did not inspire, however, any substantial change in future editions of TMS. Smith included "too often" in "a degree of magnanimity which the soul of his master is *too often* scarce capable of conceiving" in the 3rd edition, published in 1767 (see TMS V.2.9, p. 206).

reproduce notes taken from Smith's lectures. Smith discussed chattel slavery and coerced labor in different historical periods while teaching Domestic Law – the rights "which belong to a man as a member of a family" (LJ, p. 141). During his lectures, Smith addressed the origins of slavery and the possibilities of abolition, its inconveniences to both enslavers and enslaved, and how the treatment accorded to enslaved people changed depending on the society's government and wealth (LJ, p. 175-99, 450-56). In these sections, Smith presented an early version of the WN's economic arguments on the superiority of free labor.

Salter (1996, p. 226–27) argued that Smith's *Lectures* must be understood as an "attempt to confront traditional natural law arguments about the origins and justification of slavery." Smith, he continued, reacted to Grotius' and Pufendorf's arguments on the "utility" of self-enslavement and their implicit assumption that slavery was "a rational institution, entered into voluntarily for economic reasons" (p. 241). Thus, "the whole point of Smith's discussion of the economics of slavery was to illustrate his central argument that slavery was founded, not on utility, but on tyranny" (p. 241). For these reasons, Salter concluded, "it would be misleading" to see Smith's arguments on the superiority of free labor "as a form of advocacy" meant "to encourage abolition" (p. 240).

Griswold (1999, p. 199) also believes that Smith's political economy of slavery intended to "block justifications by reference to the alleged utility of the institution for the majority." But Smith's philosophy proved the injustice of slavery quite apart from political-economic considerations (p. 200). In his words, Smith's TMS showed that "an impartial spectator who looks on the situation sympathetically, and therefore also from the standpoint of the slaves, will feel the appropriate resentment against the masters and benevolence toward the slaves and will therefore pronounce their enslavement unjust" (p. 200).

Smith's moral sentimentalism did inform early antislavery rhetoric (see CAREY, 2005, p. 18–45). Nevertheless, most late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century abolitionists would rely instead on Smith's political economy of slavery.[33] The *Wealth of Nations* presented an encompassing assertion of the superiority of free labor over different kinds of coerced labor

[33] Drescher (2002, p. 54–72) showed the influence of Adam Smith's "new economics of slavery" in the 1820s debates over emancipation. Blas & Gorostiza (2017) and Coutinho (2017) discussed, respectively, how Spanish abolitionists and José da Silva Lisboa engaged with Smith's economic arguments against slavery. Levy (2001) showed the influence of Smith's theory of human homogeneity in the nineteenth-century political economy of slavery – see also Peart and Levy (2005). Fezzey (2017) compared the alternatives to slavery proposed in the writings of Adam Smith, Frances Wright, and Robert Wedderburn.

(chattel slavery therein included). In short, Smith argued that coercion would never have the same effects on labor productivity as freedom.[34]

Free workers could enjoy the fruits of their own labor and had incentives to work harder to acquire the necessities and conveniences of life (WN, III.ii.8-9). They were also interested in inventing new tools and machines to "abridge and facilitate" their work (WN IV.ix.47). Conversely, enslaved people had no interest in being more productive because everything they produced belonged to the slaveholder (WN, III.ii.8-9). Besides, an enslaved worker who invented a new tool would likely be punished instead of rewarded – slaveholders would see it as an attempt to work less at their expense (WN, IV.ix.47).

The lack of motivation explained, at least in part, why "the work done by slaves, though it appears to cost only their maintenance, is in the end the dearest of any" (WN, III.ii.9). Smith provided another reason: slaveholders and overseers did not manage the expenses destined to maintain and replace enslaved workers with the same frugality that free workers administered their wage (WN, I.viii.41). Thus, he concluded, "it appears (…) from the experiences of all ages and nations (…) that the work done by freemen comes cheaper in the end than that performed by slaves", even "where the wages of common labour" are the highest (WN, I.viii.47).

These general observations suggested that employing free over enslaved workers in British colonies would be cheaper. Nevertheless, Smith did not believe the superiority of free labor would lead unequivocally to abolition. First, emancipation meant depriving slaveholders of "their property," and governments did not have the power necessary to enforce this without providing compensation (SILVA, 2022, p. 146–47).[35] Second, while it might be in the economic interest of planters to manumit enslaved Africans, their "natural preferences are to employ slaves wherever possible" (SALTER, 1996, p. 240). According to Smith: "The pride of man makes him love to domineer, and nothing mortifies him so much as to be obliged to condescend with his inferiors. Wherever the law allows it, and the nature of the work can afford it, therefore, he will generally prefer the service of slaves to that of freemen" (WN, III.ii.10).

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[34] According to Danielle Charette (2023, p. 13), Hume included a reference to the superior productivity of free labor in the last edition of his *Essay on the populousness of antient nations*, "after reading Smith's Wealth of Nations in the spring of 1776". Hume ([1777]1987, p. 390 n.) inserted the following paragraph to a footnote: "I shall add, that, from the experience of our planters, slavery is as little advantageous to the master as to the slave, wherever hired servants can be procured. A man is obliged to cloath and feed his slave; and he does no more for his servant: The price of first purchase is, therefore, so much loss to him: not to mention, that the fear of punishment will never draw so much labour from a slave, as the dread of being turned off and not getting another service will for a free man." (p. 390).

[35] Lapidus (2002) and Weingast (2020) further explored the theme of abolition in Adam Smith.

Smith added, however, that American and Caribbean planters would prefer to employ slave labor only when "the nature of the work can afford it" (WN, III.ii.10). In short, they "could only afford the massive employment of enslaved Africans if profits compensated the higher costs" (SILVA, 2022, p. 148). Therefore, he concluded, only "the planting of sugar and tobacco can afford the expense of slave-cultivation" (WN, III.ii.10). The profits of sugar and tobacco were artificially held above their normal rate by trade regulations and market control (SILVA, 2022, p. 148–152). Indirectly, Smith associated the increasing number of enslaved Africans in the Caribbean and Chesapeake colonies to the "mercantile" policies regulating the colonial system he comprehensively attacked (ED, p. 579-80; WN, VI.vii.b.50-64, IV.vii.c). Accordingly, he "saw the high profitability arising from mercantilist regulations as an enabling condition" to employ enslaved labor in the sugar and tobacco plantations (SILVA, 2022, p. 149).

As Drescher (2002, p. 26) pointed out, Smith "did not challenge the climatological rationale" used to justify African labor in "tropical areas." In Smith's own words: "The constitution of those who have been born in Europe could not, it is supposed, support the labor of digging the ground under the burning sun of the West Indies; and the culture of sugar-cane, as it is managed at present, is all hand labor" (WN, IV.vii.b.54). These arguments, commonly used to justify the enslavement of Africans, could be subverted to support early abolitionist schemes (see section 3.5.2). Thus, one should not suppose that Smith was justifying the utility of slavery in tropical plantations by not questioning the "climatological rationale."

For my purposes, however, more important than the climatological argument is Smith's assumption that a better treatment of enslaved Africans could attenuate the economic disadvantages of slave labor. British colonial policies, despite being "dictated by the same spirit as that of other nations," were "less illiberal and oppressive" than those of other European countries (WN, IV.vii.b.50). British liberal government explained, at the same time, the incredible prosperity of North American colonies (New England, New York, Pennsylvania) and the economic advantage enjoyed by the French in the sugar trade (WN, IV.vii.b.50-54). Smith attributes the prosperity of the French sugar colonies (over the British) to the "better management of their negro slaves" (WN, IV.vii.b.53).

For him, "the genius of the government" explained the different management of enslaved workers in British and French sugar plantations (WN, IV.vii.b.53-54). The "arbitrary" government of the French West Indies allowed magistrates to interfere in the slaveholders' private affairs and

somehow protect enslaved workers from extreme violence and abuse (WN, IV.vii.b.54). This would be hardly possible in the British Caribbean: "in a free country, where the master is perhaps either a member of the colony assembly, or an elector of such member," the magistrate would "not dare" to protect enslaved people "but with the greatest caution and circumspection" (WN, IV.vii.b.54). Thus, Smith concluded:

> The protection of the magistrate renders the slave less contemptible in the eyes of his master, who is thereby induced to consider him with more regard, and to treat him with more gentleness. Gentle usage renders the slave not only more faithful, but more intelligent, and therefore, upon a double account, more useful. He approaches more to the condition of a free servant, and may possess some degree of integrity and attachment to his master's interests, virtues which frequently belong to free servants, but which never can belong to a slave, who is treated as slaves commonly are in countries where the master is perfectly free and secure. (WN, IV.vii.b.54)

Under better treatment and "gentle usage", enslaved Africans were closer "to the condition of a free servant" – thus more productive and inventive. Accordingly, a settler who kept enslaved workers "well-fed and in good disposition ensured that they produce more" (SILVA, 2022, p. 150). Smith's discussion of the treatment of enslaved Africans in the Caribbean had two crucial implications. First, it corroborated his broader assumption that interest increased labor productivity more effectively than violence. Second, it positioned Smith alongside other eighteenth-century writers who vindicated the positive outcomes of better treatment and management of enslaved workers – specifically, Edmund Burke (see section 3.3.2).

Finally, it is worth mentioning Smith's relative silence about the slave trade. He discussed the Royal African Company and its successor, the Company of Merchants Trading to Africa, in the WN without explicitly criticizing the slave trade (WN, IV.i.e.12-20). Additionally, Smith did not mention the cost of purchasing an enslaved person while comparing free and slave labor costs, or the slave trade's profitability while discussing colonial trade (SILVA, 2022, p. 151). John Millar, Smith's friend and Professor at the University of Glasgow, would incorporate these elements in his own discussion of colonial slavery (see section 3.6.1).

As discussed in the general introduction, historians of Anglo-American antislavery often address the influence of Adam Smith's political economy on British abolitionism. If Eric Williams' *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944, p. vii) was not "an essay in ideas or interpretation," it contributed to placing Adam Smith's political economy at the center of a historiographical controversy about the connection between capitalism and antislavery. Williams (1944, p. vii) associated abolition

and emancipation with the emergence of free trade – a new political-economic agenda of "mature industrial capitalism." For him, the American Revolution was the turning point leading from the mercantilist colonial system to the free trade industrial order (p. 120).

Williams believed Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* "was the philosophical antecedent of the American Revolution" (p. 107). Providing a sharp attack on the mercantilist policies regulating the colonial enterprise, "Adam Smith's role was to liberate intellectually 'the mean and malignant expedients' of a system which the armies of George Washington dealt a mortal wound on the battlefields of America" (p. 107). Described as "the intellectual champion of the industrial middle class with its new-found doctrine of freedom," Smith would become the sponsor of a free trade ideology used to dismantle at once the colonial monopoly and slavery (p. 5-6).

Historians of British abolitionism have since been searching for the connections between abolitionism and "classical political economy." David Brion Davis ([1975] 1999, p. 350) claimed "the anti-slavery movement, like Smith's political economy, reflected the needs and values of the emerging capitalist order." Describing the slave system as the epitome of "those artificial market conditions which multiplied conflicts of interest," Adam Smith framed justified abolition "on the same grounds as the remover of other artificial restrictions" to free enterprise (p. 351). Thereby, he connected antislavery to the defense of economic freedom (free trade and a free labor market) and helped frame "the end of protectionism" as "the ultimate emancipation" (p. 361). In so doing, Smith "unconsciously" reflected (and legitimated) capitalist ideology.

Howard Temperley (1977, p. 106–107) argued that "the obvious place to start" investigating the influence of capitalist ideology on British abolitionism was "the work of classical economists." They were the "theoreticians of capitalism" and "reflected a general hostility to slavery" that was notable since Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (p. 106-107). Smith's critique of slavery, Temperley continued, "was a natural extension of his general belief in economic freedom" (p. 109). Smith and other "classical economists" assumed "freedom and prosperity went hand in hand" because they generalized metropolitan experience with civil and personal liberty (p. 108-109). Accordingly, Smith's assertion of the superiority of free labor ignored colonial experience up to that point (p. 108). His free labor ideology was wrong because it was "not based in any sort of cost analysis" but on an equivocated "theory of human motivation" (p. 107).

Nevertheless, according to Temperley (1977, p. 109), Smith left an essential message to the antislavery movement: "Freedom meant prosperity"; it "meant having willing workers as

opposed to unwilling ones" (p. 109). Accordingly, abolitionists would draw upon these notions to create the following narrative: if the slave trade were abolished, planters "would be compelled to behave more humanely" towards the enslaved; "this, in turn, would cause production to rise so that, stage by stage, greater liberality being followed by larger yields, piecemeal and ultimately complete emancipation would occur" (p. 109). In sum, the "capitalist ideology" sponsored by Adam Smith "served the abolitionists well" (p. 114). Their fight for freeing enslaved Africans and African Americans could be portrayed, in the end, as promoting both humanity and wealth, happiness and economic prosperity.

These three interpretations somehow reinforce a caricature of Adam Smith "as the father of capitalism, the defender of laissez-faire economics, the advocate of selfishness, and the prophet of the invisible hand of the market" (SMITH, 2020, p. 1). If Smith's scholarship has continuously challenged this caricature since the late 1970s, it is worth remembering that Williams, Davis, and Temperley started from the received wisdom about Smith's political economy.[36] After almost fifty years of revisionism, however, it is now difficult to sustain that Adam Smith's political economy either contained or reflected an unapologetic defense of industrial capitalism.

One may still wonder, however, how British abolitionists themselves mobilized Adam Smith's "free labor ideology" to promote their cause. Seymour Drescher discussed this subject in *The Mighty Experiment* (2002), arguing that, "at the end of the eighteenth century, when slavery was first massively challenged on moral grounds, both opponents and defenders seized the opportunity to bring rational arguments and scientific principles to the issue" (DRESCHER, 2002, p. 5). He thus investigated how abolitionists appealed to the authority of political economy to guide (and justify) their policy recommendations.

According to Drescher (2002, p. 20), "economics was the first of the new human sciences to address itself directly to the problem of slavery." Its main contribution to the abolitionist debate would be the "assertion of the free labor superiority" (p. 15). The utmost expression of this argument was presented in Smith's *Wealth of Nations*:

> The opening theme of Wealth of Nations was labor. In its productivity, its division, and its maintenance lay the chief source of societal improvement. The optimum source of labor was itself the free action of the laborer. Ample rewards for voluntary labor increased the productivity, the diligence, and the needs of the beings whose satisfaction and freedom, as both workers and consumers, were the true aim of an 'opulent and free'

[36] For further discussion, see the first and eighth chapters of Craig Smith's *Adam Smith* (2020).

> society. In such a world slavery was not only morally objectionable but also, a priori, economic defective. Freedom for laborers was as beneficial for the masters as for the workers." (DRESCHER, 2002, p. 21)

As Drescher further remarked, "Smith's work unambiguously suggests that modern commerce had helped to liberate common workers in the West from their stigma of servility" (p. 32). Unlike his contemporaries, Smith provided an incisive "condemnation of slavery as an economic institution" (p. 32). Abolitionists could thereafter argue that, "quite apart from arguments or sentiments based on morality, sacrality, or inviolability, the principle of labor freedom served to maximize economic utility for all" (p. 21). Accordingly, some antislavery publications during the 1780s would begin to appeal to "Smith's principle of the superiority of free labor" (p. 35).[37]

Nevertheless, as Drescher (2002, p. 35) pointed out, the London Society propaganda and the several petitions for slave trade abolition circulated during the 1790s did not rely on the economic case against slavery. The "reticence to invoke Adam Smith's powerful authority" could be related to the abolitionist movement's tactical decision to oppose the slave trade instead of colonial slavery, or else indicate that the economic power and prosperity of the West Indies made the slave-based plantation system "too formidable to attack" for "the generation after the publication of the Wealth of Nations" (p. 35). Smith's free labor ideology, "held in abeyance while the African slave trade remained the focus of political debate," was revived when "abolitionists began their mass campaigns for emancipation in the 1820s" (p. 54).

My approach to the so-called "free labor ideology" brings me closer to Drescher than to other interpretations. After all, I focus on how eighteenth century antislavery writers mobilized the superiority of free labor to defend specific political agendas. As previously argued in the general introduction, however, Drescher started from a restrictive understanding of eighteenth-century economic literature. If "protoeconomists posed no radical opposition between free and slave labor" before Smith (DRESCHER, 2002, p. 16), they had been increasingly articulating the idea (at different levels of abstraction) that free labor could be a profitable alternative to the continuous enslavement of Africans.

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[37] Drescher (2002, p. 34-35) refers to James Ramsay and Thomas Clarkson, while Matsumoto (2011) discusses Smith's influence on Joseph Priestley's antislavery writings. Priestley (1788, p. 377) was one of the few who nominally cited the *Wealth of Nations*. Perdices de Blas & Ramos Gorostiza (2017, p. 5) mention Smith's influence on James Anderson's *Observations on slavery.* For a calculation of the cost of slave and free labor, see Anderson (1789, p. 8–10).

Indeed, both Drescher (1987, p. 134 n. 82) and Davis (1988, p. 434 n. 24) acknowledge that metropolitan writers had long insisted that free labor was more productive than coerced labor. Nevertheless, they do not investigate the early history of "free labor ideology" and implicitly assume the *Wealth of Nations* as their starting point. This is understandable, considering Adam Smith's prestige as a political economist. Besides, nineteenth-century political economists and abolitionists did rely on his formulation of "free labor ideology." In this essay, I take the opposite route, focusing on publications from before 1776 that relied on the superiority of free labor to promote various political-economic agendas.

3.3 Antislavery, "colonial security," and the productivity of free vs. slave labor

During the mid-eighteenth century, metropolitan and colonial writers appealed to the superior productivity of free labor while discussing the vulnerability of white settlers in the West Indies and Southern continental colonies. Decades before the Saint-Domingue Revolution, several authors mobilized antislavery arguments to address the threat posed by slave rebellions to white settlers. These concerns increased during periods of warfare when, besides the fear of internal conflict, settlers were exposed to the threat of foreign invasion. Writers often argued that enslaved people could not be trusted as part of the militia, concluding that increasing the number of free people was essential to colonial security – especially in the British West Indies.

The original settlement of Georgia spoke to this broader concern with the defense of slave-based territories. In 1732, George II granted a charter for establishing a colony that would function as a "military buffer" between the mainland British colonies and Spanish America. Two years later, the trustees in charge of the Georgia settlement guaranteed the prohibition of slavery in the newly founded colony. According to Betty Wood (1984, p. 5): "The trustees banned not because they were opposed to the institution as a matter of principle but because they believed the introduction of black slaves would be both undesirable and unnecessary in carrying out their expectations for the colony."

The trustees believed that Georgia would only function as a military buffer if settled by free people. James Oglethorpe, as early as 1732, advocated for the prohibition of slavery within the colony's jurisdiction, arguing that such an "abominable and destructive custom" turned the "labouring hands" into useless instruments "to the defense of the state" ([1732] 2021, p. 165). The

free white settlers opposed Georgia's ban on slavery and opened a prolonged controversy over the measure – which would be overturned in the late 1740s (see WOOD, 1984, p. 1–89).

At bottom, metropolitan and colonial writers were increasingly concerned with the striking disproportion between the free and enslaved populations in certain colonies. After the 1730s, antislavery opinion would be increasingly associated with the question of "colonial security" – including in the three publications discussed below. These publications have another common feature: all suggest that free workers were more productive than their enslaved counterparts.

3.3.1 *An Essay Concerning Slavery* (1746)

The anonymous pamphlet entitled *An Essay Concerning Slavery, and the Danger Jamaica is Exposed From The Great Number Of Slaves* (1746) is a remarkable, though usually overlooked, early antislavery writing.[38] Indeed, as Robertson (2012, p. 66, 69) showed, the publication "failed to spark English-readers imagination" despite being "advertised in leading literary journals" such as the *Gentleman's* and *British* magazines. Antislavery writings from the 1760s and 1770s hardly referred to the *Essay*. Its arguments resonated, however, in another of the publications discussed below, *An Account of the European Settlements in America* (1757), and likewise in discussions held during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries about the amelioration of colonial slavery.

Written from the perspective of a Jamaican settler, the *Essay* discussed themes often disregarded by metropolitan Britons. If the *Essay* stressed the inhumanity and injustice of slavery as did the bulk of metropolitan early antislavery literature, it also evidenced the impact of slave resistance in "prompting" or "reviving" discussions in the colonies about the consequences of enslavement (ROBERTSON, 2012, p. 78). Accordingly, the publication was prompted by fear of slave uprisings during the War of Austrian Succession, which would indicate "vulnerability to foreign attacks" (ROBERTSON, 2012, p. 73). In the authors' words, Jamaican "inhabitants are not only alarm'd by every trifling armament of the enemy, but under great apprehensions frequently from their own slaves" (1746, p. i).

The author used a dialogue to criticize slavery from a moral and political perspective. The situation in Jamaica deserved metropolitan attention because the disproportion between free and

[38] The pamphlet is often attributed to Edward Trelawny, Jamaica governor, but Robertson (2012) convincingly points to the lack of evidence confirming the authorship.

enslaved people presented a severe threat to the island's security. Despite the constant menace of rebellions, there were not enough free colonists to form an effective colonial militia and protect themselves from foreign attacks (1746, p. i–iv, 23). Without action, the situation could escalate and ruin the sugar plantation complex. The solution proposed by the author was to "forbid by an Act of Parliament" the further importation of enslaved Africans to Jamaica (p. 23).

By prohibiting the slave trade, the British administration would indirectly encourage Jamaican planters to better manage the enslaved Africans and African Jamaicans already on the island. According to the author, planters would be compelled to diminish the number of "house-slaves," those in charge of domestic labor, and send the extra hands to the field (1746, p. 24). Additionally, planters would eventually develop "prudent regulations" to encourage the reproduction of enslaved people (p. 35). Thus, the better management of enslaved workers could double the productivity of labor:

> And were your slaves once brought under good-management and discipline, were there a proper number of freemen, white, black, or yellow, mix'd with them in every plantation, one to ten or twelve at most, they would be better kept to their work and do twice as much, there would be no fear of their running into the woods, they would not have the power if they had the inclination, but probably they would not have a thought of it, for 'tis lackness of discipline and cruelty both together, which fill the woods with rebels; the latter puts the poor creatures upon the thought of it, and the former gives them the hopes of effecting it. (*Anon*, 1746, p. 47–48).

But how could one secure enough free subjects to form a colonial militia? The author recalled the story of a "friend" to suggest a scheme of controlled manumissions. Planters should eventually offer to manumit a "diligent slave" in exchange for seven years of indenture; after that period, the landowner should grant them a small portion of land (15-20 acres) and collect rent in return (1746, p. 48–49). Those manumitted would, therefore, acquire an interest in Jamaica's security. If all sugar plantations adopted this practice, they would soon be able to raise a colonial militia.

Besides, the possibility of manumission might indirectly increase labor productivity: enslaved workers would become more industrious, hoping to be rewarded with freedom (1746, p. 48–49). The author concluded by arguing that planters mistakenly believed that violence and cruelty were the way to ensure the dependence of enslaved Africans and African Jamaicans: "There is no sure way of holding a man as by his interest" (1746, p. 50–51). In sum, the *Essay* suggested

the British Parliament could increase the sugar plantations' productivity by prohibiting the slave trade to Jamaica.

As Greene (2013, p. 161) points out, however, "the author's main concern was the security of white settlers." Despite discussing the inhumanity and injustice of slavery, the author "appealed to parliamentary action to save settlers from themselves and Jamaica for the British Empire" (p. 161). Behind the proposal to stop the importation of enslaved Africans to the island and to manumit "diligent" enslaved workers was an attempt to increase the number of free people to join the colonial militia. This was neither the first nor the last occasion in which antislavery discourse was mobilized to secure the white settlers' status quo. Concern with "colonial security" – specifically, the fear of slave rebellions – was widespread among eighteenth-century writers.

3.3.2 William and Edmund Burke, *An Account of the European Settlements in America* (1757)

Anonymously published in 1757, *An Account of the European Settlements in America* was a "joint work" of the close friends William and Edmund Burke (LOCK, 1998, p. 127–129). The immediate context for its publication was the deflagration of the Seven Years' War. Lock (1998, p. 125) suggested the Burkes tried "to capitalize upon the public interest in the colonies that followed the outbreak of the war." Their perspective was "unashamedly British and expansionist" (p. 131). Similarly, Collins (2019, p. 495) argued the book provided "an endorsement of British imperial power as an instrument for prosperity and a curb on French expansionism."

The Burkes' *Account* became popular among eighteenth-century pamphleteers and philosophers, going through six editions between 1757 and 1777 (LOCK, 1998, p. 131). It also became a standard reference for antislavery writers, who liberally reproduced the following sentence: "The negroes in our colonies endure a slavery more compleat, and attended with far worse circumstances, than what any people in their condition suffer in any other part of the world, or have suffered in any other period of time" (BURKE; BURKE, 1757a, p. 120).[39] Yet, as we will see, their criticism of slavery was not as encompassing as this single quotation – and those who reproduced it – might suggest.[40]

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[39] See, for example, Anthony Benezet (1767, p. 6, 1772, p. 86) and Granville Sharp (1769, p. 80).

[40] Collins (2019, p. 495–501) argued that *Account* anticipated the reforms of colonial slavery that Edmund Burke would propose two decades later in his *Sketch of a Negro Code* (1780), being important to understand how his thought on the topic evolved.

Despite describing the hardships that enslaved workers went through in the West Indies, the Burkes (1757b, p. 235) referred to black people as "stubborn, hardy, of an ordinary understanding, and fitted to the ross slavery they endure." For them, the necessity of "peopling our colonies" and "the consideration that the slaves we buy were in the same condition in Africa" justified the slave trade (1757a, p. 124). Accordingly, they argued that British merchants should follow the Portuguese example and extend their trade in enslaved people to the Eastern African territories (1757b, p. 298–99).

Despite writing from a metropolitan perspective, the Burkes shared a similar concern with "colonial security" and highlighted the disproportion between free and enslaved people in the West Indies. Unlike the *Essay*'s author, they did not propose legislation to stop the slave trade. According to them, the British administration should encourage the migration of poor English subjects to the inland parts of Jamaica not used to cultivate sugar (1757a, p. 116–119). The migration would increase the number of free (and white) settlers able to join the colonial militia and guarantee the island's security against internal and external "enemies." Nevertheless, both publications stressed how better management and treatment of enslaved people could increase labor productivity.

The Burkes developed a more compelling economic case for the better treatment of enslaved workers. According to them, Barbados planters had to import nearly five thousand enslaved Africans every year despite their attempts to encourage reproduction (1757a, p. 120–21). They attributed the high mortality among enslaved people to "the excessive labour which they undergo" (1757a, p. 121). The authors believed, however, that "a great number of those deaths" could be prevented if planters allowed "a more moderate labour and some other indulgences" (1757a, p. 122). They suggested enslaved people should have Sundays and Christian holidays off and their children receive religious instruction (1757a, p. 125).

But how do you convince planters to change? The Burkes associated better treatment with increasing profits. According to their calculations, Barbados slaveholders could collectively save at least £40,000 annually if, by allowing a more moderate treatment, one thousand deaths could be avoided (1757a, p. 122–23). Acknowledging that such methods would negatively impact the slave trade, they suggested the expansion of the British colonial empire (and, consequently, of slavery) would solve the problem.

Additionally, the Burkes compared the productivity of free and slave labor while making their case for the better treatment of enslaved people in the sugar plantations. According to them,

"slaves certainly cannot go through so much work as freemen" (1757a, p. 124). The main difference between free and enslaved workers was access to property: "When a man knows that his labour is for himself; and that the more he labours, the more he is to acquire, this consciousness carries him through, and support him beneath fatigues, under which he otherwise would have sunk" (1757a, p. 124). Enslaved people who do not receive a reward proportional to their work could never be as productive as free workers.

The authors' case for better management of the slave-based sugar plantation illustrates the political project defended throughout the *Account* and summarized by Lock (1998, p. 131): "Taking for granted the continuing exploitation of the Americas for the benefit of Europe, the Burke's chief concern is that Britain should increase its share, though with as much regard for the well-being of the natives and slaves as is consistent with the national interest."

3.3.3 Robert Wallace, *A View of the Internal Policy of Great Britain* (1764)

Robert Wallace, a Scottish Presbyterian minister best known for his *Dissertation on the Numbers of Mankind* (1753), also claimed the superior productivity of free labor while discussing the security of white settlers in the British colonies in a later publication. Wallace's *Dissertation* advanced a relatively popular thesis among eighteenth-century writers, according to which European population had declined since the times of the Roman Empire (see TOMASELLI, 1988).[41] As Danielle Charette (2023, p. 11) showed, Wallace's population theory "assumed that slavery as an institution made the ancient world more populous" because "slaves benefited from the resources of their masters' households." Hume's essay *On the Populousness of Ancient Nations* (1752) reacted to a manuscript of Wallace's *Dissertation,* arguing that it was precisely slavery that made population smaller in the ancient world than in modern Europe.

As Charette (2023, p. 12) pointed out, Wallace "was at pains to argue that the inhumanity of colonial plantations had little in common with slavery in a pre-luxury economy, when masters and slaves lived under the same roof." Apart from his position on the populousness of the ancient world, Wallace embraced an anti-colonial slavery stance in later writings. In *A View of the Internal*

[41] Wallace's *Dissertation* reflected a concern with "vagrancy" and poverty common to other Scottish thinkers such as Andrew Fletcher. The social control of the non-working poor, who relied on public aid, led authors like Fletcher to suggest the benefits of enforcing coerced labor in Scotland (see Rozbick, 2001).

Policy of Great Britain (1764), he argues for the superiority of free immigrant labor over slave labor on both economic and moral grounds.

A View of Internal Policy, according to Greene (2013, p. 164–65), "was built upon the idea that a union between Britain and Ireland could increase the economic prosperity and power" of the British Empire without relying on foreign trade. Writing in the aftermath of the Seven Years' War, Wallace (1764, p. 260–275) was more hostile to the East Indian than to the colonial trade. "The trade with our own colonies," he argued, "though at a distance and carried on by navigation, is yet a kind of home trade, as it consists of a mutual exchange among our own people" (1764, p. 260–61).

Impressed with the population increase of Pennsylvania, New England, and New York, Wallace argued that Britain should not fear colonial prosperity. "While the British constitution remains sound," he claimed, "the strength of these people will be so much additional strength to Britain, as furnishing a new resource of men and materials for war" (p. 262). Wallace described the benefits from the fisheries of Newfoundland and even admitted that Maryland and Virginia tobacco was "an excellent article of commerce" despite being a luxury good (p. 263-64).

The Southern continental colonies generally employed enslaved workers. Despite acknowledging the "necessity" of slave labor to cultivate these colonies early on, he argued that "as the number of white people increases greatly, and begin to want employment, is an affair of the highest importance to give them encouragement, and stop the further introduction of slaves" (p. 264-65). As the conflict with Native Americans in the Carolinas had shown, substituting free Europeans for enslaved workers was essential to secure the property of white settlers from the indigenous and enslaved populations (p. 266).

Besides the question of security, there would also be an economic advantage to employing free labor: "The small matter with which a slave is kept, is the delight of his covetous master; but where a free European can labour and preserve his health and strength, the difference and labour between him and a slave will make up for the difference of maintenance" (p. 265). In other words, by employing free workers, the settlers would see an increase in productivity that would compensate for the higher cost – considering that enslaved workers were kept at the bare subsistence. Unlike the author of the *Essay* (1746) discussed before, Wallace stressed that enslaved people should be replaced by "our own people" (p. 265-266). It was not a matter of liberating the enslaved and employing them as free men and women but of encouraging "as much as possible

the breed and labour of white people" to "render them useless" (p. 266). By increasing the reproduction of the white population, one could "by degrees" substitute free workers for "black slaves" in the continent. This would improve the security of settlers without any economic loss.

Between 1746 and 1764, therefore, three publications articulated the themes of antislavery, superiority of free labor, and "colonial security." The expansion of slave-based cultivation in the West Indies and Southern continental plantations – and the increasing impact of slave resistance on the security of white settlers – had frightened eighteenth-century writers for decades before the Haitian Revolution. The *Essay*'s author was convinced that only statutory prohibition of the slave trade could solve the issue. This measure would ensure better treatment of existing enslaved Africans – which could, moreover, double labor productivity – and decrease the risk of insurrections. Besides, the author suggested a manumission scheme to increase the number of free subjects able to join the colonial militia.

William and Edmund Burke agreed that better treatment of enslaved workers in the West Indies would increase labor productivity and prevent slave rebellions. But instead of manumission, they recommended the immigration of white settlers to populate the islands. Robert Wallace, specifically addressing the continental colonies, mobilized the higher productivity of free labor to justify the employment of white workers instead of enslaved Africans. Since the white population had been increasing in those colonies, it would be prudent to guarantee their employment by putting an end to the slave trade.

3.4. Antislavery and calculation: the cost of free vs slave labor

Recently, the work of Oudin-Baptiste and Steiner (2019, p. 7–11) showed how "economic calculation" became an important "instrument" in the French public debate about colonial slavery in the late eighteenth century. According to them, Du Pont de Nemours introduced calculation into the French antislavery debate in two articles published in the *Éphémérides du citoyen* in 1771 (p. 25-26). His "aim was to prove that the cost of slave labor was more than that of free labor" (p. 27). Over the following decades, several French writers would attempt to calculate the costs of slavery to either corroborate or criticize Du Pont.

Economic calculation did not play the same role in Britain. Still, even before 1771, some attempts to compute the costs of free and slave labor appeared in the Anglo-American public debate. In fact, Davis (1988, p. 431) argues that Du Pont "drew upon Franklin's now famous essay,"

Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind (1751), to provide "detailed calculations" and show "the unprofitableness of slave labor." This section discusses Franklin's essay and the work of Granville Sharp. Both compared the costs of free and slave labor, concluding the latter to be more expensive in specific contexts. Unlike Du Pont, however, they did not claim that slave labor was *generally* more expensive than free labor.

3.4.1 Benjamin Franklin, *Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind and the Peopling of Countries* ([1751] 1755)

Benjamin Franklin, often regarded as a "founding father" of the United States, had been engaged in the Anglo-American public debate about the prospects of the British Empire for decades before the Declaration of Independence. Franklin's economic considerations about slavery appeared alongside broader reflections on British colonial policy. The literature addressing Franklin's economic and political thought is immense, but it was Davis' (1988) seminal work that placed Franklin alongside Enlightenment figures who questioned the "utility" of Atlantic slavery. Davis (1988, p. 426–27) argued that Franklin was "the first modern man to subject the institution to a bookkeeping analysis" even if his "moral concern over slavery arose only late in life."

What Davis called a bookkeeping analysis of slavery appeared in Franklin's *Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind*, written in 1751 and published a few years later as an appendix to William Clarke's *Observations on the Late and Present Conduct of the French* (1755). While discussing the causes of population growth, Franklin provided some elements to compute the comparative cost of slave labor in North America and free labor in England. Before presenting his arguments, however, it is worth recalling the context in which they appeared for the first time.

Franklin likely wrote *Observations* while he reflected on the consequences of the British Iron Act (1750), "which prohibited the erection of additional slitting and rolling mills, plating forges, and steel furnaces in the American colonies" (FRANKLIN, 1961, p. 225). Franklin was, therefore, reacting to a widespread belief that American manufactures would compete with those of the mother country. As we will see, Franklin computed the costs of slave labor while answering to metropolitan concerns about American manufactures employing slave labor and producing cheaper than their English counterparts.

Franklin's essay was annexed to William Clarke's pamphlet, printed in Boston and reprinted in London in 1755. Clarke (1755, p. iv) called the *Observations*' writer an "ingenious

author", but did not attribute the authorship to Benjamin Franklin. Writing on the eve of the Seven Years' War, Clarke not only described the French "encroachments" upon British North America but also reflected on the allegedly "fatal consequences" to the British Empire of losing these colonies (1755, p. 1). The pamphlet tried to call the attention of the British administration to territorial disputes that would only be settled with the Seven Years' War. Clarke urged that "the most vigorous measures should speedily and unitedly be projected and pursued, to oppose any encroachment of the French, and to oblige them to relinquish those they have already made" (1755, p. 35). To justify the expedience of such measures, the author purposefully exaggerated the prospects of French invasion and loss of the North American colonies (1755, p. 21–30).

Losing North America, Clarke continued, would have devasting consequences for the British economy. France would capture the "whole" trade in fur and pelt, which the author called the Indian Trade (1755, p. 16–17). He also remembered the strategic advantages of North American "naval stores" (p. 41) and the economic importance of its fisheries (p. 39-40), besides highlighting how Britain profited from the fur, tobacco, and rice trades (p. 42-43). Additionally, he connected the fate of North America to the prosperity of the British West Indies, stressing that "the lumber, horses, and fish (not to mention flower and pork) with which North America supplies the sugar colonies, are necessary for carrying on the sugar works in the plantations there, & for the subsistence of their negroes" (p. 43).

Engaging Franklin's *Observations,* Clarke (1755, p. 38) claimed that Britain could profit immensely from the increasing population of the North American colonies, which represented a rising consumption market for British manufactures and other European commodities re-exported to America from Britain. Franklin's essay explored the causes of population growth in North America and argued that Britain stood to benefit from this trend in the foreseeable future.

Franklin ([1751]1961, p. 227–28) established that population growth was proportional to "the ease and convenience of supporting a family." Following this principle, he argued that raising a family in the city was generally more expensive than in the countryside. Similarly, raising a family in a fully settled territory, like Europe, was more expensive than in an unsettled place such as North America. The abundance of land in North America, he continued, easily guaranteed the subsistence of families, thereby encouraging earlier marriages:

> Land being thus plenty in America, and so cheap as that a laboring man that understands husbandry can in a short time save money enough to purchase a piece of new land

> sufficient for a plantation, whereon he may subsist a family, such are not afraid to marry; for, if they even look far enough forward to consider how their children, when grown up, are to be provided for, they see that more land is to be had at rates equally easy, all circumstances considered. (p. 228)

Free and cheap land, according to Franklin, impacted both the cost and supply of labor in North America ([1751] 1961, p. 228-30). Considering that people could easily acquire land and work on their farms, Franklin postulated that labor would remain expensive in North America until the territory was fully settled. Therefore, he concluded, "the danger (…) of these colonies interfering with their mother country in trades that depend on labour, manufactures, &c. is too remote to require the attention of Great Britain" (p. 229).[42] North American manufactures, produced at a higher cost, could never compete with their British counterparts. Additionally, population growth in North America could, in the future, increase the demand for manufactures beyond Britain's "power of supplying" them (p. 229).

Lastly, Franklin answered those who believed that North America could produce cheaper manufactures using slave labor. It was in this context that he introduced the comparison between the costs of free and slave labor:

> 'Tis an ill-grounded opinion that by the labour of slaves, America may possibly vie in cheapness of manufactures with Britain. The labor of slaves can never be so cheap here as the labor of working men is in Britain. Any one may compute it. Interest of money is in the colonies from 6 to 10 per cent. Slaves, one with another, cost £30 sterling per head. Reckon then the interest of the first purchase of a slave, the insurance or risque on his life, his cloathing and diet, expences in his sickness and loss of time, loss by his neglect of business (neglect is natural to the man who is not to be benefited by his own care or diligence), expence of a driver to keep him at work, and his pilfering from time to time, almost every slave being *by nature* a thief, and compare the whole amount with the wages of a manufacturer of iron or wool in England, you will see that labor is much cheaper there than it ever can be by negroes here. (p. 229-230)

The cost of free labor was relatively easy to obtain – one could search for the wages of a common working person in England. The novelty, therefore, relied on the criteria established to calculate the cost of slave labor. Franklin specified that several components must be computed: the interest rate over the purchase price of an enslaved person, insurance over their death, subsistence and medical expenses, cost of an overseer, theft, and lower productivity. An enslaved

[42] Franklin's arguments dialogue with the rich country-poor country debates (see Hont, 2005, chap. 2-3). If metropolitans worried that North American manufacturers could undersell the British, Franklin guaranteed that production costs (especially wages) were higher in America than in England. Not even slavery decreased the labor costs to the level of British wages.

person who cannot "be benefited by his own care and diligence" would neglect the work and be less productive than a free person (p. 229). Using his criteria, Franklin concluded the wage of a typical worker in English manufactures was lower than the cost of employing enslaved workers in North America. British policies to restrict the development of manufactures in the colonies thus composed the background to Franklin's political economy of slavery.

Having established that slave labor was more expensive, Franklin explained why North Americans kept using it: "because slaves may be kept as long as man pleases, or has occasion for their labor; while hired men are continually leaving their masters and setting up for themselves" (p. 230). In short, colonists purchased enslaved Africans because North America had abundant and cheap land.[43] Free land explained the high wages of labor and the persistence of slavery. Thus, the North American manufacturer would face higher costs employing either free or enslaved workers. Nevertheless, it was precisely the existence of free land that guaranteed population growth in North America and, consequently, increasing demand for manufactures. For these reasons, Franklin concluded, "Britain should not too much restrict manufactures in her colonies" ([1751] 1961, p. 229).

Franklin ([1751] 1961, p. 231) dedicated the following paragraphs to discuss the causes of population decrease, among which figured the "introduction of slaves."[44] Having the British West Indies in mind, Franklin argued the imports of enslaved Africans to the sugar colonies had "greatly diminish'd the whites there". The introduction of slavery deprived the "poor" white people of employment and allowed "few families" to "acquire vast estates" (p. 231). These few privileged planters spent the profits from slave-based plantations "on foreign luxuries"; therefore, "the same income is needed for the support of one that might have maintain'd 100". The planters' children were "educated in idleness" and "unfit to get a living by industry." Conversely, enslaved Africans endured such harsh conditions in the sugar plantations that "the deaths among them are more than the births," hence the need for a "continual supply" from Africa. Franklin then drew the line

[43] Nineteenth-century writers like Edward Gibbon Wakefield would insist on the same point (see CAZZOLA, 2021). In Barbara Solow's words, "Wakefield understood that the significance of slavery was not that a black labor supply would substitute for a white one, but that slavery under certain circumstances was the sole source of a permanent supply of labor to landlords and the sole source of a sizable accumulation of capital" (SOLOW, 1991, p. 35). According to Solow, subsequent writers would rely on these arguments to argue that free land and labor scarcity explained the genesis of slavery. For a twentieth-century reassessment of this discussion, see Evsey Domar's *The Causes of Slavery or Serfdom: a Hypothesis* (1970).

[44] As discussed in the previous section, the effects of slavery upon population became a relatively popular subject in the 1750s – see Wallace (1753) and Hume ([1752] 1987, p. 377–464). For an overall assessment of Franklin's discussion of population and slavery, see Houston (2008, chap. 3 and 5).

separating the continent from the islands: “The Northern colonies having few slaves increases in whites.”

Franklin's comments on slavery, therefore, helped establish the distinction between the British colonies in North America and the West Indies. The continental colonies, with “few slaves” and an increasing white population, represented a vast consumer market for British manufactures. Conversely, the sugar colonies had a multitude of overworked enslaved Africans and fewer planters – who spent all their income on foreign luxuries, not British manufactures. His discussion of slavery served the purpose of showing how North America was strategic for the imperial economy. Franklin’s decision to reproduce the *Observations* in another pamphlet, *The Interest of Great Britain Considered with Regard to Her Colonies of Canada and Guadalupe* (1760), corroborates my interpretation.[45]

The Interest of Great Britain (1760) was published anonymously, and there was much controversy regarding its authorship until the mid-20th century. When the ninth volume of *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (1966, p. 53–58) came out, the editors had enough evidence to establish Franklin’s authorship of the so-called “Canada Pamphlet”. According to them, “this pamphlet was Franklin’s first large-scale attempt to influence the British in a matter of major public policy” (1966, p. 59). Writing anonymously and “posing as an Englishman,” Franklin aimed to address all those concerned with the future of the British Empire (1966, p. 52, 59).

It is worth recalling how this pamphlet responded to a public controversy regarding the Seven Years' War. British victories over France in 1759, especially the capture of Quebec and Guadeloupe, increased the expectations of peace. The terms of peace became a matter of public debate – specifically, the discussion on whether the British Empire should retain Canada or Guadeloupe as a spoil of war. Therefore, the relative importance of North American vs Caribbean colonies became a matter of public scrutiny. Franklin wrote *The Interest of Great Britain* (1760, p. 3) in this context, in dialogue with two other pamphlets – *A Letter Addressed to Two Great Men* (1760) and *Remarks on the Letter Addressed to Two Great Men* (1760). The first presented the reasons for keeping Canada instead of Guadeloupe, and the latter did the opposite.

[45] Before appearing in *The interest of Great Britain* (1760), Franklin’s essay was also partly reproduced in the *Gentleman’s Magazine,* November 1755, and the *Scots Magazine*, April 1756 (FRANKLIN, 1961, p. 226). In both cases, the paragraph comparing free and slave labor cost (§12) was maintained.

Franklin attempted to answer the arguments presented in the *Remarks* about the economic insignificance of Canada compared to the West Indies sugar plantations. A detailed discussion is beyond the scope of this essay, but some elements are worth highlighting. The author of *Remarks* argued that North Americans are "driven to set up manufactures similar to those of England, in which they are favoured by the plenty and cheapness of provisions" (1760, p. 30). Franklin criticized this reasoning in *The Interest of Great Britain* (1760, p. 19–25), and his discussion of the costs of slave labor had aimed at answering precisely this kind of argument a decade before. Using the same principles delineated in the essay on population, Franklin (1760, p. 25–37) argued that keeping Canada would increase the free land available and stimulate population growth even further in North America. The consumer market for British commodities would increase proportionally.

The *Observations* (1751) were annexed to the Canada Pamphlet with some passages excluded, but Franklin kept the paragraphs discussing slavery (§12 and §13). His conclusion about the higher cost of slave labor in America compared to wage labor in England had been originally connected to a broader discussion about colonial policy regarding manufactures. A decade later, the same argument would be used to assess whether the British Empire should extend its dominions in North America or the West Indies. Franklin's *Observations,* therefore, appeared amidst broader controversies surrounding British imperial policy. Moreover, and equally important, Franklin did not argue that slave labor was *universally* more expensive than free labor. His argument was contextual – although it paved the ground for later similar calculations.

3.4.2 Granville Sharp, *A Representation of the Dangerous Tendency of Tolerating Slavery in England* (1769)

In 1769, Benjamin Franklin (1769, p. 200) reproduced *Observations* in the fourth edition of his *Experiments and Observations on Electricity*, only now with a small revision: substituting the sentence "every slave being, from the nature of slavery, a thief" for the original "almost every slave being by nature a thief." Nash (2006, p. 629) suggested this change "signaled" Franklin's "evolving estimation of the African character." Franklin, who had been a slaveholder in the 1750s, apparently became more sensitive to the antislavery cause in the following decades. But he would only come to advocate unequivocally for abolition shortly before his death (NASH, 2006, p. 635).

Granville Sharp, a notorious abolitionist who published his first antislavery tract in that same year, likewise compared the cost of free and slave labor. Unlike Franklin, Sharp aimed to demonstrate that North American and Caribbean settlers had no economic justifications for bringing enslaved workers to England. This discussion, which appeared in *A Representation of the Dangerous Tendency of Tolerating Slavery in England* (1769), related to a broader debate about the legality of slavery in the metropolis.

Brown (2006, p. 91–95) argued that "blacks made slavery an issue" in Britain "by making themselves a nuisance." Many who disembarked from the plantations sought baptism or married free English subjects hoping to escape slavery, while others "simply ran away." Even before the emblematic Somerset Case of 1772, metropolitans began to see "the importation of slaves and slavery" as "an emerging threat to English Society." They were not concerned with slavery in the plantations but with its effects on British soil. Whyte (2006, p. 9–32) showed how the situation was similar in Scotland. Enslaved people brought from the colonies sought liberty through baptism, while slaveholders legally claimed their property in at least two instances before the Somerset Case – *Sheddan v Montgomery* (1756) and *Dalrymple v Spens* (1770).

Granville Sharp, according to Brown (2006, p. 93), "worked closely with the enslaved on freedom suits in the 1760s and 1770s." In 1767, Sharp and his brother were sued "for theft" after helping Jonathan Strong, a young black man, to escape from David Lisle. At that point, Brown continued, "Sharp knew little about the law" regarding personal liberty in England. This would change dramatically in the following years. Sharp's (1769, p. 42) *Representation* attempted to demonstrate "that slavery is an innovation in England, contrary to the spirit of our present laws and constitution."

North American and Caribbean settlers claimed that the laws regarding private property secured their right to keep enslaved workers in England (SHARP, 1769, p. 43). Sharp argued, however, that "private property" in a human being was "unnatural," "inconvenient and hurtful to the public," and "contrary to the laws and constitution" of England (p. 75). Metropolitans could thus only "justly" claim their property rights over enslaved people in England in the same manner that a merchant could claim his rights in "contraband goods" (p. 75).

Sharp (1769, p. 75) also wondered why someone would choose to bring an enslaved person to England "whilst so many of our own fellow subjects want bread." The only possible reason would be the labor cost. According to him, however, "the services of slaves in England" could

never be cheaper than "that of freemen" (p. 78). Sharp was convinced that feeding and clothing an enslaved worker in England would be as expensive as paying "the wages of English labourers" (p. 76). The laboring poor, he continued, "can generally provide for themselves at a cheaper rate" and voluntarily "put up with inconveniences" that "would be really oppressive" and "even intolerable" if forced upon them by "another person" (p. 76).

Beyond the bare subsistence of enslaved workers, one must also account for their purchase price, "apothecaries and surgeon bills on account of sickness and accidents," among other costs "defrayed by the master" (p. 76). Yet, one might suggest slave labor to be cheaper because masters also needed to provide food and clothing to free servants besides paying their wages (p. 77). To this objection, Sharp answered categorically:

> Let us off the annual interest of the slave's price in part of wages, and then divide the principal sum itself into as many portions as the average number of years, that a slave is usually capable of being useful. Besides this, the uncertainty of health and life, must be thrown into the scale, unless the expense of insurance upon these precarious circumstances be likewise added, otherwise the principal sum itself is laid out on a very bad security. (SHARP, 1769, p. 77)

When "all these things are weighed and compared with the common rate of servants wages," Sharp concluded, "there will not appear to have any saving in the employing of slaves" (p. 77). With this calculation, he expected to show "there are no real advantages in a toleration of slavery" in England. Nevertheless, and this is worth emphasizing, Granville Sharp did not extrapolate the conclusions of his *Representation* to the British colonies. In his words: "It is not my business at present to examine, how far a toleration of slavery may be necessary or justifiable in the West Indies" or North America (1769, p. 80-81).

This would change in the following years.[46] During the 1770s, Granville Sharp's publications and activism incorporated a broader criticism of colonial slavery and the slave trade. Brown (2006, p. 160) even argues that Sharp's "personal campaign for government action against slavery and the slave trade between 1772 and 1781 represented (…) the beginnings of British abolitionism." By 1773, Sharp seemed convinced of the overall superiority of free labor.

Benjamin Rush, who became the secretary of the PAS in the 1780s, published extracts from a letter written by Granville Sharp in his *Address to the Inhabitants of the British Settlements, on*

[46] For an overview of Granville Sharp's abolitionist activism over the 1770s, see Brown (2006, chapter 3).

the Slavery of the Negroes in America (1773). These extracts discussed the "Spanish regulations" and were published a few years later in Sharp's *The Just Limitations of Slavery in the Laws of God* (1776, Appendix, p. 54–55). There, Sharp claimed the British colonies could adopt a scheme of self-purchase like the practice of *coartación* in the Spanish Americas – where enslaved workers could buy their freedom through periodic payments of their purchase price to the slaveholder. I will further discuss Sharp's emancipation schemes in the next chapter. Here, it suffices to remark that Sharp's description of the "Spanish regulations" suggested that enslaved workers who were allowed to buy their freedom had more incentives to be productive.

Unlike Franklin, Sharp did not account for the superior productivity of free labor while computing the costs of bringing an enslaved worker to England in the *Representation* (1759). A few years later, while discussing the benefits of adopting the practice of *coartación* in the British colonies, Sharp wrote: "Regulations might be formed upon the same plan to encourage the industry of slaves that are already imported to the colonies, which would teach them how to maintain themselves and be as useful, as well as less expensive to the planter" (apud RUSH, 1773, p. 21 n.). An enslaved worker who had the possibility of purchasing their freedom might thus be more productive and "less expensive to the planter."

3.5 Antislavery and the Peace of 1763

Two publications written in the aftermath of the Seven Years' War stated the superior productivity of free labor more categorically – *A Plan for Improving the Trade at Senegal* (1763) and *A Plan for the Abolition of Slavery in the West Indies* ([1763] 1772). Both publications addressed a pressing issue of imperial policy: the administration and settlement of the newly conquered territories of Senegal and Florida. Published anonymously, these pamphlets may have been written by the same author, Maurice Morgann.

Maurice Morgann was the "personal secretary and political advisor" of William Petty-Fitzmaurice, the second earl of Shelburne (FINEMAN, 1972, p. 4–7). Shelburne briefly presided over the Board of Trade between April and September of 1763 and, during his term, "Morgann assisted his patron in drafting measures for the organization and management of American territories acquired at the Peace of Paris" (BROWN, 2006, p. 215). This was the context in which Morgann wrote *A Plan for the Abolition of Slavery in the West Indies*, appending "the plan to a

manuscript titled ‘On American Commerce and Government Especially in the Newly Acquired Territories,’ drafted for Shelburne in the spring of 1763” (BROWN, 2006, p. 217).

Morgann may also have written *A Plan for Improving the Trade at Senegal* as part of policy memoranda written for Shelburne between 1762 and 1763. While no published works have yet been able to confirm the authorship, one can infer the likelihood of this hypothesis from textual evidence. After criticizing the entire system of colonial slavery, the author concludes the introduction as follows:

> Now, indeed, it would be almost impossible to stop the slave-trade, or alter the constitution of the sugar islands; **but I imagine I could propose a plan for settling a new colony (on a much better footing than that of our sugar islands) in Florida, the Islands formerly called neutral, and Senegal**; but I shall continue myself solely to the means of settling and improving the trade of the last-mentioned place. (*A plan for improving the trade at Senegal*, 1763, p. 6, emphasis added)

Accordingly, it seems plausible to conjecture the “plan for settling a new colony” referred to Morgann’s proposal to create a new settlement of free Africans in Florida’s Pensacola district – namely, his *Plan for the Abolition of Slavery in the West Indies*. In any case, both pamphlets were written within the same context, even if not by the same author: the reorganization of the British Empire following the Seven Years' War. As Greene (2013, p. 84) pointed out, “the overwhelming victories” during the war changed “the way in which metropolitans spoke about empire.” Concerned “that the empire might lack the internal cohesion and guidance necessary to fulfill” its “glorious and grandiose destiny,” some metropolitan writers began to defend a centralized administration of the British dominions (p. 87). This was the case of both *Plans*, in which antislavery (and the argument about the superior productivity of free labor) served the purpose of reorganizing the British Empire and increasing its power.

3.5.1 *A Plan for Improving the Trade at Senegal* (1763)

France controlled the Senegalese trade until the mid-eighteenth century, which gave it privileged access to gum Senegal (BROWN, 2020, p. 113-114). The demand for gum Senegal, used “as thickener in textile printing,” had increased throughout the century with the expansion of European textile manufacturing. Thomas Cumming and Samuel Touchet saw the outbreak of the Seven Years’ War as “an opportunity to break the French monopoly” in the Senegalese gum trade (p. 114). Cumming came to an agreement with the British prime minister (the Elder Pitt) to lead

the conquest of Senegal in exchange for the exclusive right to trade in the territory (p. 114). This "private military venture licensed by the state" did capture St. Lewis island in the Senegal River in 1758 (p. 114).

Accordingly, Touchet and Cumming "petitioned George III to grant them a commercial monopoly" (BROWN, 2020, p. 115). The petition was sent on July 1762 to the Board of Trade's consideration (GREAT BRITAIN BOARD OF TRADE, 1935, p. 291). By then, Pitt was no longer prime minister, and "a consortium of textile merchants and manufacturers petitioned against the monopoly and in favor of a free trade in Senegalese gums" (BROWN, 2020, p. 115). This was the historical context in which *A plan for improving the trade at Senegal addressed to the Lord Commissioners for Trade and Plantations* (1763) first appeared.

The author designed a proposal to colonize St. Lewis without slavery: the settlers must be prohibited "from being served by slaves" and "should hire servants as they can, in the same manner as is done in London" (1763, p. 15). Accordingly, the British administration should emancipate the existing enslaved workers, "paying the owners an equitable sum for their freedom," and grant "fifty long boats" to be shared among them (p. 18-19). But why prohibit slavery, give manumissions, and compensate slaveholders? According to the author, "slavery is the bane of that sort of honest industry, the labour of the hands, which is the foundation and ground work of all commerce, wealth, and perfection of arts and sciences, which we observe in all well regulated and civilized states" (p. 16). In short, in slave-based societies labor was associated with "shame" and saw in such a "despicable light" that free people would try to avoid working at all costs (p. 16).

Free labor, moreover, would be cheaper: "A free labouring man, in a free country, where the fruits of his labour are entirely at his own disposal, works harder than any slave in any part of the world" (p. 2). Since nobody "will willingly work" without compensation, enslaved people must be compelled to do it (p. 1-2). But violence would hardly increase labor productivity more than the freedom to pursue one's own interest: "A porter in London does more work in one day than any four slaves in the West-Indies at the same space of time. This is not owing to the difference of climates; for a Black's constitution is suited to a hot country, and agrees well there with labour" (p. 2).

But "the laziness and wickedness with which the African blacks are charged, proceeds only from their slavery" (p. 3). In Pennsylvania, "where a slave is only one in name," enslaved Africans "are cheerfully industrious" (p. 3). It was slavery that decreased labor productivity, not a natural

disposition. According to the author, free workers would be more productive "in any part of the world," even in the West Indies. Despite being skeptical about the actual possibility of stopping the slave trade or changing "the constitution of the sugar islands" (p. 6), the author seemed convinced "that if those slaves were all set at liberty, and obliged to work for their subsistence, they could be hired to plant and prepare sugars &c. so as to raise them cheaper, than by the present method of purchasing slaves and maintaining them for that purpose" (p. 5). With this affirmation, the author implied that emancipating enslaved Africans and African Americans would increase the productivity of British plantations.

3.5.2 Maurice Morgann, *A Plan for the Abolition of Slavery in the West Indies* (1772)

Morgann's plan to establish a settlement of freed Africans in Western Florida was included in the colonial memoranda written for Shelburne in 1763. The author confirmed it "was written soon after the conclusion of the last peace" and "communicated only to a few friends" (MORGANN, 1772, p. i). He thus designed the first metropolitan "scheme for gradual abolition" while reflecting on "American governance" in the aftermath of the Seven Years' War (BROWN, 2004, p. 115; 2006, p. 217).

Morgann only published *A Plan for the Abolition of Slavery in the West Indies* a full decade later, however. It was "the question which had been lately agitated in the Court of King's Bench" that "revived the memory" of his "almost forgotten paper" (p. i). Morgann referred to the Somerset Case (1772), the emblematic trial addressing the legality of slaveholding in England. The case "promoted an intensive public discussion" about "the rights of slaves and slaveholders" on English soil (BROWN, 2006, p. 98).

Several metropolitan writers, Granville Sharp included, insisted on the dangers of transporting colonial slavery to the metropolis. They questioned former interpretations of the common law that considered slavery to be legal in England.[47] Those who advocated for British slaveholders insisted on property rights and referred to acts regulating the slave trade as confirmation of the legality of slavery in England.[48] The trial ended with an ambiguous verdict. As Brown (2006, p. 97-98) summarized, Judge Mansfield "preserved the slaveholders' right to the

[47] See Francis Hargrave' *An Argument in the Case of James Somersett* (…); *wherein is attempted to demonstrate the present unlawfulness of domestic slavery in England* (1772).
[48] See Samuel Estwick's *Considerations on the Negro Cause Commonly so Called* (1772) and Edward Long's *Candid Reflections upon the Judgement Lately Awarded by the Court of King's Bench.*

service of their slaves but not the right to enforce it." Yet the public interpreted his decision as a confirmation of the illegality of slaveholding on English soil. Thereafter, "black and whites in England behave as though the institution had been outlawed" (BROWN, 2006, p. 98).

Morgann (1772, p. ii-iv) briefly addressed the trial in the preface, arguing that neither the "antient customs" of villeinage nor trade regulations could be used to justify the legality of slaveholding in England. He hoped "that the claim of property in the persons of our-fellow creatures will, in this island at least, soon receive an effectual check" (p. ii). If Morgann was prompted by the public controversy surrounding the Somerset Case to publicize his abolitionist plan, this was not the context in which the latter had been drafted. Printed "as it was written" (p. iv), the pamphlet addressed the reorganization of imperial policy at the end of the Seven Years' War – more specifically, the settlement of the newly acquired territory of Florida.

Morgann's plan for gradual abolition involved introducing free Africans "into an assigned part of Florida," granting them lands and encouraging "their propagation" (p. 2). In short:

> My proposal is that a certain number of male and female children be annually, for the period of 15 years, bought in Africa, and imported into Great Britain; that they be educated in our abused charity-schools, or otherwise, till they arrive at the age of 14; that they be, for two years longer, practically instructed in gardening and agriculture; and that they learn even the rudiments of some manufactures; that, at the age of sixteen, they be married and sent to some district near Pensacola, to be at present reserved for this purpose; that lands be granted them; and that they receive, for a certain time, that assistance and support proper to be given to new settlers. (MORGANN, 1772, p. 16–17)

Morgann was aware the success of his proposal depended on public funding. He estimated the British administration would spend £6,000 annually for 20 years to carry out the plan (p. 18). Despite arguing the government should appoint "commissioners" to execute his idea, Morgann suggested some regulations for the new settlement (p. 17-20). First and foremost, slavery should not be allowed (p. 18-19). Besides, he proposed restricting the mobility of the African settlers "for some years," prohibiting them "to wander and settle elsewhere" (p. 19). The Pensacola government, under the control of a centralized imperial administration, would be responsible for creating further regulations (p. 20).

Morgann (1772, p. 7–8, 25–27) built the plan upon the assumption that free labor was cheaper and more efficient than slave labor. Nevertheless, he contended that "nature has fitted all his creatures for the climate they are destined to inhabit" (p. 4). Morgann agreed that Europeans were not adapted to toil under the sun of the tropics, but it did not follow from this that workers in

Florida should be enslaved (p. 4-8). On the contrary, the settlers must be free: “Who that has seen the spirit of industry toiling in the streets of London, who that has heard of our draymen, our watermen, or our miners, can doubt if freedom does not furnish inducements and supports of labour beyond all the terrors and the inflicted punishments of tyranny?” (p. 7). Freedom increased labor productivity more than violence.

Morgann assured his readers that freedom could induce Africans to perform “the same degree of labour in hot climate, as the whites do in cold” (p. 6). Echoing arguments discussed in the previous section, he explained that Africans had “no disposition to work” in the Caribbean plantations because they were enslaved, not because they were naturally lazy (p. 7-8). Nevertheless, emancipating enslaved people in the Caribbean and sending them to the newly conquered territories was not an attainable goal (p. 7-8, 13). Enslaved people assimilated the bad habits introduced by slavery, associating hard work with cruelty and degradation. For these reasons, Morgann proposed educating a new generation of Africans instead of emancipating enslaved people in the Caribbean.

The Pensacola settlement, combining freedom and the “natural” disposition of Africans to work in hot climates, would ensure a virtuous cycle:

> The settlers will increase, they will cultivate, they will trade, they will overflow; they will become labourers and artisans in the neighbouring provinces; they will, being freemen, be more industrious, more skilful, and, upon the whole, work cheaper than slaves (the prime cost of slaves and the wages of overseers considered) and slavery will thereupon necessarily cease. (MORGANN, 1772, p. 25)

But how would the proposed settlement lead to the abolition of slavery in the British Caribbean? It would represent, as Brown (2006, p. 213) summarized, “a competing model of labor and social relations” in tropical climates. Free labor increased the economy’s productivity. If free Europeans did not work efficiently in the Caribbean weather, free Africans would. Thus, the Pensacola project offered a profitable alternative to the slave-based plantations of the British West Indies and Southern continental colonies.

Morgann speculated about how the settlement would entail positive consequences besides providing an alternative to slave-based cultivation. The colony would become a growing consumer market for British products while offering in exchange “hemp, wine, silk, indigo, gold, and other minerals” (p. 26). Additionally, it might also check the progress of nearby French colonies: “One

may transport one's self to the future, and see, first, in the success of this design, the Louisiana of France, as cultivated by slaves, fall without a blow; and her envied islands soon yield to the same inevitable necessity" (p. 26). More settlements of free (or freed) Africans in the British Empire would follow, and economic competition would "shake the power of Spain to its foundations" (p. 28).

For all these reasons, Morgann (1772, p. 1) believed his proposal would extend "the future power and commerce of Great Britain." Drafted upon the assumption of the superior productivity of free labor, Morgann's plan was the first in the British Atlantic to associate labor productivity, economic competition, and gradual abolition. As discussed earlier, 19th-century writers heavily relied on "free labor ideology" when discussing the economic expedience of emancipation. As early as 1772, however, a colonial adviser had articulated similar arguments to defend a particular imperial project incorporating Africans and African Americans as British subjects.

3.6 Antislavery and North American hypocrisy

Brown (2006, p. 110–14) argued that the public controversies culminating in the American Revolution politicized slavery as an institution. The problem of slavery, he continued, became "a way to make the case for or against American independence" (p. 114). During the years of political crisis, several metropolitan writers turned antislavery rhetoric into a weapon to point out the hypocrisy of the North American claim for political liberty (BLACKBURN, 1988, p. 93–96; BROWN, 2006, p. 110–134; GREENE, 2013, p. 191–98). John Millar and Josiah Tucker, who also believed in the superiority of free over slave labor, were among them.

3.6.1. John Millar, *Observations Concerning the Distinction of Ranks in Society* (1771)

John Millar, Smith's former student, was a professor of Civil Law at the University of Glasgow. The first edition of his *Origins of the Distinction of Ranks* (1771) ended with the following observation:

> At the same time it affords a curious spectacle to observe, that the same people who talk in so high a strain of political liberty, and who consider the privilege of imposing their own taxes as one of the unalienable rights of mankind, should make no scruple of reducing a great proportion of the inhabitants into circumstances by which they are not only deprived of property, but almost of every right whatsoever. Fortune perhaps never produced a situation more calculated to ridicule a grave, and even a liberal hypothesis, or

> to show how little the conduct of men is at bottom directed by any philosophical principles. (MILLAR, 1771, p. 241–42)

Millar decided to close his book by calling out the hypocrisy of North Americans, who considered political liberty as an "unalienable right" while depriving thousands of enslaved Africans of their freedom. This statement also concluded his account of slavery, which was "strongly influenced by the argument and material covered in the Lectures on Jurisprudence of his teacher Smith" (CAIRNS, 2012, p. 87). Nevertheless, it is worth emphasizing that Millar's account gave even more weight to the argument about the economic inefficiency of slavery.

Accordingly, he argued that an enslaved person "works merely in consequence of the terror in which he is held" and "can never exert much vigour or activity in the exercise of any employment" (MILLAR, 1771, p. 200–201). Although the lower productivity of slave labor "may easily be overlooked in a country where the inhabitants are strangers to improvement," this would change with the development of commerce and manufacturing:

> But when the arts begin to flourish, when the wonderful effects of industry and skill in cheapening commodities, and in bringing them to perfection, become more and more conspicuous, it must be evident that little profit can be drawn from the labour of a slave, who has neither been encouraged to acquire that dexterity, nor those habits of application, which are essentially requisite in the finer and more difficult branches of manufacture. This may be illustrated from the price of labour in our West-India islands, where it will not be doubted that the inhabitants are at great pains to prevent the idleness of their slaves. In Jamaica the yearly labour of a field-negroe, when he is upheld to the master, is rated at no more than nine pounds currency of that island. When a negroe has been instructed in the trade of a carpenter, the value of his yearly labour will amount at the utmost to thirty-six pounds, whereas a free man is capable of earning seventy pounds yearly in the very same employment. (MILLAR, 1771, p. 201–202)

As the "price of labour" in Jamaica revealed, the productivity gap between free and slave labor increased with economic development. Additionally, Millar (1771, p. 205) stressed that one must account not only for the subsistence of enslaved workers but also for the costs of "first acquisition" and "all the hazard to which their life is exposed" to compute the "price" of slave labor. Unlike Smith, therefore, he introduced the purchase price in his analysis. Considering all these factors, he concluded "that the work of a slave, who receives nothing but a bare subsistence, is really dearer than that of a free man, to whom constant wages are given in proportion to his industry" (p. 205).

Considering the productivity gap and higher cost, why did British planters continue to employ slave labor? According to Millar (1771, p. 218), "all the successive improvements of agriculture" in feudal Europe gradually made landowners realize the "utility" of rewarding peasants according to their labor. Since the landowner had "no opportunity of looking narrowly into" how the villains managed their land, "he estimated their diligence" relative to their production – rewarding them accordingly (p. 218). Consequently, the villains (to whom Millar referred as slaves) increased their productivity. The exact same mechanism was not triggered in the American and Caribbean colonies because of differences in work organization (p. 231-32). Enslaved people employed in mining or planting staple crops were closely supervised by an overseer who could "punish their negligence" (p. 232). Therefore, he concluded:

> As the slaves are continually under the lash of their master, he has not been forced to use the disagreeable expedient of rewarding their labour, and improving their condition by those means which were found so necessary, and which were employed with so much emolument, to encourage the industry of the peasants in Europe. (MILLAR, 1771, p. 232)

But if only American and Caribbean slaveholders introduced the practice of giving "small wages" to encourage the industry of enslaved workers, Millar (1771, p. 241) believed they "would soon find" its "utility." He seemed surprised that "improvements of this nature" had not yet been introduced in the British colonies, considering their positive consequences "in the case of the villains in Europe" (p. 241).

The "institution of slavery" was also responsible for preventing the introduction of tools or methods of cultivation designed to "shorten or facilitate the most laborious employments of people" in the British colonies (p. 240-41). Millar mentioned that some experiments conducted in the sugar plantations evidenced how using cattle in cultivation would significantly decrease the demand for slave labor (p. 241). But "these experiments have been little regarded" because that innovation would affect "a lucrative branch of trade" (p. 241). Millar thus concluded that the slave trade hindered progress in the sugar plantations by preventing the introduction of methods to increase labor productivity.

3.6.2 Josiah Tucker, *Letter to Edmund Burke* (1775)

Josiah Tucker also mobilized antislavery arguments while discussing the Anglo-American crisis. Tucker (1775b, p. iv–v) wondered whether the North Americans' advocacy for liberty was consistent with their behavior towards indigenous and enslaved populations:

> Permit me therefore ask, why are not the poor Negroes, and the poor Indians entitled to the like rights and benefits? And how comes it to pass, that these immutable Laws of Nature are become so very mutable, and so very insignificant in respect to them? They probably never ceded to any power, most certainly they never ceded to you, the right of disposing of their lives, liberties, and properties, just as you please. And yet what horrid cruelties do you daily practice on the bodies of the poor negroes; over whom one can have no claim, according to your own principles? (TUCKER, 1775b, p. v)

During the mid-1770s, as Greene (2013, p. 191) pointed out, "prominent political writers and members of Parliament" highlighted this form of colonial hypocrisy "to score rhetorical points in the American controversy." In several writings, Tucker mobilized this argument "to persuade the British public that Britain would be better off to throw the colonies out of the empire" (2013, p. 195). Accordingly, he stated the superiority of free labor while criticizing a speech delivered by Edmund Burke on March 22, 1775.

The Tucker-Burke polemic related to metropolitan disputes about the future of the British Empire in America.[49] The British administration, "supported by a substantial majority in Parliament and defended by a large pamphlet and newspaper literature," pressed for a coercive posture toward the North American colonies (GREENE, 2013, p. 89-95). Parliamentary opposition blamed the American crisis on the administration's attempts to centralize political control over the colonies (p. 99-104). Stressing that Britain had achieved impressive economic success and imperial grandeur by the mid-eighteenth century merely based on its "commercially driven form of empire building," the opposition advocated "conciliation and the avoidance of force in dealing with the North American colonies" (p. 99, 106-107). Burke was among the members of Parliament who recommended conciliation, a position formulated in his parliamentary speech of March 22nd.

In this speech, Burke ([1775] 1999, p. 223–248) discussed the American character and the causes behind their "stubborn spirit" of liberty. Slavery was among them: the existence of a "multitude of slaves" in the Southern continental colonies made freedom "a kind of rank and

[49] For another influential interpretation of metropolitan debates during the American Revolution, see Pocock ([1980] 2014).

privilege." There, free colonists "are by far the most proud and jealous of their freedom" (p. 240). Despite not condoning their behavior, Burke concludes that Southern slaveholders were even "more strongly (…) attached to liberty" than the Northern colonists (p. 240-41). He wondered how the British administration should deal with "this stubborn spirit, which prevails in your colonies, and disturbs your government" (p. 246). One solution, he acknowledged, was to attempt to change such a spirit by removing its causes.

Burke criticized those who defended general emancipation as a strategy to reduce "the high aristocratic spirit of Virginia and the Southern Colonies" (p. 249). He wondered whether enslaved people would not "suspect the offer of freedom from that very nation which has sold them to their masters" (p. 249-250). Here, Burke turned the blame for colonial slavery back to Britain. Since trying to change the Americans' "fierce spirit of liberty" was impracticable, he concluded the best solution was "to submit to it as a necessary evil" (p. 253).

Burke disregarded the idea of "giving up the colonies" supported by Tucker as "nothing but a little sally of anger," a solution that "met so slight a reception" that he does not feel "obliged to dwell a great deal upon it" (p. 246). Indeed, few agreed with Tucker's proposition at the time. Both administration and opposition agreed, according to Greene (2013, p. 105), that "retention of the colonies was necessary for the preservation of metropolitan prosperity and imperial greatness." Both sides rejected "suggestions by Adam Smith and Josiah Tucker on behalf of a voluntary separation that would spare Britain all costs of colonial administration and defense while not alienating colonial trade" (p. 105).

Josiah Tucker's *Letter to Edmund Burke* (1775) criticized the conciliatory solution by arguing that Britain should abandon the colonies precisely because of the American "character" – and their allegedly fierce spirit of liberty. "[T]here is but too much truth," he claimed, in Burke's observation that a Southern slaveholder was at once "a tyrant over his inferiors" and a "patriot, a leveller in respect to his superiors" (p. 20). According to Tucker (1775a, p. 21), those colonies with a "multitude of slaves" were "by far the weakest" and demanded constant protection from Britain. Nevertheless, the slaveholders' attachment to liberty forbade them to contribute to the mother country for their defense (p. 21-22). If "man of such principles" did not condescend in paying "their fair quota towards their own preservation," the best solution was to let them go (p. 22).

When answering Burke's comment on the "general enfranchisement" of enslaved people in the Southern colonies, Tucker declared the superiority of free labor:

> As to the institution of slavery in any of our colonies; let those be advocates for it, who approve of it. I am thoroughly convinced, that the Laws of Commerce, when rightly understood, do perfectly coincide with the Laws of Morality; both originating from the same good being, whose mercies are over all his works. Nay, I think it is demonstrable, that domestic or predial slavery would be found, on a fair calculation, to be the most onerous and expensive mode of cultivating land, and of raising produce, that could be devised (TUCKER, 1775a, p. 22–23)

In this passage, Tucker suggested that Burke was advocating for colonial slavery. Besides, he defied his interlocutor to find historical evidence of "a country being well-cultivated, and at the same time abounding in manufactures, where this species of slavery (…) is preferred to the method of hiring free persons, and paying them wages" (TUCKER, 1775a, p. 23). After casually referring to an argument about the higher costs of slave labor, Tucker returned once again to his portrait of American colonists as tyrants who demanded liberty while enslaving a multitude of people.

Colonial slavery was far from being the main topic in the Tucker-Burke controversy. Unlike Millar, who criticized American colonists and presented other antislavery arguments, Tucker made an instrumental use of antislavery rhetoric. He referred to the superiority of free labor not to argue for the emancipation of enslaved Africans in Virginia but to strengthen his critique of the opposition's conciliatory strategy. For him, the behavior of American settlers towards their slaves helped boost the case for separation.

3.7 Conclusion

Arguments about the superiority of free over slave labor have always puzzled me. How could eighteenth-century writers ascertain that free workers were more productive than enslaved Africans? Scholars have provided different answers to this question, one of the most compelling being that Anglo-American writers extrapolated the successful English experience with free labor to the colonial setting. Nevertheless, not all the authors discussed above were unacquainted with the reality of British American and Caribbean colonies. Neither did they share similar views about the British Empire's political economy. Still, it is not impossible that they did share a compatible view of human motivation: violence and coercion were less compelling than freedom.

More important than finding a common denominator, however, is to put in evidence that the superiority of free labor was already something of a cliché by the time Adam Smith published *Wealth of Nations*. The argument, highly malleable, was used to legitimize different political

agendas. The superiority of free over coerced labor was mobilized to defend the "amelioration" of American and Caribbean slavery or, more specifically, the better treatment and management of enslaved workers. Such arguments established a dialogue with the widespread fear of slave rebellions among white settlers, figuring in attempts to improve the "security" of Caribbean and Southern Continental colonies.

Others proposed calculations to show the higher cost of slave labor in specific circumstances. Franklin argued that the cost of purchasing and maintaining an enslaved African in North America was higher than the typical wages of a metropolitan worker. This proved, he continued, that North American manufactures would never be cheaper than the British ones. Therefore, the superiority of free labor served to criticize British policy forbidding the development of colonial manufactures. Sharp, on the other hand, used similar calculations to show that colonial slaveholders had no justification for bringing enslaved people to England, since these would be at least as expensive as hiring a free worker in the metropolis.

Maurice Morgann was the first to articulate the statement of the superiority of free labor into a plan for gradual abolition. He mobilized these arguments to defend a particular project of imperial expansion through the incorporation of Africans as British subjects. Before him, John Millar had suggested that giving small wages to enslaved workers might encourage their industry and increase production – but this was far from an emancipation scheme. Only later would Granville Sharp justify an emancipation scheme relying on the superiority of free labor. One should remember, however, that most of the authors discussed in this chapter – Smith therein included – did not use the superiority of free labor to advocate for abolition.

Millar and Tucker stressed the superiority of free labor while addressing some of the pressing issues raised by the Anglo-American conflict. Both insisted on the hypocrisy of North American settlers, who cried for liberty while enslaving others. Tucker's assertion of the higher cost of slave labor appeared amidst a highly polemical debate about the evolving Anglo-American conflict. By then, he was convinced that separation was the best possible political and economic outcome.

The first edition of the *Wealth of Nations* was published just a few months before the American Declaration of Independence. Smith wrote extensively about colonies and also reflected on the ongoing Anglo-American conflict (see WN IV.vii). Questioning contemporary political-economic justifications for the British territorial empire, Smith concluded that "under the present

system of management, Great Britain derives nothing but loss from the dominion which she assumes over her colonies" (WN IV.vii.c.65). If Smith did not expect Britain to give up its American and Caribbean colonies willingly, he developed an encompassing critique of the system of political economy that allegedly guided imperial policymaking.

Smith articulated an antislavery opinion as part of a broader criticism of the mercantile policies regulating the colonial system. In so doing, he provided a thorough and straightforward economic criticism of slavery that nineteenth-century abolitionists would later draw upon. Even if we accept that the universal superiority of free labor envisioned by Smith was nothing more than a generalization of the Western European experience with serfdom, the legacy of the *Wealth of Nations* went far beyond this statement. At bottom, what made Smith's political economy compelling for abolitionists was its ability to speak to contemporary concerns about the means and purposes of the British Empire. The vision of a competitive commercial empire – not ruled at the expense of metropolitan consumers, enslaved Africans, Native Americans, and Asians – would prove compelling to many at the time.

4. SLAVERY AS A POLITICAL PROBLEM: ABOLITION AND POLITICAL ECONOMY DURING THE ANGLO-AMERICAN CRISIS

4.1 Introduction

The Seven Years' War brought global victories to the British Empire and expanded its dominion in North America. The vast territorial acquisitions compelled a revaluation of the relationship between the metropolis and its dependencies.[50] Thereafter, the British administration would attempt to centralize political control over its larger territorial empire. These attempts at centralization, especially related to taxation, stirred colonial opposition. North Americans claimed their status as British subjects "entitled to all British liberties" and denied submission to a legislation to which they had not consented "through their representatives" (GREENE, 2013, p. 88). The colonial reaction, added to metropolitan political disputes, engendered the crisis culminating in the American War of Independence (1776-1783).[51]

The unfolding Anglo-American crisis *politicized* the enslavement of Africans in the British Empire. During the third quarter of the eighteenth century, an increasing number of Britons and American settlers could be swayed to the position that slavery was morally wrong. David Brion Davis ([1966] 1988, p. 446) showed how "by the 1760s broad changes in cultural values had undermined traditional religious and philosophic justifications for slavery." Evangelical theology and Enlightenment philosophy had contributed to "weaken Biblical and historical sanctions" for the enslavement of Africans in the Americas (p. 446). As Roger Anstey (1975, p. 239) summarized: "The content of received wisdom had so changed that educated men in Britain, including the political nation, were likely to regard slavery as morally and philosophically condemned."

If slavery had already been seen as a moral wrong, at least in the abstract, before the American Revolution, the political conflict leading to it turned slavery into a *political* problem. During the Anglo-American crisis, in other words, antislavery opinion attained political

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[50] Thomas (1984, p. 51) argued that antislavery opinion benefited "from a sense of revaluation of the purpose and value of empire and of the status and nature of its people, both free and unfree" that emerged after the Seven Years' War. According to him, "the rapacity of East India Company servants in Bengal, the depredations of land speculators and frontiersmen in America and the West Indies, raised questions of how far empire presented a *carte blanche* to exploit free and unfree non-Europeans and how far in the interest of economy, good government and of the good name of the British empire such depredations should be limited by a sense of duty and humanity." See also Greene (2013, chap. 4-5). For metropolitan reassessments of the economic advantages derived from a colonial empire, see Clément (2014).

[51] For further discussion on the metropolitan political disputes, see Pocock ([1984] 2014), Miller (1994, chap. 3,6), and Greene (2013, chap. 6).

significance. Metropolitan writers often pointed to the hypocrisy inherent in the discourse and practice of North American settlers: the same individuals who complained about being subjected to the most odious political slavery were responsible for enslaving a multitude of men, women, and children. Thus, antislavery became "a way to make the case for or against American independence" (BROWN, 2006, p. 114). If antislavery opinion served political purposes other than the liberation of enslaved Africans and African Americans, there was still a group of abolitionists who strategically engaged the transatlantic debate to propose emancipation schemes. These activists who thus turned emancipation into a target for political action during the revolutionary era could hardly escape economic considerations such as labor supply, compensation, redress, etc.

For the past decades, historians of British abolitionism have assumed that a distinguishable "rhetorical profile" could be found amid public and parliamentary debates. Abolitionists overwhelmingly relied on moral, religious, and legal arguments, while the reactions of antiabolitionists focused on the economic importance of the slave-based system to the British Empire (section 4.2). Building on the literature that shows how the Anglo-American dispute *politicized* the institution of slavery, I question this rhetorical profile: those who turned abolition or emancipation into a target for political action could hardly escape considerations about economic concerns (section 4.3). Once slavery became a political problem, the search for solutions required thinking about political economy. Even those who justified abolition on *moral* and *religious* grounds faced the challenge of rethinking labor organization in slave-based societies. They had to deal with political economy to provide *policy* advice. To illustrate my argument, I discuss a group of authors who devised emancipation schemes for North America during the 1770s (section 4.4). In so doing, I hope to contribute to a better understanding of the role of political economy in Anglo-American antislavery.

4.2 Morality vs economics?

Historians of slavery and antislavery have long contended about the precise relationship between political economy and abolitionism. Eric Williams's *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944), even after decades of criticism and reappraisal, remains the starting point. Ultimately, Williams's work forced economic considerations into the historiography of British abolitionism – which had, for more than a century, unashamedly praised the role of British humanitarians, the "Saints," in

liberating enslaved Africans and African Caribbeans.[52] *Capitalism and Slavery*, in the words of a distinctive critic, "made it impossible for historians ever to return to the posture of splendid moral isolation which characterized the story of British slave emancipation for more than a century" (DRESCHER, 1987, p. 196).

Williams (1944, p. 126-52) associated the abolition of slavery in the British Empire with the development of industrial capitalism. According to him, the humanitarians chose to attack the colonial system in "its weakest and most indefensible spot" and only succeeded in the nineteenth century because the "capitalist interest" was no longer "on the side" of the slave-based sugar plantations (p. 136). Williams' conclusion profoundly impacted the historiography of Anglo-American abolitionism, as discussed in the general introduction. Specifically, the controversies surrounding *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944) shaped the way historians reflected on political economy and antislavery. Among these, Seymour Drescher's critique is particularly important.

Drescher's *Econocide* ([1977] 2010, p. 24) questioned Williams's decline thesis, arguing that the West Indian slave-based complex was expanding "in terms of both capital value and overseas trade" by the turn of the nineteenth century. He also criticized other aspects of Williams's scholarship, which often connected the emergence of abolitionism "with that of laissez-faire" (p. 60). In so doing, historians had "unconsciously manufactured an eighteenth-century tapestry of imperial history with nineteenth-century threads" (p. 60). On the contrary, when abolitionism emerged as an organized political movement in Britain during the 1780s, the administration was committed to "conservative and pragmatic commercial policy":

> Neither Pitt and his cabinet, nor Fox and his opposition, nor Parliament, nor the Committee of Trade, clamored for the abandonment of the protectionist framework. In 1790 British policy was, as it had been before the American Revolution, to move selectively toward the liberalization of trade, while legislatively reaffirming its commitment to imperial protectionism. The move toward reciprocal lower tariffs in the Anglo-French treaty of 1787 must be set off against Parliament's rejection of trade reciprocity with Ireland two years before. The renewal of the Caribbean free port system in 1787 was preceded by the exclusion of American carriers from the British West Indies and by the reaffirmation of the Navigation Acts in 1786. (DRESCHER, [1977] 2010, p. 60)

Additionally, Drescher stressed that abolitionism was unrelated to a rising anti-colonialist or anti-imperialist ideology. Even though "certain theoretical arguments against colonies"

[52] See, for instance, Sir Reginald Coupland's *The British Antislavery Movement* (1933).

circulated among political economists, "no parliamentary abolitionists wished to disband the empire" by the 1790s (p. 39). Antislavery could, thereby, be perfectly compatible with the expansion of the British Empire. Reflecting on the legacy of *Econocide* three decades after its publication, Drescher stressed how his study showed that "economic motives, whether mercantilist or laissez-faire, were not the primary incentives in the termination of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery" ([1977] 2010, p. xxiv). Accordingly, it "highlighted moral and political calls to action that worked against powerful and hitherto unquestioned economic forces" (p. xxi).

Drescher's publications after *Econocide* reaffirmed such conclusion: in the late-eighteenth century, British abolitionists were up against a powerful group that stressed at every opportunity how the slave system was central to imperial economic and military power (DRESCHER, 1986, 2002, 2007, 2012). Drescher (2002, p. 35) suggested that British abolitionists "decided to attack the African slave trade rather than West Indian slavery itself" because the latter "seemed too formidable to attack directly for a generation after" the American Revolution.

Accordingly, he argued that the popular antislavery mobilization overwhelmingly stressed moral over economic arguments: "less than five percent" of the petitions for the slave trade abolition "added any promise of economic advantage" (DRESCHER, 1990, p. 566–67; 2007, p. 49). Quantitively, something similar would happen in parliamentary debates (DRESCHER, 1990, p. 568–576; 2007, p. 49). Conversely, those who opposed abolition relied mainly on economic arguments. In sum, Drescher (1990, p. 564) traced a "rhetorical profile" based on the "moral versus economic dichotomy," which would hold true from the early antislavery debates to the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Drescher did not deny that British abolitionists relied on considerations about political economy to make their case but argued that, quantitatively, the moral rhetoric prevailed. Commenting on the reaction to James Ramsay's *Essay On The Treatment And Conversions Of African Slaves In The British Sugar Colonies* (1784a), Christopher Brown (2006, p. 369) argued that slavery "apologists" would have found "nearly every line of argument closed" by the mid-1780s. Having to justify a morally unjustifiable practice, they "fall back on the sanctity of property, the economic value of slave labor, and the national interest in sustaining valuable Atlantic trade" (p. 369). Slavery "apologists" thus focused on political-economic considerations to counter moral, religious, and legal arguments mobilized by antislavery writers.

The rhetorical profile described above explains why, apart from mentioning the influence of canonical figures such as Adam Smith in antislavery discourse, few have attempted to study the place of political economy in the early antislavery literature. Even if we accept that political economy was a marginal theme in their campaigns, it does not follow that abolitionists could ignore it completely. If it made sense, strategically, to focus on moral arguments to convince their readership, abolitionists could not escape the broader challenge of rethinking the entire labor organization of the British Empire; neither could they evade policy considerations when trying to persuade the Parliament to ban the slave trade.

If metropolitan petitioning campaigns did not rely heavily on economic arguments, abolitionists in the 1780s still had to convince their audience that ending the slave trade would not ruin Britain's economy. Prominent activists like James Ramsay (1784b, p. 11–24) and Olaudah Equiano (1789, p. 248–54) described the commerce in African natural products as a lucrative and humane alternative to the slave trade. Arguably the first metropolitan tract on the political economy of abolition, Thomas Clarkson's *Essay on the Impolicy of the African Slave Trade* (1788) attempted to rebuke pro-slavery economic reasoning and present the African commodity trade as a better alternative both to the public (p. 6-22) and to the individuals previously engaged in the slave trade (p. 23-27).[53]

Once American and Caribbean slavery turned into a sustained *political* problem, antislavery writers and activists searching for solutions needed to deal with economic considerations. The imperial crisis following the Seven Years' War and culminating in the Anglo-American war *politicized* antislavery on both sides of the Atlantic. In the years preceding the American Revolution, colonial and metropolitan writers designing emancipation schemes had to deal with practical questions regarding compensation and redress, the existing manumission laws, and widespread concern about the social control of emancipated blacks. If early abolitionists chose to justify emancipation mainly on moral and religious grounds, they still faced the challenge of rethinking the organization of slave-based societies. In so doing, it was hard to escape considerations about political economy.

[53] As the first essay showed, British abolitionists drew selectively upon Malachy Postlethwayt's *Universal Dictionary of trade and commerce* (1751-55) to portray the "legitimate commerce" with African territories as an alternative to the slave trade.

It is worth remembering that political economy was not an established disciplinary field by the late eighteenth century. It was neither an independent science nor a theoretical field emancipated from political and ethical considerations. Ryan Walter (2021, p. 11), for instance, has shown how British "political economy did not have a vocabulary of its own" at the beginning of the nineteenth century. At the time of Malthus and Ricardo, political economy was still a "subordinate element" of the "sciences of politics" and evaluated by its "ability to act as political counsel" (p. 14, 18-20). According to Walter, a "piece of political economy articulated in abstract terms was vulnerable to being perceived as theoretical enthusiasm" and having its validity questioned on these grounds (p. 19-20). The legitimacy of political economy did not rely upon "producing elegant theories for their own sake" but on providing practical political counsel (p. 18). Thus, "the production of treatise-length texts in political economy was a minority pursuit, with the overwhelmingly majority of writing taking the form of pamphlets that were either prompted by parliamentary debate around specific issues or intended to influence the course of such debate" (p. 18).

Walter stretches the characteristics of the previous literature on political economy to the early nineteenth century. Julian Hoppit (2017) has likewise revealed the plurality of British political economies in existence during the eighteenth century, highlighting the variety of themes and perspectives – or the lack of a paradigmatic economic discourse – and its connection with parliamentary politics. Hoppit's (2017, p. 172) survey of printed sources in the third quarter of the eighteenth century shows that "quantitively, economic literature at the time was overwhelmingly short, ephemeral, anonymous and politically oriented" (see also HOPPIT, 2006). Much of this literature aimed at influencing public policy over specific and often polemical topics. Although the central government did not closely control economic policy in the eighteenth century, contemporaries "believed that political power could significantly affect economic life" (HOPPIT, 2017, p. 5–7).

Throughout the eighteenth century, therefore, writings on economic matters were highly political in their nature. Nevertheless, as Heather Welland's research on Canada and Ireland has shown, political economy was not "a pre-existing orthodoxy that shaped imperial policymaking" (2021, p. 1). To insist on this point: there was no orthodoxy in British eighteenth-century political economy, be it mercantilist or laissez-faire. Historians trace influences, search for standard

vocabularies and discourses, and identify trends. But to speak of an orthodoxy, one must first assume the pre-existence of an autonomous intellectual field.

It is essential to keep this in mind while discussing the place of economic arguments in the early antislavery literature. Rather than assuming the existence of an orthodox political economy influencing abolitionism, I seek to investigate how early antislavery activists dealt with economic considerations while giving political advice about emancipation. To provide the necessary historical context, the following section recovers the process of politicization of slavery in the British Empire.

4.3 Slavery as a political problem

The decision to frame colonial opposition to British rule as a crusade against "political slavery" unintendedly put slaveholding under scrutiny: "As those white Americans who later called themselves patriots charged that British policies regarding trade and taxation reduced them to slaves, they could not avoid the question of responsibility for black slavery" (HARROLD, 2019, p. 18). Since the dispute was "conceived in terms of the opposition between freedom and tyranny, liberty and slavery," not only the metropolitan government but also North American slaveholders became political targets (BLACKBURN, 1988, p. 93). If the colonists and their British allies denounced the tyranny of the imperial administration, opposition pamphleteers and politicians condemned their hypocrisy "to score some rhetorical points in the American controversy" (GREENE, 2013, p. 191–99).

According to Brown (2006, p. 124), those "looking for ways to demean colonial pretensions to political liberty" mobilized antislavery rhetoric to defend "parliamentary supremacy." They attempted to undermine any reason for rebellion by exploring the contradictions between revolutionary ideology and the practice of slavery (p. 122-34). Thus, antislavery attained political significance:

> The unrecognized premises nesting in the attack on American slaveholders bore potent messages with far reaching implications. How individuals, communities, even nations conducted themselves with regard to human bondage could provide a legitimate standard for evaluating their politics. And only those who divested themselves from chattel slavery could rightfully campaign for political liberty. (BROWN, 2006, p. 134)

North American colonists and their allies reacted, blaming Britain for the imposition of slavery. Patriots exploited colonial attempts to ban the slave trade to "justify their struggle for political liberty" (p. 138), "pairing antislavery initiatives with challenges to imperial sovereignty" (p. 143).[54] By these means, "British and American propagandists during the era of the American Revolution politicized involvement in the slave system" (p. 152). Exploring the "unspoken consensus" about the "abstract injustice" of slavery, pamphleteers and politicians would "scrutinize and condemn the politics of those they opposed" (p. 114). Thus, Brown concluded, the imperial crisis extended the problem of slavery "from the more abstract realms of sentiments and moral judgment to the politically charged arena of ideological dispute" (p. 133-34).

Additionally, a small but essential network of black and white abolitionists in North America "transformed revolutionary currents into a call for African liberty" (SINHA, 2016, p. 35). These activists "mocked the colonists' plight when compared to the oppression suffered by black slaves" (p. 36). For the Quaker abolitionist William Dillwyn (1773, p. 8), defending liberty as an "unalienable right of man" was absolutely inconsistent with subjecting enslaved Africans "to the most abject state of slavery." A postscript to the *Pennsylvania Journal*, often attributed to Thomas Paine, remembered that those who complained "so loudly of attempts to enslave them" kept so many in perpetual slavery (BRUNS, [1775] 1977, p. 378). The editors of Samuel Hopkins's *Dialogue on Emancipation* (1776, p. iii) hoped American political leaders were "sensible of the inconsistences of promoting slavery of the Africans, at the same time we are asserting our own civil liberty, at the risque of our fortunes and lives."

Abolitionists would explore the contradictions between revolutionary ideology and slavery both rhetorically and through direct political action (HARROLD, 2019, p. 18–24). Whites and blacks, free and enslaved, organized collectively in different provinces to pursue slave trade

[54] From the 1760s onwards, a small group of North American abolitionists (mainly Quakers) pressed local legislatures to ban the slave trade, restricting the importation by increasing taxation. As Frey summarized (2000, p. 409): "Pennsylvania (1773), Rhode Island (1774), and Connecticut (1774) passed prohibitory acts, and the general Articles of Association adopted by the first Continental Congress in 1774 contained a slave-trade clause which pledged the Association "neither [to] import nor purchase any slave imported after the first day of December next," after which time it agreed "wholly [to] discontinue the slave trade" and "neither [to] be concerned in it ourselves" nor to "hire our vessels, nor sell our commodities or manufacturers to those who are concerned in it." Prohibitory acts "failed in the early 1770s to win the assent of royal governors in Delaware, New York, and Massachusetts" and "George III's Privy Council also vetoed duties passed by the Virginia General Assembly in 1767, 1769, and 1772" (BROWN, 2006, p. 135).

abolition or complete emancipation (see SINHA, 2016, p. 34–64). Even before the Declaration of Independence, black abolitionists exposed the limits of American republicanism and turned revolutionary ideology into a weapon in their fight for freedom. By 1773, enslaved people living in New England had already formed antislavery committees and petitioned for freedom (SINHA, 2016, p. 42–44). The first antislavery society in the Anglo-American world was created in Philadelphia in 1775. The practical success of these initiatives was limited, as the scholarship on American abolitionism often notes. Nevertheless, during the 1770s, North American abolitionists explored the contradictions of revolutionary ideology to turn abolitionism into a course of political action.

Accordingly, antislavery writers in both North America and England seized the momentum to propose gradual emancipation schemes. As Brown (2006, ch. 4-5) has revealed, these schemes emerged once the existence of slavery became a sustained moral and political problem. Thereafter, those who defended the antislavery cause would have to search for alternatives to the enslavement of Africans. While Brown discusses at length the emancipation schemes devised by British authors during the Revolutionary Crisis, his work did not focus on the abolitionists' reflections on political economy (p. 212-330).

As we will see in the next section, the activists interested in changing public policy in the revolutionary era could hardly escape practical considerations about economic matters. Some writers indeed assumed a moral absolutist position, supporting abolition despite its economic consequences. The author of *Two Dialogues on the Man-Trade* (1760) argued that no economic interest could justify the continuation of slavery and the slave trade, neither the alleged need to compensate slaveholders nor the effects of abolition upon the plantation trade: "Let the consequence of such prohibition be what they will, that none should be suffered to go on tormenting and murdering, their fellow-creatures, year after year, though they were never any more to see an ounce of tobacco or sugar in Great Britain" (p. 59-60). The author was less concerned with changing British policy, however, than convincing those directly involved in the slave trade to give it up.

This was also the case of John Wesley, who wrote *Thoughts upon Slavery* (1774) on the eve of the Anglo-American War. He thought it futile to address "the public in general" or even Parliament, deciding to appeal directly to those "immediately concerned" with the subject – captains, merchants, and planters (p. 43). Considering the economic consequences of abolition,

Wesley stated it would be better to let the sugar islands "sunk in the depth of sea" than to cultivate them "at such a high price as the violation of justice, mercy, and truth" (p. 36). If slavery was necessary to guarantee Britain's wealth and trade, it would be better "to have no wealth [and] no trade" (p. 38-39). To him, "honest poverty" was preferable to "riches brought by tears, and sweat, and blood of our fellow-creatures" (p. 28-39). But once again, unlike North American abolitionists, Wesley was not yet focused on direct political action against slavery.

Focusing on the humanitarian reasons for abolition and decrying as avarice the economic advantages reaped from the enslavement of Africans could be an effective strategy to convince the public about the morality of the antislavery endeavor. And popular mobilization was essential to the organized abolitionist movement on both sides of the Atlantic. Overthrowing the slave system, however, would require more than just convincing the public that slavery was morally wrong. This was particularly true of slave-based societies such as North America, where antislavery activists could not escape questions about labor supply and the compensation of slaveholders or dismiss the restrictions posed by manumission laws.

I must add two observations before proceeding any further. Following the process of politicization described above, some antislavery writers would begin to incorporate *policy* considerations to strengthen their case about the inhumanity and injustice of slavery. In such a context, economic arguments were often connected to policy advice. Discussing the alleged advantages of introducing free labor in the British West Indies, the Pennsylvanian Quaker Benjamin Rush (1773, p. 7) wrote: "It is to be hoped therefore that motives of policy will at last induce Britons to give up a trade, which those of justice and humanity cannot prevail them to relinquish." Another American writer lamented that the practice "of steal and enslave men by violence and murder" persisted despite being "so often proved contrary to the light of nature, to every principle of justice and humanity, and even good policy" (BRUNS, [1775] 1977, p. 376). More than a decade later, the English activist Thomas Clarkson published *An essay on the impolicy of the African Slave Trade* (1788) to show how the trade was "as impolitick, as I proved it to be inhuman and unjust" (p. 3).

What did antislavery writers mean by policy, impolicy, and impolitick? Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) offers some clues on contemporary uses of these terms. *Policy* is defined as (i) "the art of government, chiefly in respect to foreign powers" and (ii) "art; prudence; management of affairs; stratagem" (1755a). Johnson defines *political* as "relating to

politicks; relating to the administration of public affairs" (1755b), while *politick* is (i) "political; civil" and (ii) "prudent; versed in affairs" (1755c). Similarly, the antislavery literature used policy and impolicy while discussing something broadly related to public administration and government.[55] It included considerations on the management and reproduction of the enslaved population, the security of those colonies in which the enslaved population outnumbered free citizens, and the contribution of the slave trade to British wealth and naval power.

Such considerations were not entirely new by the 1770s and 1780s, which leads to a second observation: antislavery writers mobilized arguments from previous secular and religious traditions.[56] Accordingly, those designing emancipation schemes would often consider claims about the superiority of free labor. As discussed in the previous chapter, this was already a rather common notion even before the appearance of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776). Nevertheless, most publications stressing the lower productivity and higher cost of slave labor were not immediately concerned with emancipation.[57] Moreover, even those who invoked the superiority of free labor to justify emancipation schemes – most notably Maurice Morgan (1772) – did not believe in the overall inefficiency of slave-based production. In other words, referring to the lower cost and higher productivity of free workers was insufficient to convince either the public or the government to support emancipation in practice. Emancipation schemes needed to provide an alternative mode of social organization, answering concerns about hindrances to manumission, the compensation of slaveholders, and the future of liberated Africans and African Americans.

In sum, considerations about the superiority of free labor did not necessarily entail support for abolition. But this was bound to change on the eve of the American Revolution: antislavery

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[55] Early antislavery writers, especially those mentioned before, used *policy* in a loose sense that reflected something in the realm of government. I did not find references to the word *police* in the early antislavery literature analyzed here. According to Dodsworth (2008, p. 587), "police discourse" in late-eighteenth century England referred to "the regulation of sites of temptation so as to prevent the acquisition of vicious habits, alongside the assumption that police function was generally to establish good order and public morals". Between 1780 and 1800, English writers defended a "reformed system of police (…) to act as a form of moral education, compensating for the apparent lack of religious and civil instruction in the general populace" (p. 597). Davis (1999, chap. 8) suggested that several English abolitionists were committed to a "moral reform" and to the social control of the laboring people in way that resembled the "police discourse" described by Dodsworth (2008). This discussion lies beyond the scope of this dissertation, however. It suffices here to remark that social control was one of the practical concerns of North American abolitionists.

[56] Davis (1988, p. 191–445) discussed in detail the sources of antislavery thought, from the legacy of evangelical theology to the controversial messages of enlightenment philosophy.

[57] See *An Essay Concerning Slavery and the Danger Jamaica is Exposed From The Great Number Of Slaves* (1746, p. 47–51), Benjamin Franklin ([1751] 1961, p. 229–30), William Burke and Edmund Burke (1757, p. 124), *A plan for improving the trade at Senegal* (1763, p. 1–3), Robert Wallace (1764, p. 264–66), Granville Sharp (1769, p. 75–78), John Millar (1771, p. 200–205, 218, 240–41), Maurice Morgann (1772, p. 7), Josiah Tucker (1775, p. 22–23). For further discussion, see Chapter 3.

writers began to mobilize existing economic arguments to justify either emancipation or slave trade abolition. Following the politicization of slavery in the Anglo-American world, activists now had to articulate a case to convince the public that stopping the enslavement of Africans was a matter of sound policy.

4.4 The 1770s political economy of emancipation

Once antislavery attained political significance, abolitionists were encouraged to channel their efforts into political action. Accordingly, some abolitionists would strategically engage with the contradictions of revolutionary ideology to propose emancipation schemes for the North American provinces. This was the case of Anthony Benezet (1771), Benjamin Rush (1773), William Dillwyn (1773), Granville Sharp (1776), and the anonymous author of *Essays Commercial and Political* (1777). Except for the latter, none of them wrote a piece on political economy. Benezet, Rush, Dillwyn, and Sharp relied overwhelmingly on moral, religious, and legal arguments against slavery and the slave trade. Yet, in proposing emancipation, they had to deal with economic matters, including solutions to material problems such as compensation, redress, and the legislation that imposed fees on the manumission of enslaved Africans and African Americans. Convincing the public that slavery was an unequivocal moral wrong would not be enough.

Before discussing these schemes in more detail, some clarifications are in order. First, American abolitionism has a history of its own. It related at once to international movements and the local context of specific provinces. It encompassed over a century, extending from the colonial period to the Civil War and Reconstruction eras. Accordingly, several scholars have documented the history of American abolitionism from a wide range of perspectives and with different emphases.[58] Here, I do not attempt to provide an overall account of antislavery organization in Revolutionary America.

I aim to explore how a small group of American and English abolitionists dealt with economic concerns while proposing emancipation. These were neither the only nor the most

[58] Recently, some scholars tried to provide a comprehensive account of American antislavery from the late-seventeenth century to the reconstruction. Sinha (2016) provides a detailed history that privileges the continuity of abolitionist efforts throughout the period. Placing slave resistance (in its multiple forms) at the core of abolitionism, Sinha describes it as an interracial movement from the beginning and "tied to the development of democracy" (p. 3). Harrold (2019) discusses the politics of antislavery, stressing how abolitionists acted directly towards political change during the long period analyzed.

radical emancipation schemes to appear during the revolutionary era. But they evidence something fundamental: even those who focused on the moral case against slavery, associating the enslavement of Africans with vicious avarice and the search for personal gain, would eventually have to deal with economic matters while advocating for political change.

Second, most of the publications discussed below were either encouraged by the Quaker reformer Anthony Benezet or inspired by his writings. Historians often discuss the importance of Quaker activists to early antislavery efforts in colonial America.[59] Sinha (2016, p. 19) remarked that their "opposition to imperialist warfare" during the Seven Years' War "pushed Quaker reformers" toward "organized abolition." Anthony Benezet, called the father of Atlantic abolitionism by Maurice Jackson (2009), was a pivotal figure in the process of antislavery organization in America.[60] For my purposes, it is worth noting that Quaker antislavery rhetoric attributed the existence of slavery to the "love of gain": the blinding pursuit of wealth and luxuries at the expense of human life. One might thus be tempted to assume that Quaker antislavery writers would renounce any economic considerations. But this would be misleading. By the mid-eighteenth century, Benjamin Lay and John Woolman pioneered the later famous "antislavery tactic of encouraging the nonconsumption of goods produced by the slave labor" (SINHA, 2016, p. 19). In the early 1770s, Anthony Benezet and William Dillwyn reflected on compensation and redress while proposing gradual emancipation.

4.4.1 Thinking Emancipation: Anthony Benezet, Benjamin Rush, and Granville Sharp

Anthony Benezet (1713-1784) was born in France and emigrated to Philadelphia in 1731. He became a schoolteacher in the late 1730s and, by the early 1750s, "began to teach young black people in his own home" (JACKSON, 2009, p. 22). Around the same time, Benezet joined John Woolman's efforts "to restrict slaveholding and the buying of slaves among Quakers" (SINHA, 2016, p. 21). From the 1760s until his death, Benezet would become not only a well-known antislavery writer across the Anglo-American world but also an influential activist who used

[59] See Sinha (2016, p. 9–33) and Carey (2012) for Quaker antislavery before the revolutionary period.
[60] The collection of essays edited by Maurice Jackson and Susan Kozel (2015) discusses different aspects of Quaker antislavery organization in America from 1754 to 1808. For the role of Quakers in antislavery organization in Britain, see Brown (2006, chap. 8). For Benezet's contributions, see Jackson (2009; 2014). See also the collection of essays on Benezet edited by Marie-Jeanne Rossignol and Bertrand Van Ruymbeke (2017).

petitions, correspondence, and printing to pursue an abolitionist agenda in revolutionary North America.

His publications combined religious sources with travel accounts, commercial writings, and secular enlightenment philosophy (see BENEZET, 1762, 1767, 1771). Aiming to reach a public beyond the Society of Friends, he insisted that slavery was inconsistent not only with Christianity but also with "the dictates of reason, and every common sense of humanity" (BENEZET, 1767, p. 3). To this end, Benezet quoted extensively from Enlightenment sources such as Montesquieu and Francis Hutcheson (see BENEZET, 1771, p. 72–74, 180–88).

Additionally, his *Short Account of that Part of Africa Inhabited by Negroes* (1762) and *Some Historical Account of Guinea* (1771) drew on travel narratives to combat the "false representation" of Africans advanced by Europeans and white American settlers. According to him, Africans "are generally a sensible, humane and sociable people, and their capacity is as goof, and capable of improvement as that of whites" (BENEZET, 1762, p. 7). Besides, the Western African countries "appear particularly agreeable" and "so fruitful as to furnish its inhabitants plentifully with the necessaries of life" (p. 7). Benezet thus helped forge an alternative description of Western Africa on which antislavery writers would later rely.[61] He insisted on the injustice of the slave trade, the brutality of middle-passage, and the horrors of colonial slavery. The "love of gain" and "selfish avarice," not the alleged necessity of supplying labor to the colonies, were the root causes of slavery and the slave trade. Accordingly, Benezet criticized the common justification that white people were not suited to work in warm climates (BENEZET, 1771, p. 142–143).

Benezet's writings cover a wide range of subjects, but political economy was not among his primary concerns – likely because Quaker antislavery rhetoric had long associated slaveholding with efforts to increase personal wealth without regard for the common good. Nevertheless, he would move towards an economic argument for the abolition of the slave trade in some of his publications. Benezet (1771, p. 142–144) included a section in *Some Historical Account* to show "the great advantage that might accrue to the British nation, if the slave trade was entirely laid aside, and a fair and friendly commerce established through the whole coast of Africa." As discussed in Chapter 2, Benezet likely borrowed arguments from Postlethwayt's *Dictionary of Trade and Commerce* (1751-55) to connect slave trade abolition to the economic advantages that a commodity trade with Africa might yield (see BROWN, 2013, p. 156–57).

[61] See Sparks (2017) for a discussion of Benezet's image of Africa.

In the early 1770s, those who defended gradual abolition in America argued that stopping the imports of enslaved Africans should be the first step toward this goal. Acknowledging the limited capacity of colonial authorities to do so, abolitionists encouraged petitioning the British Crown and Parliament for the abolition of slave trade. While making this case, some antislavery writers like Benezet and James Swan thought it would be proper to highlight the unexplored possibilities of "legitimate commerce" with Africa and the benefits it might bring to the British Empire.[62] Here, I focus on Benezet's comments on emancipation.

Understanding that abolition was beyond individual initiative, Benezet addressed the government to offer a gradual emancipation scheme. To him, the first step should be to prohibit the imports of enslaved Africans to the colonies. Gradual abolition was often regarded as a strategic decision, especially in Britain. Several eighteenth-century activists thought it better to target the slave trade before entering the question of slaveholders' "property rights." In Benezet's case, as in other schemes I will discuss later, the option for gradual abolition reflected the concern of white settlers with the social control of emancipated Africans.

Benezet was convinced the solution involved neither sending freed blacks back to Africa nor immediate emancipation (1762, p. 69, 1771, p. 138). Considering that enslaved people were usually "undisciplined (…) in religion and virtue," Benezet feared that sudden emancipation "might give a loose of those evil habits, which the fear of a master would have restrained" (1762, p. 69, 1771, p. 138). Immediate emancipation would also raise another problem: how to compensate slaveholders. All the schemes discussed here accepted that emancipation required compensation, but none of them assumed the government should pay for this. The solutions envisaged involved either compensation through a period of indentured servitude or self-purchased manumission. Benezet argued that enslaved workers who were already in North America should be freed "after serving so long as may appear equitable." Temporary indenture, if adequately regulated by the Courts of Justice, would be a way to compensate slaveholders for the costs of purchasing an enslaved African or raising those born in America (BENEZET, 1762, p. 70–71, 1771, p. 139–140).

[62] See James Swan's *A dissuasion to Great Britain and their colonies from the slave trade* (1772). Swan was a Scottish-born merchant who emigrated to Boston during his childhood. In 1773, black abolitionists asked Swan to reprint his pamphlet and attached it to their petition for freedom to the Massachusetts General Court (BRUNS, 1977, p. 200; SINHA, 2016, p. 41–42).

Once emancipated, all former slaves should “be enrolled in the County Court” and remain in said county for a specific time “under the care of the overseers of the poor.” Benezet believed these measures would guarantee that adults behave “circumspectly,” making “proper use of their liberty” and allowing their children to be educated. Thus, “parents and children might grow up to be useful members of the society.” He also proposed that government assign a “small portion of land” to those manumitted families unable to find employment as hired servants (BENEZET, 1762, p. 71, 1771, p. 139–140).

Benezet concluded by enumerating the happy consequences of his emancipation plan:

> Hence, both planters and tradesmen would be plentifully supplied with cheerful and willing-minded labourers, much vacant land would be cultivated, the produce of the country be justly increased, and the taxes for the support of the government lessened to the individuals, by the increase of taxables, and the Negroes, instead of being an object of terror, as they certainly must be to the governments where their number are great, would become interested in their safety and welfare. (BENEZET, 1771, p. 140–41)

First, emancipation would increase the supply of productive and industrious free workers. Slavery, according to Benezet, depressed the minds of individuals and “sunk their spirits into habits of idleness and sloth” (1771, p. 133-34). Once free, the same workers would have the “inducement” and “opportunity” to use “their natural capacities” to improve, thereby becoming more industrious (p. 133). Thus, emancipation would guarantee a labor force willing to work to enrich themselves and their masters. Moreover, colonial production might also be increased if each manumitted family received a small portion of unoccupied land.

Benezet next proceeded to address the question of taxation. Reminding his audience that emancipation would increase the number of taxpayers, he argued this could decrease the burden of taxation on each settler. Conversely, those who opposed emancipation worried that “freedmen might become a public charge” (FREY, 2000, p. 409). In other words, there was widespread concern that manumission would simply transfer the cost of maintenance of emancipated slaves onto the taxpayers – assuming those who were manumitted would be incapable of providing for themselves and become a burden to the local government (DAVIS, 2008, p. 153).

Finally, Benezet addressed a pressing concern among eighteenth-century settlers: their own safety in a slave-based society. As discussed in Chapter 3, slave rebellions all over the British Atlantic Empire frightened white colonists. The disproportionality between enslaved and free people in colonies such as Jamaica and South Carolina became a common theme in the literature

about colonies. Writers worried such disproportion not only threatened the safety of white settlers but also exposed the entire colony to external attack. Slavery was a weapon that enemies could use in times of war. Some suggested the only solution involved encouraging European migration to these colonies (BURKE; BURKE, 1757, p. 116–119). Others proposed the prohibition of slave trade and, eventually, manumission (*Anon*, 1746, p. 47–48). Engaging similar concerns, Benezet argued that emancipation was the ultimate solution. Free blacks, interested in the "safety and welfare" of their respective governments, would no longer represent a threat.

As mentioned above, Benezet was a major force in organized antislavery efforts during the 1770s. In April 1775, he "solicited a group of ten men, mostly Quakers," to a meeting that would launch the *Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage* (JACKSON, 2009, p. 215). Besides "advocating abolition and overseeing the manumission of slaves," the society was mainly concerned with "the assistance of free people of color" (p. 215). Members met four times in 1775 but did not assemble again during the Revolutionary War. Two-thirds of the members were Quakers, whose pacifism was increasingly "unpopular during wartime" (p. 216). Aware that "Quaker pacifism might discredit or render ineffectual the Society's antislavery testimony," the members would suspend their meetings until 1784 (p. 216). Benjamin Rush (1746-1813), one of the original members, joined the meetings again in 1787 and became the secretary of the reorganized Pennsylvania Abolitionist Society (p. 221).

Anthony Benezet encouraged Benjamin Rush, a prominent physician and patriot political leader, to write his first antislavery tract in 1773. Bruns (1977, p. 224) summarizes the episode as follows: "With a bill dealing with slavery before the Pennsylvania assembly and with the necessary Quaker support lined up, Anthony Benezet, the incessant lobbyist, asked the Presbyterian Rush to write a pamphlet attacking slavery." Rush anonymously published *An Address to the Inhabitants of the British Settlements, on the Slavery of the Negroes in America* (1773), and the Assembly decided to increase the duty on imported enslaved Africans shortly thereafter (BRUNS, 1977, p. 234; JACKSON, 2009, p. 121). Like Benezet's earlier publications, Rush's *Address* also hints at emancipation.

The *Address* (1773) aimed to rebuke the main arguments used to support the slave trade. Rush denounced those who used the Scriptures to justify perpetual bondage, insisting that both slave trade and slavery were inconsistent with Christianity (p. 8-16). Besides, he criticized allegations that colonial slavery saved the lives of war prisoners who would have been killed in

Africa and that well-treated slaves were better off in the colonies than in their home country (p. 17-18). Rush's arguments were framed as a response to the "inhabitants of the sugar islands and South Carolina," who opposed slave trade abolition by arguing "that it would be impossible to carry on the manufactures of sugar, rice, and indigo" without enslaved Africans (p. 4).

Quoting from Pierre Poivre's *Travels of a Philosopher* (1770), he remarked that the sugar was produced more cheaply by free workers in Cochin-China than in the British Atlantic colonies (p. 5-6). If "the plantations in the islands and the southern colonies were more limited" and only employed free men, "the general product would be greater although the profits to individuals would be less" (p. 7). The suppression of "luxury and vice" and the promotion of "the welfare of the society," he concluded, could then be attained "by diminishing the opulence in a few" (p. 7). Despite reproducing Poivre's argument that sugar plantations in the West Indies could produce twice as much with free workers, Rush did not appeal to the slaveholder's interest. He defended a new labor organization that would increase the welfare of society at the expense of a few individuals' luxury.

Additionally, Rush drafted proposals for achieving gradual abolition. Like Benezet, he believed the first step was to stop the slave trade. To accomplish this end, colonial assemblies should "unite in petitioning the king and Parliament to dissolve the African committee of merchants" – Rush believed this committee to be "chiefly" responsible for carrying enslaved Africans to America (p. 19). He referred to the *Company of Merchants Trading to Africa,* which was established in 1750 to substitute the Royal African Company (see Chapter 2). Moreover, Rush insisted the timing was right: Mansfield's decision in favor of the enslaved person in the Somerset Case and the widespread antislavery sentiment among Britons would help the colonial case for abolishing the slave trade (p. 19).

Besides this petitioning tactic aimed at suppressing the slave trade, Rush had little to say about the next steps toward emancipation. He separated the enslaved population between the fit and "unfit to be set at liberty" (p. 20). The latter included the elderly, unhealthy, or those who had "acquired all the low vices of slavery" and must remain enslaved (p. 20). Conversely, the young slaves should "be educated in the principles of virtue and religion" and "instructed in some business, whereby they may be able to maintain themselves" (p. 20). With proper education, they would be ready to become free. Accordingly, pertinent legislation would "limit the time of their servitude" and "entitle them to all the privileges of free-born British subjects" (p. 20). In short, he

proposed a scheme of temporary indenture in which young Africans and African Americans should be educated before manumission. In so doing, he excluded several enslaved people from his emancipation scheme, deeming them "unfit" for liberty.

After these considerations, Rush directed the reader to a footnote where he reproduced a letter from Granville Sharp on the "Spanish regulations" (p. 20-21). By Spanish regulations, Sharp meant *coartación* – a relatively common practice that allowed enslaved people to purchase their freedom in Spanish colonies. Sharp had heard about this from Brook Watson, a London merchant "who had spent part of his teenage years aboard his uncle's ship" (WYMAN-MCCARTHY, 2018, p. 45). The *coartación* was "formally written into Spanish law" in 1842, but it was already a well-established practice by the late eighteenth century (p. 44).

Sharp described the practice as follows: enslaved Africans were allowed one free day per week (besides Sundays), and if they worked for their enslaver during this day, they were compensated accordingly – with "the wages of a freeman" (SHARP apud RUSH, 1773, p. 20–21). After saving the amount necessary to pay one-fifth of their "original cost," the enslaved person could purchase another "working day" (1773, p. 21). This process continued until they had purchased the remaining four days and became "completely free" (1773, p. 21). Sharp described these "regulations" as a "considerable step towards abolishing absolute slavery" (1773, p. 21).

After describing what he knew about the Spanish regulations, Sharp enumerated the advantages that would follow if the British colonies adopted similar measures:

> This is such an encouragement to industry, that even the most indolent are tempted to exert themselves. Men who have thus worked out their freedom are inured to the labor of the country and are certainly the most useful subjects that a colony can acquire. Regulations might be formed upon the same plan to encourage the industry of slaves that are already imported to the colonies, which would teach them how to maintain themselves and be as useful, as well as less expensive to the planter. They would by such means become members of society and have an interest in the welfare of the community, which would add greatly to the Strength and Security of each colony; whereas, at present, many of the planters are in continual danger of being cut off by their slaves – a fate which, they but too justly deserve! (SHARP apud RUSH, 1773, p. 21)

Self-purchase would, at the same time, solve the problem of slaveholders' compensation and prepare enslaved people to be productive members of society. Moreover, it would increase labor productivity since the possibility of retrieving liberty was a great "encouragement to

industry."[63] Finally, gradual abolition through self-purchase would increase colonial strength and guarantee the security of white settlers.

Benjamin Rush thus decided to close his remarks on emancipation by referring to Granville Sharp's account of the Spanish regulations. Two years later, in July 1775, the English abolitionist sent a letter to Rush offering "a few hints" on how to achieve emancipation in North America (WOODS; RUSH; SHARP, 1967, p. 14–16). Sharp included this letter and his account of the Spanish regulations as an appendix to *The Just Limitation of Slavery in the Laws of God* (1776).

Granville Sharp, the English antislavery activist who supported freedom suits in England, first caught the attention of Anthony Benezet with the publication of his *Representation of the Injustice and Dangerous Tendency of Tolerating Slavery* (1769).[64] They began to correspond frequently from then onward. Sharp also became acquainted with Benjamin Rush and other antislavery activists through Benezet's network. He learned about antislavery initiatives in revolutionary America and publicized them among metropolitans (BROWN, 2006, p. 165–67).

Unlike those who used antislavery instrumentally during the imperial crisis, Sharp "found in the North American campaign for political liberty a new way to promote emancipation and abolition" (BROWN, 2006, p. 168). He was sympathetic to the patriotic cause and defended that American colonies "were entitled to their own legislatures"[65] (p. 161), but stressed that "colonial resistance could only succeed (…) if the patriots collectively renounced" slave trade and promoted emancipation (p. 167-68).

Such a position was evident in Sharp's letter to Benjamin Rush in 1775: "The congress has acted nobly in forbidding the iniquitous importation of more slaves; but the business is but half done, 'till they have agreed upon some equitable and safe means of gradually enfranchising those which remain there" (SHARP, 1776, Appendix 6, p. 56). Here, Sharp refers to the second article of association agreed upon during the First Continental Congress in 1774, which established that, "after the first day of December next," Americans would no longer import enslaved Africans or participate in the slave trade (see BRUNS, 1977, p. 351–57). Considering the measure as a step towards slave trade abolition, Sharp remembered his patriot interlocutor that "American liberty"

[63] For further discussion about Granville Sharp on the superiority of free labor, see Chapter 3.
[64] For an overview of Granville Sharp's publications and activities, see Brown (2006, chap. 3).
[65] See Sharp's *A declaration of the people's natural right to a share in the legislature; which is the fundamental principle of the British constitution of state* (1774).

could not “be firmly established” until “some scheme of general enfranchisement” was adopted (1776, Appendix 6, p. 61).

Taking slave trade abolition in North America for granted, Granville Sharp devised an emancipation scheme based on self-purchase. Accordingly, it was necessary to appoint “juries” to estimate “the value of each slave now in the colonies” and, afterward, to record it “as a pecuniary debt due” from each enslaved person to the slaveholder in a “public register for each district” (SHARP, 1776, Appendix 6, p. 57). He then proposed two regulations that would ban the “private property in men” and encourage self-purchase simultaneously (p. 58-59).

First, Sharp suggested that slaveholders divide their property into “compact little farms” and lease each portion to trustworthy enslaved workers for a determinate period (p. 58). Landowners would also be responsible for building a “small wooden cottage” on each farm and supplying the necessary provisions for the tenants, adding these expenses to the original “debt” of each enslaved person (p. 58). Thereby, enslaved workers would become tenants and use part of their production to pay rent. This rent should be enough to liquidate their debt over the lease period and to “yield the landlords a due profit from each portion of their estates” (p. 58). Thus, this tenancy regime would promote emancipation without any loss to the slaveholders.

Second, Sharp addressed colonial concerns and proposed an alternative plan for those Africans and African Americans allegedly not “fit to be trusted” with their own “liberty” (p. 59). Such enslaved workers might be liberated under “the care and protection of a county committee” (p. 59). The committee could “let out” these workers as “hired servants” and use the income to pay “the registered debt for each man’s original price” (p. 59). In the meantime, each worker should “be allowed one day a week (besides the Sunday) for his own profit, or be paid for it according to the mode of the Spanish regulations” (p. 59). Thus, they could “acquire a little property” and care for themselves once wholly free.

According to Sharp, both regulations would approximate enslaved workers to the condition of hired servants: “No master would be the absolute proprietor of those he employs, and yet all reasonable advantages arising from their labour, would remain” (p. 59). Additionally, he was convinced his emancipation proposals had another advantage:

> And in process of time, instead of wretched slaves, a new and useful class of men, at present unknown in America, (where every freeman cultivates his own ground only) would be established amongst you; I mean a hardy body of free peasants, serving either as trusty tenants or farmers, to improve the estates of landed gentlemen, or else as

> laborious cottagers, who might be employed with infinite advantage in the neighborhood, wherever established, especially if they were encouraged by an allotment of a small patch of land for a potatoe ground or garden, with a right of pasture for a little live stock upon some common field in the neighborhood of their little cottages. Landholders by these means would have their estates better peopled and improved, and yet avoid the guilt and danger of oppression. (SHARP, 1776, Appendix 6, p. 60)

The society Sharp described above resembled his own. His insistence on the benefits of transforming enslaved workers into peasants, either tenants or cottagers, likely came from his understanding of English history. In sum, he believed emancipation could be handled in such a way as to improve American agriculture and increase wealth. It could be gradually achieved through regulations encouraging self-purchase, a scheme that addressed American fears of immediate emancipation, the necessity of establishing *a priori* a period of temporary servitude, and compensation. Sharp's plan was more thorough than those suggested by his colonial correspondents. Like them, however, it did not account for the hindrances to manumission existing in several North American provinces. Two other emancipation schemes would do so.

4.4.2 Calculating the price of freedom

Before the Revolutionary War, several American provinces restricted manumission in one way or another. A slaveholder in New Jersey wishing to free an enslaved person would have to pay a £200 fee. The Pennsylvania Assembly's *Act for the Better Regulating of Negroes* (1726) established that a slaveholder should pay £30 to the respective county court to manumit someone. The legislation intended "to secure and indemnify the city, township or county" from any future "charge or incumbrance" in case the freed person "by sickness or otherwise be rendered incapable to support him or herself" ("Pennsylvania Legislation Relating to Slavery," 2003, p. 78). This legislation was enforced until 1780, when a gradual abolition act was approved.

William Dillwyn reflected on North American manumission laws in *Brief Considerations on Slavery and the Expediency of its Abolition* (1773). An American-born Quaker, Dillwyn was Benezet's former pupil and assistant. The publication of *Brief Considerations* was "only the beginning of his antislavery activities" (BRUNS, 1977, p. 270). Dillwyn would later emigrate to England and co-found the London Abolitionist Society. More than a decade before, he had already proposed a scheme for gradual emancipation in North America that anticipated, to a certain extent, the "voluntary manumission laws passed in numerous states through the revolutionary and post-revolutionary period" (BRUNS, 1977, p. 270).

Dillwyn (1773, p. 8) would also mobilize revolutionary rhetoric to defend emancipation: enslaved Africans had the same "unalienable" right to liberty as American settlers. Like Benezet and Rush, he argued the "first and most important step" towards emancipation was prohibiting the importation of enslaved Africans to North America (p. 10). Dillwyn also encouraged his fellow Americans to petition the British Crown and Parliament to ban the slave trade (p. 10). Even if these petitions failed, he concluded, "the conscious satisfaction of having done our duty" would "be a reward sufficient for the labour" (p. 10).

Dillwyn (1773, p. 11) then proceeded to discuss the prospect of emancipating the enslaved population already living in North America. He tackled the manumission laws after considering the "diversity of sentiments" against emancipation. He remembered that "the act of manumission" was "clogged with difficulties that amount to a prohibition" in several northern colonies. Changing the legislation to "leave people at liberty to emancipate their slaves under certain restrictions" would thus bring significant benefits to the community. Dillwyn assumed that voluntary manumission laws existed to guarantee the public would not be "chargeable with any expense" if those who benefited from manumission could not work or support themselves for some reason – "age, sickness, or other disability" (p. 12). This was the logic behind the laws requiring that slaveholders pay a certain amount upon manumission.

Such regulations, he continued, were "highly reasonable" in some cases and prevented slaveholders from freeing the elderly or sick, who were no longer profitable, at the expense of the local government (p. 12). Nevertheless, the same logic did not justify charging slaveholders for the manumission of a young person:

> If, for instance, a slave is become aged and infirm in my service, it is unreasonable I should have in my power, by manumission to deny him a support from my estate, which perhaps his labour had contributed. But if, on the other hand, I have received no other benefit from his labour, than what was a proper compensation for the instruction I have given him, and the publick afterwards receives that benefit, it is then as reasonable, that the publick should be chargeable with any expenses, occasioned by such disability. This seems to be the general principle on which our laws relating to paupers are formed; and I see no inconvenience in adopting it in the case now under consideration. (DILLWYN, 1773, p. 12)

Reframing voluntary manumission laws was therefore central to removing unnecessary obstacles to emancipation. Dillwyn's proposal started from a few assumptions. First, those who voluntarily manumitted 21-year-old enslaved workers should not be charged since the public

would receive "all the benefits" of their labor for the following decades (p. 12). Using the "Breslau Bills of Mortality," he established the maximum life expectancy for enslaved people to be 67 years (p. 14). Supposing that people could usually work until they were 60 year old, he concluded that a manumitted African or African American would need public assistance for the remaining 7 years of their life (p. 14). From the Pennsylvanian experience since the 1726 Act, he inferred that a security of £30 was enough to repay the local government for any possible expenses arising from manumission (p. 13-14).

All considered, Dillwyn calculated the fee for manumitting a 50-year-old enslaved person at £20 (p. 14). The author arrived at this sum considering that a sum of £20 invested at the annual interest rate of 6% for ten years – the period for which a 50-year-old person would still be working – would yield £32 (p. 14). Using a similar logic to calculate the price of freedom, Dillwyn concluded the fee should increase by 14 shillings for each year above 21 at the date of manumission (p. 14-15). If "the slave on whose account" this fee was paid did not require "any assistance" from the local government, "the fund allotted for the purpose" would increase proportionally (p. 13). Thereby, Dillwyn guaranteed that those wishing to free their slaves could do so without any public burden.

Four years later, the writer of *Essays Commercial and Political* (1777) revised Dillwyn's calculations. The tract, anonymously published in Newcastle, discussed the British Empire's political economy. Its central theme was the Anglo-American crisis: eight out of ten sections analyzed the causes of the conflict, proposed solutions, and reflected on its consequences. According to the author, Americans did not have a proper cause "to justify their raising arms" (1777, p. 2–4). The "present resistance" against colonial taxation came not from the injustice of British policy but from their "turbulent and seditious spirit" (p. 60). The author thus remarked on the hypocrisy of American patriots who, "far from being animated by a general love of liberty any further than concerns themselves, never think of emancipating their poor slaves" (p. 61-62).

Nevertheless, the author did not use antislavery rhetoric only for instrumental purposes: "As we have, with some severity, animadverted on the Americans retaining, notwithstanding their own cry for liberty, their fellow creatures in perpetual slavery, we thought it highly necessary, not only to decry this evil, but to point out a remedy" (p. ii). With this in mind, the writer added to the *Essays* an "Appendix on the means of emancipating slaves without loss to the proprietors" (p. 129-

147). The appendix revised William Dillwyn's calculations and proposed the adoption of a self-purchase practice in the British colonies.

According to the author, "the chief and evident cause" hindering emancipation was "the unwillingness of men in general to give up any property or power they have attained" (p. 129). Additionally, the laws restricting voluntary manumission in different colonies prevented "many persons, even of humanity, from emancipating slaves" (p. 129). The *Essays'* writer acknowledged the merits of Dillwyn's plan but questioned his estimations and proposed another method to calculate what I have been referring to as the price of freedom (p. 130-34). This was based on two premises: (i) generally, workers were able to provide for themselves until 60, and (ii) £30 in North American currency was enough to indemnify the local government for any possible expenses arising from voluntary manumission (p. 130-31).

To estimate the charge of freeing enslaved workers older than 21, one must account for the probability of that person "attaining the age of 60" (p. 131-32). It was assumed that life expectancy in the British colonies was equal to or lower than in London (p. 132). Using data from "Doctor Price's Observations on Reversionary Payments," the author calculated such probabilities by dividing the number of individuals in a determinate age group by the total population at the age of 60. The results were summarized in a long table describing the calculation of manumission fees for each year after 21 (p. 135). I partially reproduce the results in Table 1.

The *Essays*' calculations differed substantially from Dillwyn's. The estimated charge upon manumission was higher for an enslaved person of 21 years of age and lower for one of 50. Using the decimal system, I summarize the approximate charges in £ sterling according to the calculations prepared by both Dillwyn and the *Essay* in Table 2.[66]

Using the *Essay's* (1777) values and a Currency Converter tool,[67] I could estimate how much the charges upon manumission were worth in 1770. The amount required to manumit enslaved workers aged 22, 35, and 50 would pay the wages of a skilled tradesperson in England for 13, 29, and 88 days, respectively. These estimations help to understand which values the *Essay's* writer had in mind when suggesting a scheme of self-purchase in which the enslaved person would pay not only for their acquisition cost but also the manumission fee.

[66] I used the conventional values: £1 = 20 shillings (s), 1 shilling (s) = 12 pence (d).
[67] Available at https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter/.

Table 1: Manumission fees according to the age (£ sterling)[68]

Age of the slave to be liberated	Complement of his age or No. of years short of 60	Persons living at different ages, according to the probabilities of life in London	Probability of being living at the age of 60 years	Present value of £1 to be paid on the expiration of the complement of any given life from 60, discounting at the rate 4 percent compound interest	Value of £1 to be paid conditionally on the attaining of the full age of 60 years	Value of £20 to be paid on the same conditions
22	39	487	0.3018	0.2166	0.0652	£1 7*s* 7*d*
35	25	368	0.3994	0.3751	0.1498	£2 19s 11d
50	10	224	0.6562	0.6755	0.4432	£8 17*s* 3*d*
60	0	147	1	1	1	£20

Table 2: Estimated charges upon voluntary manumission (*£ sterling)*[69]

Age	Dillwyn (1773)	Essays (1777)
22	£0.46	£1.37
50	£13.33	£8.86
60	£20	£20

Considering that reform in colonial voluntary manumission laws might take time, the author argued that a self-purchase plan would be appropriate to encourage further emancipation. Accordingly, a modified version of the Spanish regulations was advanced. As discussed in the previous section, Granville Sharp had described the practice of *coartacíon* to English-speaking audiences in 1776. As Wyman-McCarthy (2018, p. 45) observed, "Sharp's appendix generated a significant interest within emerging abolitionist circles," and several "British writers included a

[68] Source: *Essays Commercial and Political* (1777, p. 135). Note that the values were converted at the following exchange rate: £1 sterling = £1.5 North American currency.
[69] Source: Dillwyn (1773, p. 14-15) and *Essays Commercial and Political* (1777, p. 135).

description of what came to be known as 'the Spanish regulations' in their own antislavery tracts." The *Essay's* writer was among them.

According to Sharp's description, slaveholders in Spanish colonies allowed their enslaved workers a free day besides Sunday. The *Essay*'s author wondered whether British slaveholders would willingly do the same: they might oppose this self-purchase scheme because it relied upon sparing those enslaved one working day at their own "expenses" (1777, p. 136-37). For these reasons, a slightly different "plan of liberation" was proposed. Each slaveholder "should encourage" enslaved workers "to save money" and purchase a free day at 1/6 of their purchase price (p. 136). But how could an enslaved person save money? One might encourage such savings "by paying" the slave "proportionally for working above his task-work" or even "by allowing him, where land is plentiful, to cultivate at his leisure hours, a spot of ground for himself, and by purchasing the produce of him at its full value, if no other market be near" (p. 138). "Humanity dictates" that slaveholders must allow a person who saved 1/24 of their purchase price to buy a free day per month, thereby facilitating the process of self-purchase (p. 138).

Once the enslaved worker bought one out of six days, the landowner should pay them "the usual hire" for their labor during the free day (p. 138). The process should continue until, eventually, the enslaved worker could purchase all six days. The author still considered the manumission fee, however. After paying the entire purchasing price, formerly enslaved people should continue working for their enslavers until paying the estimated sum regarding the "probability (…) of becoming a charge" at "old age" (p. 138-39). Here, the author seemed to consider a scenario in which manumission laws remained the same:

> However, until such time as the emancipated negroes fall further under the consideration of the respective governments, it is easy for individuals who make them free, or afford them the means of doing it, to take such equivalent into their own hands, and in consequence engage to maintain them when they can no longer do it by their own labor, that is, to take them again into their own plantations as soon as they require it, and there maintain them, reaping the benefit of such little employment as they are capable of. (*Anon*, 1777, p. 135)

Thus, the author seemed to suggest a system in which the enslaver assumed the role of local government: they would administrate the manumission fee and assist elderly and infirm blacks whom they used to enslave. Nevertheless, Africans and African Americans who purchased their freedom would not be formally free under this arrangement. As mentioned before, voluntary

manumission in New Jersey required the payment of a £200 fee, besides the annual provisions of £20 to each manumitted person. I cannot determine whether the author was familiar with manumission legislation in other colonies besides Pennsylvania, but some of them made voluntary emancipation virtually impossible. This would inevitably hinder any emancipation plan that relied on individual initiative.

On the other hand, self-purchase was a non-regulated practice in Spanish colonies such as Cuba during the eighteenth century – despite Granville Sharp mistakenly referring to *coartación* as a law (1776, Appendix 5, p. 55). As we mentioned above, self-purchase would only become law in Spanish colonies in the nineteenth century. Therefore, a non-regulated self-purchase scheme was not a chimerical plan, even if it could conflict with existing manumission laws in North America.

The *Essay*'s author, writing from the metropolitan perspective at the beginning of the Anglo-American War, did not seem to have the same faith in government-led emancipation than some of the antislavery activists discussed before. Indeed, much had changed in America and Britain since the beginning of the decade. Warfare often hindered abolitionist organization in North America, which was particularly true for institutions with a strong Quaker influence – such as the Pennsylvania Abolitionist Society. In Britain, antislavery organization would come into its own only in the late 1780s. Besides, metropolitan audiences seemed less concerned with abolition in the late 1770s than at the beginning of the decade.[70] Thus, the author's choice to present a plan for legislative reform and a scheme based on individual initiative seems to have made sense.

To convince readers about the necessity of adopting an emancipation plan based on self-purchase, the author compared the English and Spanish characters: "Let not they who boast of their own freedom, and should entertain elevated notions of liberty, be greater tyrants and oppressors of their fellow-creatures than the subjects of a despotic are" (p. 136). Slaveholders were not expected to manumit enslaved workers "without recompense." Still, the author asked them to see each of their slaves as a debtor who deserves the opportunity to redeem their freedom after paying their purchase price (p. 144). Emancipation would thus neither diminish private fortunes nor affect the labor supply in the colonies: once somebody purchased their liberty (and the

[70] Brown (2006, p. 230) remembers that "the leading literary journals thought Sharp's *Just limitations of slavery in the laws of God* unworthy of review" and "few seemed to have noticed" the *Essay*'s author's "suggestions for reform."

manumission fee), the slaveholder would have enough capital to buy another slave or to hire a free person to do the job (p. 140-41).

Finally, the author provided an account of the advantages of employing free labor. For a "man of small capital," hiring a free person is more advantageous because he can cultivate his lands before advancing the total price of an enslaved worker, paying only the wages (p. 141-142). The "men of great capital," the author estimates, would be indifferent between purchasing enslaved workers at £50 or hiring the manumitted person at £6.50 "yearly wages, with all necessary clothing and provisions" (p. 142). The advantage of hired labor was that "the planter would be under no engagement of maintaining" the worker "in their old age" (p. 142). All considered, American settlers would be able to increase their production by choosing free labor: "Men, conscious of being free, will, even for moderate wages, engage themselves in labour that appear the most intolerable to slaves" (p. 143). Free workers were "stimulated by the consciousness of greater gain," while slaves had "no such motive" and no interest in working "more or less" or "in his master's welfare" (p. 142-43).

It is interesting to notice how the author mobilized the superiority of free labor as part of his case for allowing self-purchase in the British colonies. Settlers should consider hiring manumitted workers instead of purchasing other enslaved Africans because they would be more productive:

> Men thus made free, would have in them the spirit of industry, and, as we have before concluded, would voluntarily labour for as much more than meat and necessaries, as the life annuity of their value and prospect of future maintenance would be worth, exclusive of the additional labour, which, as free men interested in it, they would give. These wages, though equally advantageous to the employer to give, as to purchase the labourer, would enable the latter to live in a degree of enjoyments of wants, real or imaginary, so much superior to a slave, as would stimulate this class, to attain the condition of freemen. (*Anon*, 1777, p. 145–46)

By purchasing their freedom "with their own industry," Africans and African Americans would become the most valuable of subjects (p. 144). This scheme of gradual manumission also addressed concerns with emancipating people unfit for liberty: self-purchasing would teach enslaved people the value of honest industry and stimulate their productivity. Besides, as most emancipationists discussed here argued, voluntary labor prevented slave rebellions and insurrections: "Should we still continue the system of keeping our fellow-creatures in perpetual slavery, what have we not to expect from that justly enraged part of our species?" (p. 146).

4.5 Conclusion

What place did considerations about political economy occupy in Anglo-American early antislavery debates? Recent scholarship seems to assume the existence of a moral/economic duality: abolitionist discourse was primarily moral, while its opponents insisted on political-economic arguments. When abolitionists chose to rely on economic considerations, they usually *reacted* to slavery apologists rather than insist on the economic benefits of abolition. If stressing the positive consequences of abolition, they would mainly resort to the superiority of free labor or the benefits of a legitimate commerce with Africa. In a nutshell, this seemed to be the restricted place of political-economic considerations in abolitionist discourse.

I propose a different interpretation: thinking about abolition and emancipation required reflecting on political economy as well. If abolitionists privileged certain economic discourses to justify abolition in general (see Chapter 2 and 3), they had to deal with practical questions about the socioeconomic reorganization of slave-based societies to make a *politically compelling* case for abolition. Some abolitionists indeed argued that no prospect of economic loss should prevent the end of slavery. Despite being rhetorically powerful, this argument presented no concrete path to curtail the enslavement of Africans. The search for solutions involved thinking about political economy, as evidenced by the emancipation schemes discussed above.

Written in a context where antislavery opinion had attained political significance, these schemes engaged the contradictions of revolutionary ideology to propose emancipation. All plans were gradualist, proposed legislative changes, and suggested compensation schemes. Besides, most of them assigned an essential role to local government in ensuring emancipation. The first measure towards emancipation, they all agreed, was to stop the further importation of enslaved Africans to the colonies. Apart from Benezet's *Some historical account* (1771), no other publication attempted to demonstrate the economic advantages of abolishing the slave trade – probably because they did not need to do so. By the 1770s, an increasing number of settlers in Northern and Chesapeake provinces seemed convinced – not necessarily for abolitionist reasons – of the benefits of prohibiting the slave trade. It was now a matter of convincing the mother country rather than the Americans. By 1774, the Continental Congress itself attempted to ban the slave trade.

The proponents of these plans were also convinced that general and immediate emancipation would be imprudent. People accustomed to slavery needed time and supervision to become "fit" for liberty. The authors likewise addressed two further economic issues: compensation and manumission laws. Anthony Benezet and Benjamin Rush suggested temporary indenture as the best way to indemnify slaveholders. This would be the solution adopted in several gradual abolitionist acts in North America in the following decades. Granville Sharp proposed a solution combining self-purchase, a tenancy regime, and public supervision. The *Essay*'s author recommended a modified version of Sharp's description of the Spanish regulations to simultaneously guarantee compensation and emancipation.

William Dillwyn dealt with another pressing issue for North American abolitionists: the manumission laws. Voluntary emancipation was an expensive endeavor in most provinces. The fees charged upon manumission would allegedly cover public expenses incurred with free people who could no longer "provide for themselves." Assuming that a fee was necessary to prevent slaveholders from manumitting the elderly and sick, Dillwyn calculated what might be a fair manumission fee according to age. The *Essay*'s author revised these calculations and suggested that enslaved workers should pay for their purchase price and manumission fee. This way, slaveholders could not claim any economic loss with voluntary emancipation.

Most authors also evoked the benefits of abolition besides putting an end to an inhuman practice inconsistent with Christianity. They stressed that emancipation was the ultimate solution to guarantee public security in these colonial provinces. Besides, most of them agreed that free workers were more industrious than enslaved ones. Emancipation, then, would ensure a more productive labor force, increasing North American production and wealth. These general considerations were not, however, the only way in which abolitionists engaged with political economy. Rethinking the socioeconomic organization of slave-based societies was essential to the abolitionist endeavor.

5. CONCLUSION: THE POLITICAL ECONOMIES OF ANTISLAVERY

Did political economy contribute to the development of Anglo-American antislavery? Historians have addressed this problem since Eric Williams's *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944), yet some questions remain still open. Did activists and politicians borrow arguments from the emerging "science" of political economy to make their case for abolition? Where did these arguments come from? Did abolitionists mobilize economic discourses merely for rhetorical purposes? Or was thinking about economic matters part of the abolitionist endeavor? My dissertation attempted to answer these questions by examining early antislavery history.

I started from a broader understanding of eighteenth-century political economy. Recognizing that most Anglo-Americans did not see "economic activity" as a separate domain of human life by the turn of the nineteenth century, I insisted that political economy was not an autonomous science, a separate theoretical field, or an established profession at the time. Besides, I embraced the existence of a plurality of economic discourses instead of assuming either a liberal or mercantilist orthodoxy. For these reasons, I did not assume that antislavery opinion could have been shaped by a political-economic orthodoxy. Instead, I were interested in the interplay between eighteenth-century *political economies* and Anglo-American antislavery.

Indeed, late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century abolitionists often resorted to two distinguishable economic arguments. First, the slave trade hindered the development of a civilized, humane, and profitable commerce in African staple crops and natural produce. Second, free labor was more productive than slave labor. If historians have acknowledged the relevance of these arguments, few have attempted to understand where they came from. Chapters 2 and 3 accordingly investigated how these influential notions had become popular by the late eighteenth century.

Chapter 2 dealt with the origins of the antislavery case for a legitimate commerce with African territories. Historians agree that Malachy Postlethwayt's *Dictionary of Trade and Commerce* (1751-1755) provides the common source for similar arguments. A distinctive commercial rationale against trading in enslaved Africans thus came from the pen of a former director of the Royal African Company and slave trade apologist. Indeed, Postlethwayt moved towards a criticism of the African slave trade in the early 1750s. By then, he had abandoned traditional justifications for African enslavement and speculated whether slavery was necessary in British America. Besides, he suggested slave trading *might* hinder the development of a civilized,

humane, and "Christian-like" commerce in African natural produce and staple crops. These comments, coming from a well-known commercial writer, would be enough to provide rhetorical ammunition for later antislavery writers.

The account delineated above is correct but incomplete. To a certain extent, insistence on the unexplored economic potential of African territories reflected the Royal African Company's official stance. The company had lost its monopoly on the slave trade in the late-seventeenth century. Unable to compete with private merchants, the RAC attempted to redirect its activities towards commercializing African natural products and staple crops. If these initiatives ultimately failed, the dream of expanding commerce beyond the Western African coast remained alive. Postlethwayt likewise shared in this dream.

If Postlethwayt believed that extending commerce into the bowels of Africa would increase British wealth and power, he did not see it as an *alternative* to the slave trade. Between 1744 and 1749, he wrote at least four tracts insisting on the centrality of the slave trade to the imperial economy and proposing a reorientation of commercial policy. Britain gambled its share of the transatlantic slave trade by not properly supporting the Royal African Company's forts in Western Africa. Besides, competition among separate traders increased the prices of enslaved workers to British planters. The British government needed better instruments to regulate the African trade. At first, Postlethwayt seemed convinced the solution involved increasing the subsidy given to the Royal African Company and enforcing the division of labor between the company and independent traders. Once the Parliament decided to establish a new company to administrate the African forts, Postlethwayt suggested the South Sea Company should be put in charge. By then, he was skeptical that a commercial policy based on free trade was the best way to increase British commerce with African territories.

Facing the divestment of the Royal African Company, Postlethwayt would no longer focus on slave trade regulation in the *Dictionary*. Instead, he devised a plan to expand commerce with the African interior. The East India Company should take care of the African forts, receiving the public subsidy destined to that end, without being involved in the slave trade. The British government should also grant the company a temporary monopoly for extending the commodity trade between Britain and Africa. Only a joint-stock company with a temporary monopoly could afford the expensive enterprise of establishing new commercial routes with the inland African

territories. These measures would entail an expansion of the British commercial empire without requiring slave trade regulation.

Postlethwayt's antislavery comments in the *Dictionary* were intertwined with his broader reassessment of British commercial policy in Africa. If Postlethwayt wondered whether the slave trade might obstruct the development of a legitimate commerce with the African interior, his proposal was designed to reconcile both. With proper commercial policy, Britain could bring commerce to the heart of Africa without losing the slave trade. Although desirable, slave trade abolition was neither expected nor necessary. Ultimately, one could engage with Postlethwayt's writings to support either anti- or pro-slave trade agendas. Accordingly, abolitionists like James Swan and Thomas Clarkson selectively mobilized the *Dictionary*'s antislavery to draw the line separating barbaric and civilized, vicious and virtuous commerce. Late-eighteenth century abolitionists – not Postlethwayt himself – insisted on the incompatibility between the barbaric slave trade and legitimate commerce with Africa. In proposing a more humane and equally profitable alternative to the slave trade, abolitionists answered their opponents who insisted on the latter's strategic role in the imperial economy. There is thus something profoundly ironic about the origins of one of the most important Anglo-American economic arguments against the slave trade: it appeared amid a public debate about its very management in which all participants took the economic importance of the slave trade for granted.

Chapter 3 addressed the history of the so-called "free labor ideology." Historians point to Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776) as the obvious source for the antislavery discourse postulating the higher productivity of free labor. My research established that, by 1776, several writers had already articulated antislavery with general notions about the superiority of free labor. With noteworthy exceptions, most writers were not immediately concerned with the emancipation of enslaved workers in British American and Caribbean colonies. Antislavery discourse often appeared amid broader discussions about British imperial administration.

Benjamin Franklin's *Observations concerning the increase of mankind* (1751) is the perfect example. The manuscript discussed population dynamics in North America to criticize British colonial policy. Franklin was likely reacting to the Iron Act (1750), which prohibited the further development of iron manufacturing in North America. Regulations attempting to inhibit colonial manufacturing assumed that North American products could compete with those produced in Britain. Franklin insisted this was not the case, since labor was cheaper in England. Free labor was

scarce and expensive in British North America, and the costs involved in purchasing and maintaining an enslaved worker were higher than the average wage in England. By calculating the "actual" cost of slave labor, Franklin rested his case against British colonial policy.

William and Edmund Burke, Robert Wallace, and an anonymous Jamaican author referred to the higher productivity of free labor while addressing concerns about the effects of slavery on the security of the Caribbean and Southern continental colonies. Maurice Morgann invoked the superiority of free labor while proposing settlement plans for the newly conquered territories of Senegal and Florida. Josiah Tucker casually mentioned that slavery was the most expensive form of labor organization while making a case for British separation from the rebellious North American colonies. Even Adam Smith's economic case against slavery was intertwined with a broader critique of British colonial policies.

Few of these writers postulated the universal superiority of free labor, and none of them suggested that abolition would unequivocally follow from this. Only Maurice Morgann and Granville Sharp relied on the lower productivity of slave labor to support emancipation schemes. Yet they were both convinced that appealing to the slaveholders' "economic interest" was not enough. Most late-eighteenth century abolitionists understood that freeing enslaved Africans and African Americans required state intervention. Several of the writers discussed in Chapter 3 did not envision emancipation at all.

Moreover, my research highlighted that most versions of the so-called "free labor ideology" before Adam Smith were not merely theoretical abstractions. If early antislavery writers shared a general confidence in the advantages of free labor, they turned this into specific comments about the organization and administration of the British Empire. In so doing, they gave concrete and practical meaning to an essentially commonplace notion. Thereafter, those who defended the socio-economic reorganization of the British Empire could benefit from widely recognized statements about the cost and productivity of free vs slave labor.

When Smith published the *Wealth of Nations*, discourses about the superior productivity of free labor had already attained *political* significance among Anglo-American abolitionists. Both the publications discussed above and the ongoing antislavery debate in France must have likely contributed to this result. While this dissertation focused on the English-speaking world, future research on the history of "free-labor ideology" might benefit from exploring the interplay among early antislavery writing in the Americas, Britain, and France. Nevertheless, I believe to have

provided sufficient evidence showing that, by the third quarter of the eighteenth century, those who invoked the superiority of free labor were not merely repeating the lesson of a hegemonic economic theory.

I also showed how Smith's version of "free labor ideology" was not merely a theoretical abstraction but related to a broader critique of the British colonial empire. If Smith had not introduced free labor ideology, he managed to turn a relatively commonplace notion into a compelling political-economic discourse. This may be why Adam Smith – not other early antislavery writers – would be later recalled by those who compared free and slave labor in the nineteenth century. It is worth recalling, however, that as early as 1772, a colonial adviser had already relied on the superiority of free labor to propose an interesting, if chimerical, project to turn free Africans and African Americans into British subjects.

Having explored the origins of two important economic discourses against slavery and the slave trade, I now turn to the other questions posited in the first paragraph. Did abolitionists mobilize existing economic discourses merely as a rhetorical weapon against their opponents? Or was thinking about economic matters part of the abolitionist endeavor? For the past decades, historical accounts of Anglo-American abolitionism have often reinforced the "rhetorical profile" of antislavery debates. Abolitionists insisted on religious and moral arguments, while their opponents relied on the profitability of the slave system and its contribution to the prosperity of the British Empire. If abolitionists mobilized economic arguments such as those discussed above, it was mainly to provide an answer to slavery apologists. Few abolitionists would have insisted on economic arguments for their own sake.

Chapter 4 challenged these interpretations. Historians have shown how the Anglo-American crisis *politicized* antislavery opinion in the British Atlantic world. The dispute between North American settlers and the imperial administration turned the enslavement of Africans into a sustained *political* problem. Framing the opposition to imperial rule as a fight for liberty, North Americans called attention to their own practices as slaveholders. Accordingly, those who supported the British administration could denounce North American hypocrisy and mobilize antislavery rhetoric to advocate for imperial rule. American patriots reacted, arguing that Britain introduced slavery into the colonies and opposed every colonial attempt to ban the African slave trade. During the years of crisis, antislavery opinion became a rhetorical tool for those discussing the future of the British Empire.

In this context, some activists would turn abolition into a target for political action. Critically engaging revolutionary ideology, they seized the opportunity to press for slave trade abolition and emancipation. Colonial and metropolitan writers set to work devising emancipation schemes for the North American provinces. The chapter discussed some of these schemes to show how thinking about political economy was an inescapable part of the abolitionist endeavor.

These schemes were somehow connected through Anthony Benezet's network. William Dillwyn and Benjamin Rush were close to Benezet, and all of them corresponded with Granville Sharp during the 1770s. The author of *Essays Commercial and Political* (1777) reacted to and updated William Dillwyn's calculations. At bottom, these plans were intertwined in a transatlantic antislavery network. They all assumed a gradualist approach and agreed that prohibiting the slave trade should be the first step towards emancipation. The next step was the liberation of enslaved Africans and African Americans already in the colonies. Finally, all the different plans dealt with the issue of compensation. None envisioned the possibility of emancipation without somehow "indemnifying" slaveholders.

Benezet and Rush suggested a regulated scheme of temporary indenture, while Dillwyn tackled the existing manumission laws. Writing from a colonial perspective, they addressed specific concerns about emancipation. Notably, they proposed ways to ensure manumitted Africans and African Americans were "fit for liberty" and would not become an economic burden to local governments. Their metropolitan counterparts somehow incorporated these same concerns. Sharp, who insisted on the advantages of introducing something like the "Spanish regulations" in British America, designed an emancipation scheme for North America accounting for Rush's and Benezet's concerns about the social control of manumitted people. The author of the *Essays* revised the manumission fees calculated by Dillwyn, besides suggesting a self-purchase scheme to "indemnify" both the slaveholder and the public. The enslaved person should pay not only for their purchase price but also for the probability of becoming a public "burden" in the future.

Occasionally, these writers would refer to the advantages of a "legitimate" commerce with Africa or remark on the superiority of free labor while making their case for abolition. Yet, these were not the only economic arguments in their plans. I argued that one needed to consider the socio-economic reorganization of slave-based provinces to propose emancipation – such a task required more than a few references to standard economic tropes. Rethinking political economy was, therefore, part of the abolitionist agenda.

Once slavery and the slave trade became a *political* target, those who searched for alternatives to the enslavement of Africans and African Americans had to deal with economic concerns. The "moral" absolutist position, which disregarded any economic considerations for the sake of the greater good, was a powerful rhetorical tool. So was opposing slavery to Christianity. If these discourses helped to convince the public that abolition was a moral and just agenda, they were not enough to prove that it was either an attainable aim or a matter of sound *policy*. The burden of rethinking the political-economic organization of the empire also lay on the abolitionists – not on their opponents.

My research brought a different perspective to bear on the political economies of antislavery. Political economy was not a liberal orthodoxy impinging its beliefs onto the antislavery movement. Neither was it a separate theoretical field to which late-eighteenth century abolitionists eventually resorted. It was, in all its variations, part and parcel of the abolitionist endeavor. My research on early antislavery history contributes a new perspective to those who are interested in understanding the relationship between political economy and abolitionism. I believe the scholarship on Anglo-American abolitionism can benefit from a reassessment of the political economies that helped sustain the cause during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries.

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