

Hypocrisy of the Abolitionists

If anybody wishfully thinks that the main cause of the abolition of slavery was moral and ethical development, he would be well-advised to look at the attitude of abolitionists within the frame work of their economic aims.

Thus we see that the same West Indian interest holders who before the previously mentioned distress were the ardent supporters of slave-trade now became enthusiastic “humanists”. Dr. Williams says, “Ironically enough, it was the former slave owners of the West Indies who now held the humanitarian torch. Those who, in 1807, were lugubriously prophesying that abolition of the British slave-trade would ‘occasion diminished commerce, diminished revenue and diminished navigation; and in the end sap and totally remove the great cornerstone of British prosperity,’ were, after 1807, the very men who protested against ‘a system of man-stealing against a poor and inoffensive people.’”

The West India interest in 1830 put a resolution “to adopt more decisive measures...*to stop the foreign slave-trade; on the effectual suppression of which the prosperity of the British West Indian colonies... ultimately depends.* Jamaican envoys, sent to Britain in 1823, declared that ‘the colonies were easily reconciled to the abolition of a barbarous commerce, which the advanced civilization of the age no longer permitted to exist’ ...A great mass movement for abolition of the slave-trade developed in Jamaica in 1849. Auj claplo, parties and sects were united on the question of justice to Africa. They denounced the slave-trade and slavery as ‘opposed to humanity – productive of the worst evils to Africa – degrading to all engaged in the traffic, and inimical to the moral and spiritual interests of the enslaved,’ and pleaded that ‘the odious term “slave” be expunged from the vocabulary of universe. *slavery must fall, and, when it falls, Jamaica will flourish.*’ England, they declared pointedly, had gone to wars for less justifiable causes.”¹

And what was the worth of all such high-sounding phrases may be judged from the fact that the British capitalism, even after destroying West Indian slavery, “continued to thrive on Brazilian, Cuban and American slavery.” So, in the words of Professor Brogan, “we get the paradoxes of the reversal of roles. It was all very well for the abolitionists to deplore the use of slave-produced sugar in the West Indies, but no one proposed to stop the use of the slave-produced cotton from the United States. Indeed, no

one proposed seriously to stop the use of the slave-produced sugar from Brazil or Cuba. Money not passion, passion of wickedness or goodness, spun the plot”.

Dr. Williams writes, “After India, Brazil and Cuba, by no stretch of imagination could any humanitarian justify any proposal calculated to rivet the chains of slavery still more firmly on the Negroes of Brazil and Cuba. That was precisely what free trade in sugar meant. For after 1807 the British West Indians were denied the slave-trade and after 1833 slave labour. If the abolitionists had recommended Indian sugar, incorrectly, on the humanitarian principle that it was free-grown, it was their duty to their principles and their religion to boycott the slave-grown sugar of Brazil and Cuba. In failing to do this it is not to be inferred that they were wrong, but it is undeniable that their failure to adopt such a course completely destroys the humanitarian argument. The abolitionists, after 1833, continued to oppose the West Indian planter who now employed free labour. Where, before 1833, they had boycotted the British slave-owner, after 1833 they espoused the cause of the Brazilian slave-owner.”²

“The barbarous removal of the Negroes from Africa continued for at least twenty five years after 1833, to the sugar plantations of Brazil and Cuba. Brazilian and Cuban economy depended on the slave-trade. Consistency alone demanded that the British abolitionists oppose this trade. But that would retard Brazilian and Cuban development and consequently hamper British trade. The desire for cheap sugar after 1833 overcame all abhorrence of slavery. Gone was the horror which once was excited at the idea of a British West Indian slave-driver armed with whip; the Cuban slave-driver armed with a whip, cutlass, dagger and pistols, and followed by bloodhounds, aroused not even comment from the abolitionists.”³

Thus it is clear that the real reasons of the British humanitarianism was not so much moral uprightness or ethical awakening but the economic pressure and to harm their business competitors. In the words of Professor Brogan, the lesson of Capitalism and Slavery is chilling if not new:

“Where your treasure is there will your heart be also.”

1. Ibid, p. 175-6.

2. Ibid, p. 188.

3. Ibid, p. 192.

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