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Eric Williams Capitalism and Slavery



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Capitalism and Slavery

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'One of the most learned, most penetrating and most significant [pieces of work] that has appeared in this field of history' Henry Steele Commager, New York University

'It is a work of conceptual brilliance, intellectually mature, bold, incisive, and immensely provocative . . . *Capitalism and Slavery* will remain a historical treasure' Colin A. Palmer, Princeton University

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eric Williams (1911–1981) was a pioneering historian and politician born in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago. He graduated with first-class honours from St Catherine's College, Oxford in 1935, and completed a DPhil in History in 1938. His dissertation, 'The Economic Aspects of the Abolition of the Slave Trade', was published as *Capitalism and Slavery* in 1944, while he was a professor at Howard University. In 1956, Williams founded the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago's first modern political party. He led the country to independence from the British and became the nation's first prime minister in 1962.

ERIC WILLIAMS

Capitalism and Slavery



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TO PROFESSOR LOWELL JOSEPH RAGATZ,
*whose monumental labors in this field
may be amplified and developed
but can never be superseded*

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Preface

The present study is an attempt to place in historical perspective the relationship between early capitalism as exemplified by Great Britain, and the Negro slave trade, Negro slavery, and the general colonial trade of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Every age rewrites history, but particularly ours, which has been forced by events to re-evaluate our conceptions of history and economic and political development. The progress of the Industrial Revolution has been treated more or less adequately in many books both learned and popular, and its lessons are fairly well established in the consciousness of the educated class in general and of those people in particular who are responsible for the creation and guidance of informed opinion. On the other hand, while material has been accumulated and books have been written about the period which preceded the Industrial Revolution, the worldwide and interrelated nature of the commerce of that period, its direct effect upon the development of the Industrial Revolution, and the heritage which it has left even upon the civilization of today have not anywhere been placed in compact and yet comprehensive perspective. This study is an attempt to do so, without, however, failing to give indications of the economic origin of well-known social, political, and even intellectual currents.

The book, however, is not an essay in ideas or interpretation. It is strictly an economic study of the role of Negro slavery and the slave trade in providing the capital which financed the Industrial Revolution in England and of mature industrial capitalism in destroying the slave system. It is therefore first a study in English economic history and second in West Indian and Negro history. It is not a study of the

institution of slavery but of the contribution of slavery to the development of British capitalism.

Many debts must be acknowledged. The staffs of the following institutions were very kind and helpful to me: British Museum; Public Record Office; India Office Library; West India Committee; Rhodes House Library, Oxford; Bank of England Record Office; the British Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society; Friends' House, London; John Rylands Library, Manchester; Central Library, Manchester; Public Library, Liverpool; Wilberforce Museum, Hull; Library of Congress; Biblioteca Nacional, Havana; Sociedad Económica de Amigos del Pais, Havana. I wish to thank the Newberry Library, Chicago, for its kindness in making it possible for me, through an inter-library loan with Founders' Library, Howard University, to see Sir Charles Whitworth's valuable statistics on 'State of the Trade of Great Britain in its imports and exports, progressively from the year 1697-1773.'

My research has been facilitated by grants from different sources: the Trinidad government, which extended an original scholarship; Oxford University, which awarded me two Senior Studentships; the Beit Fund for the study of British Colonial History, which made two grants; and the Julius Rosenwald Foundation, which awarded me fellowships in 1940 and 1942. Professor Lowell J. Ragatz of George Washington University in this city, Professor Frank W. Pitman of Pomona College, Claremont, California, and Professor Melville J. Herskovits of Northwestern University very kindly read the manuscript and made many suggestions. So did my senior colleague at Howard University, Professor Charles Burch. Dr Vincent Harlow, now Rhodes Professor of Imperial History in the University of London, supervised my doctoral dissertation at Oxford and was always very helpful. Finally, my wife was of great assistance to me in taking my notes and typing the manuscript.

ERIC WILLIAMS
Howard University
Washington, D.C.
September 12, 1943

Capitalism and Slavery

The Origin of Negro Slavery

When in 1492 Columbus, representing the Spanish monarchy, discovered the New World, he set in train the long and bitter international rivalry over colonial possessions for which, after four and a half centuries, no solution has yet been found. Portugal, which had initiated the movement of international expansion, claimed the new territories on the ground that they fell within the scope of a papal bull of 1455 authorizing her to reduce to servitude all infidel peoples. The two powers, to avoid controversy, sought arbitration and, as Catholics, turned to the Pope – a natural and logical step in an age when the universal claims of the Papacy were still unchallenged by individuals and governments. After carefully sifting the rival claims, the Pope issued in 1493 a series of papal bulls which established a line of demarcation between the colonial possessions of the two states: the East went to Portugal and the West to Spain. The partition, however, failed to satisfy Portuguese aspirations and in the subsequent year the contending parties reached a more satisfactory compromise in the Treaty of Tordesillas, which rectified the papal judgment to permit Portuguese ownership of Brazil.

Neither the papal arbitration nor the formal treaty was intended to be binding on other powers, and both were in fact repudiated. Cabot's voyage to North America in 1497 was England's immediate reply to the partition. Francis I of France voiced his celebrated protest: 'The sun shines for me as for others. I should very much like to see the clause in Adam's will that excludes me from a share of the world.' The king of Denmark refused to accept the Pope's ruling as far as the East Indies were concerned. Sir William Cecil, the famous Elizabethan statesman, denied the Pope's right 'to give and take

kingdoms to whomsoever he pleased.' In 1580 the English government countered with the principle of effective occupation as the determinant of sovereignty.¹ Thereafter, in the parlance of the day, there was 'no peace below the line.' It was a dispute, in the words of a later governor of Barbados, as to 'whether the King of England or of France shall be monarch of the West Indies, for the King of Spain cannot hold it long. . . .'² England, France, and even Holland began to challenge the Iberian Axis and claim their place in the sun. The Negro, too, was to have his place, though he did not ask for it: it was the broiling sun of the sugar, tobacco and cotton plantations of the New World.

According to Adam Smith, the prosperity of a new colony depends upon one simple economic factor – 'plenty of good land.'³ The British colonial possessions up to 1776, however, can broadly be divided into two types. The first is the self-sufficient and diversified economy of small farmers, 'mere earth-scratchers' as Gibbon Wakefield derisively called them,⁴ living on a soil which, as Canada was described in 1840, was 'no lottery, with a few exorbitant prizes and a large number of blanks, but a secure and certain investment.'⁵ The second type is the colony which has facilities for the production of staple articles on a large scale for an export market. In the first category fell the Northern colonies of the American mainland; in the second, the mainland tobacco colonies and the sugar islands of the Caribbean. In colonies of the latter type, as Merivale pointed out, land and capital were both useless unless labor could be commanded.⁶ Labor, that is, must be constant and must work, or be made to work, in cooperation. In such colonies the rugged individualism of the Massachusetts farmer, practicing his intensive agriculture and wringing by the sweat of his brow niggardly returns from a grudging soil, must yield to the disciplined gang of the big capitalist practicing extensive agriculture and producing on a large scale. Without this compulsion, the laborer would otherwise exercise his natural inclination to work his own land and toil on his own account. The story is frequently told of the great English capitalist, Mr Peel, who took £50,000 and three hundred laborers with him to the Swan River colony in Australia. His plan was that his

laborers would work for him, as in the old country. When he arrived in Australia, however, where land was plentiful – too plentiful – the laborers preferred to work for themselves as small proprietors, rather than under the capitalist for wages. Australia was not England, and the capitalist was left without a servant to make his bed or fetch him water.⁷

For the Caribbean colonies the solution for this dispersion and ‘earth-scratching’ was slavery. The lesson of the early history of Georgia is instructive. Prohibited from employing slave labor by trustees who, in some instances, themselves owned slaves in other colonies, the Georgian planters found themselves in the position, as Whitefield phrased it, of people whose legs were tied and were told to walk. So the Georgia magistrates drank toasts ‘to the one thing needful’ – slavery – until the ban was lifted.⁸ ‘Odious resource’ though it might be, as Merivale called it,⁹ slavery was an economic institution of the first importance. It had been the basis of Greek economy and had built up the Roman Empire. In modern times it provided the sugar for the tea and the coffee cups of the Western world. It produced the cotton to serve as a base for modern capitalism. It made the American South and the Caribbean islands. Seen in historical perspective, it forms a part of that general picture of the harsh treatment of the underprivileged classes, the unsympathetic poor laws and severe feudal laws, and the indifference with which the rising capitalist class was ‘beginning to reckon prosperity in terms of pounds sterling, and . . . becoming used to the idea of sacrificing human life to the deity of increased production.’¹⁰

Adam Smith, the intellectual champion of the industrial middle class with its newfound doctrine of freedom, later propagated the argument that it was, in general, pride and love of power in the master that led to slavery and that, in those countries where slaves were employed, free labor would be more profitable. Universal experience demonstrated conclusively that ‘the work done by slaves, though it appears to cost only their maintenance, is in the end the dearest of any. A person who can acquire no property can have no other interest than to eat as much, and to labour as little as possible.’¹¹

Adam Smith thereby treated as an abstract proposition what is a

specific question of time, place, labor and soil. The economic superiority of free hired labor over slave is obvious even to the slave owner. Slave labor is given reluctantly, it is unskillful, it lacks versatility.¹² Other things being equal, free men would be preferred. But in the early stages of colonial development, other things are not equal. When slavery is adopted, it is not adopted as the choice over free labor; there is no choice at all. The reasons for slavery, wrote Gibbon Wakefield, 'are not moral, but economical circumstances; they relate not to vice and virtue, but to production.'¹³ With the limited population of Europe in the sixteenth century, the free laborers necessary to cultivate the staple crops of sugar, tobacco and cotton in the New World could not have been supplied in quantities adequate to permit large-scale production. Slavery was necessary for this, and to get slaves the Europeans turned first to the aborigines and then to Africa.

Under certain circumstances slavery has some obvious advantages. In the cultivation of crops like sugar, cotton and tobacco, where the cost of production is appreciably reduced on larger units, the slave owner, with his large-scale production and his organized slave gang, can make more profitable use of the land than the small farmer or peasant proprietor. For such staple crops, the vast profits can well stand the greater expense of inefficient slave labor.¹⁴ Where all the knowledge required is simple and a matter of routine, constancy and cooperation in labor – slavery – is essential, until, by importation of new recruits and breeding, the population has reached the point of density and the land available for appropriation has been already apportioned. When that stage is reached, and only then, the expenses of slavery, in the form of the cost and maintenance of slaves, productive and unproductive, exceed the cost of hired laborers. As Merivale wrote: 'Slave labour is dearer than free wherever abundance of free labour can be procured.'¹⁵

From the standpoint of the grower, the greatest defect of slavery lies in the fact that it quickly exhausts the soil. The labor supply of low social status, docile and cheap, can be maintained in subjection only by systematic degradation and by deliberate efforts to suppress its intelligence. Rotation of crops and scientific farming are therefore alien to slave societies. As Jefferson wrote of Virginia, 'we can buy an

acre of new land cheaper than we can manure an old one.'¹⁶ The slave planter, in the picturesque nomenclature of the South, is a 'land-killer.' This serious defect of slavery can be counterbalanced and postponed for a time if fertile soil is practically unlimited. Expansion is a necessity of slave societies; the slave power requires ever fresh conquests.¹⁷ 'It is more profitable,' wrote Merivale, 'to cultivate a fresh soil by the dear labour of slaves, than an exhausted one by the cheap labour of freemen.'¹⁸ From Virginia and Maryland to Carolina, Georgia, Texas and the Middle West; from Barbados to Jamaica to Saint Domingue and then to Cuba; the logic was inexorable and the same. It was a relay race; the first to start passed the baton, unwillingly we may be sure, to another and then limped sadly behind.

Slavery in the Caribbean has been too narrowly identified with the Negro. A racial twist has thereby been given to what is basically an economic phenomenon. Slavery was not born of racism: rather, racism was the consequence of slavery. Unfree labor in the New World was brown, white, black, and yellow; Catholic, Protestant and pagan.

The first instance of slave trading and slave labor developed in the New World involved, racially, not the Negro but the Indian. The Indians rapidly succumbed to the excessive labor demanded of them, the insufficient diet, the white man's diseases, and their inability to adjust themselves to the new way of life. Accustomed to a life of liberty, their constitution and temperament were ill-adapted to the rigors of plantation slavery. As Fernando Ortíz writes: 'To subject the Indian to the mines, to their monotonous, insane and severe labor, without tribal sense, without religious ritual, . . . was like taking away from him the meaning of his life. . . . It was to enslave not only his muscles but also his collective spirit.'¹⁹

The visitor to Ciudad Trujillo, capital of the Dominican Republic (the present-day name of half of the island formerly called Hispaniola), will see a statue of Columbus, with the figure of an Indian woman gratefully writing (so reads the caption) the name of the Discoverer. The story is told, on the other hand, of the Indian chieftain, Hatuey, who, doomed to die for resisting the invaders, staunchly

refused to accept the Christian faith as the gateway to salvation when he learned that his executioners, too, hoped to get to Heaven. It is far more probable that Hatuey, rather than the anonymous woman, represented contemporary Indian opinion of their new overlords.

England and France, in their colonies, followed the Spanish practice of enslavement of the Indians. There was one conspicuous difference – the attempts of the Spanish Crown, however ineffective, to restrict Indian slavery to those who refused to accept Christianity and to the warlike Caribs on the specious plea that they were cannibals. From the standpoint of the British government Indian slavery, unlike later Negro slavery which involved vital imperial interests, was a purely colonial matter. As Lauber writes: ‘The home government was interested in colonial slave conditions and legislation only when the African slave trade was involved. . . . Since it [Indian slavery] was never sufficiently extensive to interfere with Negro slavery and the slave trade, it never received any attention from the home government, and so existed as legal because never declared illegal.’²⁰

But Indian slavery never was extensive in the British dominions. Ballagh, writing of Virginia, says that popular sentiment had never ‘demanded the subjection of the Indian race *per se*, as was practically the case with the Negro in the first slave act of 1661, but only of a portion of it, and that admittedly a very small portion. . . . In the case of the Indian . . . slavery was viewed as of an occasional nature, a preventive penalty and not as a normal and permanent condition.’²¹ In the New England colonies Indian slavery was unprofitable, for slavery of any kind was unprofitable because it was unsuited to the diversified agriculture of these colonies. In addition the Indian slave was inefficient. The Spaniards discovered that one Negro was worth four Indians.²² A prominent official in Hispaniola insisted in 1518 that ‘permission be given to bring Negroes, a race robust for labor, instead of natives, so weak that they can only be employed in tasks requiring little endurance, such as taking care of maize fields or farms.’²³ The future staples of the New World, sugar and cotton, required strength which the Indian lacked, and demanded the robust ‘cotton nigger’ as sugar’s need of strong mules produced in Louisiana the epithet ‘sugar mules.’ According to Lauber, ‘When compared

with sums paid for Negroes at the same time and place the prices of Indian slaves are found to have been considerably lower.²⁴

The Indian reservoir, too, was limited, the African inexhaustible. Negroes therefore were stolen in Africa to work the lands stolen from the Indians in America. The voyages of Prince Henry the Navigator complemented those of Columbus, West African history became the complement of West Indian.

The immediate successor of the Indian, however, was not the Negro but the poor white. These white servants included a variety of types. Some were indentured servants, so called because, before departure from the homeland, they had signed a contract, indented by law, binding them to service for a stipulated time in return for their passage. Still others, known as 'redemptioners,' arranged with the captain of the ship to pay for their passage on arrival or within a specified time thereafter; if they did not, they were sold by the captain to the highest bidder. Others were convicts, sent out by the deliberate policy of the home government, to serve for a specified period.

This emigration was in tune with mercantilist theories of the day which strongly advocated putting the poor to industrious and useful labor and favored emigration, voluntary or involuntary, as relieving the poor rates and finding more profitable occupations abroad for idlers and vagrants at home. 'Indentured servitude,' writes C. M. Haar, 'was called into existence by two different though complementary forces: there was both a positive attraction from the New World and a negative repulsion from the Old.'²⁵ In a state paper delivered to James I in 1606 Bacon emphasized that by emigration England would gain 'a double commodity, in the avoidance of people here, and in making use of them there.'²⁶

This temporary service at the outset denoted no inferiority or degradation. Many of the servants were manorial tenants fleeing from the irksome restrictions of feudalism, Irishmen seeking freedom from the oppression of landlords and bishops, Germans running away from the devastation of the Thirty Years' War. They transplanted in their hearts a burning desire for land, an ardent passion for independence. They came to the land of opportunity to be

free men, their imaginations powerfully wrought upon by glowing and extravagant descriptions in the home country.²⁷ It was only later when, in the words of Dr Williamson, 'all ideals of a decent colonial society, of a better and greater England overseas, were swamped in the pursuit of an immediate gain,'²⁸ that the introduction of disreputable elements became a general feature of indentured service.

A regular traffic developed in these indentured servants. Between 1654 and 1685 ten thousand sailed from Bristol alone, chiefly for the West Indies and Virginia.²⁹ In 1683 white servants represented one-sixth of Virginia's population. Two-thirds of the immigrants to Pennsylvania during the eighteenth century were white servants; in four years 25,000 came to Philadelphia alone. It has been estimated that more than a quarter of a million persons were of this class during the colonial period,³⁰ and that they probably constituted one-half of all English immigrants, the majority going to the Middle colonies.³¹

As commercial speculation entered the picture, abuses crept in. Kidnaping was encouraged to a great degree and became a regular business in such towns as London and Bristol. Adults would be plied with liquor, children enticed with sweetmeats. The kidnapers were called 'spirits,' defined as 'one that taketh upp men and women and children and sells them on a shipp to be conveyed beyond the sea.' The captain of a ship trading to Jamaica would visit the Clerkenwell House of Correction, ply with drink the girls who had been imprisoned there as disorderly, and 'invite' them to go to the West Indies.³² The temptations held out to the unwary and the credulous were so attractive that, as the mayor of Bristol complained, husbands were induced to forsake their wives, wives their husbands, and apprentices their masters, while wanted criminals found on the transport ships a refuge from the arms of the law.³³ The wave of German immigration developed the 'newlander,' the labor agent of those days, who traveled up and down the Rhine Valley persuading the feudal peasants to sell their belongings and emigrate to America, receiving a commission for each emigrant.³⁴

Much has been written about the trickery these 'newlanders' were not averse to employing.³⁵ But whatever the deceptions practiced, it remains true, as Friedrich Kapp has written, that 'the real

ground for the emigration fever lay in the unhealthy political and economic conditions. . . . The misery and oppression of the conditions of the little (German) states promoted emigration much more dangerously and continuously than the worst "newlander."³⁶

Convicts provided another steady source of white labor. The harsh feudal laws of England recognized three hundred capital crimes. Typical hanging offences included: picking a pocket for more than a shilling; shoplifting to the value of five shillings; stealing a horse or a sheep; poaching rabbits on a gentleman's estate.³⁷ Offences for which the punishment prescribed by law was transportation comprised the stealing of cloth, burning stacks of corn, the maiming and killing of cattle, hindering customs officers in the execution of their duty, and corrupt legal practices.³⁸ Proposals made in 1664 would have banished to the colonies all vagrants, rogues and idlers, petty thieves, gypsies, and loose persons frequenting unlicensed brothels.³⁹ A piteous petition in 1667 prayed for transportation instead of the death sentence for a wife convicted of stealing goods valued at three shillings and four pence.⁴⁰ In 1745 transportation was the penalty for the theft of a silver spoon and a gold watch.⁴¹ One year after the emancipation of the Negro slaves, transportation was the penalty for trade union activity. It is difficult to resist the conclusion that there was some connection between the law and the labor needs of the plantations, and the marvel is that so few people ended up in the colonies overseas.

Benjamin Franklin opposed this 'dumping upon the New World of the outcasts of the Old' as the most cruel insult ever offered by one nation to another, and asked, if England was justified in sending her convicts to the colonies, whether the latter were justified in sending to England their rattlesnakes in exchange?⁴² It is not clear why Franklin should have been so sensitive. Even if the convicts were hardened criminals, the great increase of indentured servants and free emigrants would have tended to render the convict influence innocuous, as increasing quantities of water poured in a glass containing poison. Without convicts the early development of the Australian colonies in the nineteenth century would have been impossible. Only a few of the colonists, however, were so particular. The general attitude was

summed up by a contemporary: 'Their labor would be more beneficial in an infant settlement, than their vices could be pernicious.'⁴³ There was nothing strange about this attitude. The great problem in a new country is the problem of labor, and convict labor, as Merivale has pointed out, was equivalent to a free present by the government to the settlers without burdening the latter with the expense of importation.⁴⁴ The governor of Virginia in 1611 was willing to welcome convicts reprieved from death as 'a readie way to furnish us with men and not allways with the worst kind of men.'⁴⁵ The West Indies were prepared to accept all and sundry, even the spawn of Newgate and Bridewell, for 'no goalehird [*sic*] can be so incorrigible, but there is hope of his conformity here, as well as of his preferment, which some have happily experimented.'⁴⁶

The political and civil disturbances in England between 1640 and 1740 augmented the supply of white servants. Political and religious nonconformists paid for their unorthodoxy by transportation, mostly to the sugar islands. Such was the fate of many of Cromwell's Irish prisoners, who were sent to the West Indies.⁴⁷ So thoroughly was this policy pursued that an active verb was added to the English language – to 'barbadoes' a person.⁴⁸ Montserrat became largely an Irish colony,⁴⁹ and the Irish brogue is still frequently heard today in many parts of the British West Indies. The Irish, however, were poor servants. They hated the English, were always ready to aid England's enemies, and in a revolt in the Leeward Islands in 1689⁵⁰ we can already see signs of that burning indignation which, according to Lecky, gave Washington some of his best soldiers.⁵¹ The vanquished in Cromwell's Scottish campaigns were treated like the Irish before them, and Scotsmen came to be regarded as 'the general travaillers and soldiers in most foreign parts.'⁵² Religious intolerance sent more workers to the plantations. In 1661 Quakers refusing to take the oath for the third time were to be transported; in 1664 transportation, to any plantation except Virginia or New England, or a fine of one hundred pounds was decreed for the third offence for persons over sixteen assembling in groups of five or more under pretense of religion.⁵³ Many of Monmouth's adherents were sent to Barbados, with orders to be detained as servants for ten years. The prisoners were

granted in batches to favorite courtiers, who made handsome profits from the traffic in which, it is alleged, even the Queen shared.⁵⁴ A similar policy was resorted to after the Jacobite risings of the eighteenth century.

The transportation of these white servants shows in its true light the horrors of the Middle Passage – not as something unusual or inhuman but as a part of the age. The emigrants were packed like herrings. According to Mittelberger, each servant was allowed about two feet in width and six feet in length in bed.⁵⁵ The boats were small, the voyage long, the food, in the absence of refrigeration, bad, disease inevitable. A petition to Parliament in 1659 describes how seventy-two servants had been locked up below deck during the whole voyage of five and a half weeks, ‘amongst horses, that their souls, through heat and steam under the tropic, fainted in them.’⁵⁶ Inevitably abuses crept into the system and Fearon was shocked by ‘the horrible picture of human suffering which this living sepulchre’ of an emigrant vessel in Philadelphia afforded.⁵⁷ But conditions even for the free passengers were not much better in those days, and the comment of a Lady of Quality describing a voyage from Scotland to the West Indies on a ship full of indentured servants should banish any ideas that the horrors of the slave ship are to be accounted for by the fact that the victims were Negroes. ‘It is hardly possible,’ she writes, ‘to believe that human nature could be so depraved, as to treat fellow creatures in such a manner for so little gain.’⁵⁸

The transportation of servants and convicts produced a powerful vested interest in England. When the Colonial Board was created in 1661, not the least important of its duties was the control of the trade in indentured servants. In 1664 a commission was appointed, headed by the King’s brother, to examine and report upon the exportation of servants. In 1670 an act prohibiting the transportation of English prisoners overseas was rejected; another bill against the stealing of children came to nothing. In the transportation of felons, a whole hierarchy, from courtly secretaries and grave judges down to the jailors and turnkeys, insisted on having a share in the spoils.⁵⁹ It has been suggested that it was humanity for his fellow countrymen and men of his own color which dictated the planter’s preference for the

Negro slave.⁶⁰ Of this humanity there is not a trace in the records of the time, at least as far as the plantation colonies and commercial production were concerned. Attempts to register emigrant servants and regularize the procedure of transportation – thereby giving full legal recognition to the system – were evaded. The leading merchants and public officials were all involved in the practice. The penalty for man-stealing was exposure in the pillory, but no missiles from the spectators were tolerated. Such opposition as there was came from the masses. It was enough to point a finger at a woman in the streets of London and call her a ‘spirit’ to start a riot.

This was the situation in England when Jeffreys came to Bristol on his tour of the West to clean up the remnants of Monmouth’s rebellion. Jeffreys has been handed down to posterity as a ‘butcher,’ the tyrannical deputy of an arbitrary king, and his legal visitation is recorded in the textbooks as the ‘Bloody Assizes.’ They had one redeeming feature. Jeffreys vowed that he had come to Bristol with a broom to sweep the city clean, and his wrath fell on the kidnapers who infested the highest municipal offices. The merchants and justices were in the habit of straining the law to increase the number of felons who could be transported to the sugar plantations they owned in the West Indies. They would terrify petty offenders with the prospect of hanging and then induce them to plead for transportation. Jeffreys turned upon the mayor, complete in scarlet and furs, who was about to sentence a pickpocket to transportation to Jamaica, forced him, to the great astonishment of Bristol’s worthy citizens, to enter the prisoners’ dock, like a common felon, to plead guilty or not guilty, and hectored him in characteristic language: ‘Sir, Mr Mayor, you I meane, Kidnapper, and an old Justice of the Peace on the bench doe not knowe him, an old knave: he goes to the tavernne, and for a pint of sack he will bind people servants to the Indies at the tavernne. A kidnapping knave! I will have his ears off, before I goe forth of towne. . . . Kidnapper, you, I mean, Sir if it were not in respect of the sword, which is over your head, I would send you to Newgate, you kidnapping knave. You are worse than the pick-pockett who stands there. . . . I hear the trade of kidnapping is of great request. They can discharge a felon or a traitor, provided they will go to Mr Alderman’s plantation at the West Indies.’

The mayor was fined one thousand pounds, but apart from the loss of dignity and the fear aroused in their hearts, the merchants lost nothing – their gains were left inviolate.⁶¹

According to one explanation, Jeffreys' insults were the result of intoxication or insanity.⁶² It is not improbable that they were connected with a complete reversal of mercantilist thought on the question of emigration, as a result of the internal development of Britain herself. By the end of the seventeenth century the stress had shifted from the accumulation of the precious metals as the aim of national economic policy to the development of industry within the country, the promotion of employment and the encouragement of exports. The mercantilists argued that the best way to reduce costs, and thereby compete with other countries, was to pay low wages, which a large population tended to ensure. The fear of overpopulation at the beginning of the seventeenth century gave way to a fear of underpopulation in the middle of the same century. The essential condition of colonization – emigration from the home country – now ran counter to the principle that national interest demanded a large population at home. Sir Josiah Child denied that emigration to America had weakened England, but he was forced to admit that in this view he was in a minority of possibly one in a thousand, while he endorsed the general opinion that 'whatever tends to the depopulating of a kingdom tends to the impoverishment of it.'⁶³ Jeffreys' unusual humanitarianism appears less strange and may be attributed rather to economic than to spirituous considerations. His patrons, the royal family, had already given their patronage to the Royal African Company and the Negro slave trade. For the surplus population needed to people the colonies in the New World the British had turned to Africa, and by 1680 they already had positive evidence, in Barbados, that the African was satisfying the necessities of production better than the European.

The status of these servants became progressively worse in the plantation colonies. Servitude, originally a free personal relation based on voluntary contract for a definite period of service, in lieu of transportation and maintenance, tended to pass into a property relation which asserted a control of varying extent, over the bodies

and liberties of the person during service as if he were a thing.⁶⁴ Eddis, writing on the eve of the Revolution, found the servants groaning 'beneath a worse than Egyptian bondage.'⁶⁵ In Maryland servitude developed into an institution approaching in some respects chattel slavery.⁶⁶ Of Pennsylvania it has been said that 'no matter how kindly they may have been treated in particular cases, or how voluntarily they may have entered into the relation, as a class and when once bound, indentured servants were temporarily chattels.'⁶⁷ On the sugar plantations of Barbados the servants spent their time 'grinding at the mills and attending the furnaces, or digging in this scorching island; having nothing to feed on (notwithstanding their hard labour) but potatoe roots, nor to drink, but water with such roots washed in it, besides the bread and tears of their own afflictions; being bought and sold still from one planter to another, or attached as horses and beasts for the debts of their masters, being whipt at the whipping posts (as rogues) for their masters' pleasure, and sleeping in sties worse than hogs in England.'⁶⁸ As Professor Harlow concludes, the weight of evidence proves incontestably that the conditions under which white labor was procured and utilized in Barbados were 'persistently severe, occasionally dishonourable, and generally a disgrace to the English name.'⁶⁹

English officialdom, however, took the view that servitude was not too bad, and the servant in Jamaica was better off than the husbandman in England. 'It is a place as grateful to you for trade as any part of the world. It is not so odious as it is represented.'⁷⁰ But there was some sensitiveness on the question. The Lords of Trade and Plantations, in 1676, opposed the use of the word 'servitude' as a mark of bondage and slavery, and suggested 'service' instead.⁷¹ The institution was not affected by the change. The hope has been expressed that the white servants were spared the lash so liberally bestowed upon their Negro comrades.⁷² They had no such good fortune. Since they were bound for a limited period, the planter had less interest in their welfare than in that of the Negroes who were perpetual servants and therefore 'the most useful appurtenances' of a plantation.⁷³ Eddis found the Negroes 'almost in every instance, under more comfortable circumstances than the miserable European, over whom the rigid planter exercises an

inflexible severity.⁷⁴ The servants were regarded by the planters as 'white trash' and were bracketed with the Negroes as laborers. 'Not one of these colonies ever was or ever can be brought to any considerable improvement without a supply of white servants and Negroes,' declared the Council of Montserrat in 1680.⁷⁵ In a European society in which subordination was considered essential, in which Burke could speak of the working classes as 'miserable sheep' and Voltaire as 'canaille,' and Linguet condemn the worker to the use of his physical strength alone, for 'everything would be lost once he knew that he had a mind'⁷⁶ – in such a society it is unnecessary to seek for apologies for the condition of the white servant in the colonies.

Defoe bluntly stated that the white servant was a slave.⁷⁷ He was not. The servant's loss of liberty was of limited duration, the Negro was slave for life. The servant's status could not descend to his offspring, Negro children took the status of the mother. The master at no time had absolute control over the person and liberty of his servant as he had over his slave. The servant had rights, limited but recognized by law and inserted in a contract. He enjoyed, for instance, a limited right to property. In actual law the conception of the servant as a piece of property never went beyond that of personal estate and never reached the stage of a chattel or real estate. The laws in the colonies maintained this rigid distinction and visited cohabitation between the races with severe penalties. The servant could aspire, at the end of his term, to a plot of land, though, as Wertenbaker points out for Virginia, it was not a legal right,⁷⁸ and conditions varied from colony to colony. The serf in Europe could therefore hope for an early freedom in America which villenage could not afford. The freed servants became small yeomen farmers, settled in the back country, a democratic force in a society of large aristocratic plantation owners, and were the pioneers in westward expansion. That was why Jefferson in America, as Saco in Cuba, favored the introduction of European servants instead of African slaves – as tending to democracy rather than aristocracy.⁷⁹

The institution of white servitude, however, had grave disadvantages. Postlethwayt, a rigid mercantilist, argued that white laborers in the colonies would tend to create rivalry with the mother country in