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Marxian Social History vs New Economic History: The “Williams Thesis” and the Debate on Slavery’s Relationship with the British Industrial Revolution

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Abstract: In 1944, the publication of Eric Williams’ thesis Capitalism and Slavery sparked a historiographical debate that continues to rage to this day. In particular, his work’s foundational premise, in which he argues that the eighteenth-century slave plantation system of the Caribbean laid the economic foundations of the British industrial revolution in the nineteenth, has been hotly contested by historians since the year of its publication. Invariably, historical interpretations of the “Williams Thesis,” as it came to be known, are largely informed by the political and social leanings of the scholars who tackle the issue. In this article, I argue that the historical understanding of the Williams Thesis is subject to the fluctuations of economic historical theory in contemporary scholarship. In particular, cliometrics understandings of history according to the New Economic school of thought tends towards criticizing the basic economic tenets of the Williams Thesis, while socially minded Marxian schools of historical thought uphold it. The result is an unsettled debate regarding the nature of slavery and industrialism’s relationship that reveals larger historiographic tensions between economic interpretations of studying history and social ones.

Keywords: Eric Williams, Williams Thesis; slavery; historiography; industrial revolution; economy.

Introduction

The publication of Eric William’s 1944 Capitalism and Slavery shook the historiographical world of both economic and social history when it made two groundbreaking suppositions on the relationship between Caribbean slavery and the British Industrial Revolution. The first, known among historians as the “William’s Thesis,” argued that Britain’s involvement in the Atlantic slave economy was the primary driving force behind its Industrial Revolution - and as a result, the foundation of British capitalism - in the mid to late nineteenth century. The second supposed that the capitalist undercurrents of British slavery ultimately led to its demise as British interests moved toward
industrial free trade due to the accumulation of surplus capital from slavery, ironically making slavery itself obsolete in the new industrial era. Both the supposed causational relationship between Atlantic slavery and British industrialism and economically motivated abolition fit Williams’ Marxist tendencies and have been hotly debated by historians ever since. The Williams Thesis seems to be a particularly polarizing subject - since its official publication in 1944, the supposed relationship between Atlantic slavery and British industrialization has been discussed by dozens of economic historians, each of which seem to use Williams’ *Capitalism and Slavery* as a touchstone by which to either ground their own conclusions or set them up against. As a result, it has come to be that the historical question of slavery’s relationship with British industrialism is most typically understood in the world of academia in terms of the validity of the Williams Thesis.

Furthermore, a close reading of the available source material suggests patterns according to shifting historiographical trends in approaches to economic world history. The typical Williams Thesis supporters tend to latch on particularly to his theories’ deep roots in a Marxian-inspired social history of an extensive “Atlantic economy,” which suppose a global connection between surplus profits of the slave economy of the Atlantic World to the overall generation of capital that formed the basis of industrial markets in the late nineteenth century. The heyday of the pro-Williams “Atlantic Economy” scholars, such as Joseph Inikori and Barbara Solow corresponded with a growing international interest between the 1960s and the early 1990s in understanding slavery’s foundational role in the development of institutions both political and economic hitherto unconsidered.

In the opposite camp, the greatest critique of the Williams Thesis typically comes from historians invested in cliometrics historical theory, or “New Economic History.” Though first founded in 1958, and roughly contemporary with Williams’ own work in social economic history, it was generally overshadowed by the orthodoxy of the Atlantic Economy theorists for the greater part of the latter twentieth century. It was not until the late 1990s that a renewed interest in cliometrics revitalized the Williams debate, which has resulted in some of the more recent scholarship of the early 2000s on the link between slavery and British industrialism, spearheaded by David Eltis and Stanley Engerman, to actively argue against the Williams Thesis. The most recent contributions to the debate, summed up in this article with the works of Sven Beckert and Seth Rockwell, Gavin Wright, Trevor Burnard and Giorgio Riello, Stephen J. Redding, and Hans-Joachim Voth (all published in the last four years) suggest that while Williams Thesis may still yet find champions in the 2020s, true consensus has yet to be achieved.

The overall result seems to be that the actual understanding of the relationship between Atlantic slavery and the development of a British industrial economy is entirely dependent on whether current dominant historical scholarship falls into the camp of social historical theory or cliometrics historical theory. If the former, then slavery, much in line with Williams’ original thesis, formed the foundational accumulation of capital necessary for the development of an industrial system of labor based on domestic production in the
late 1700s. If the latter, then profits in plantation slavery in the Caribbean proves too relatively insignificant to have been the sole catalyst for mass industrialization (the so-called “small ratios” theory).

Marxian Historical Theory vs. Cliometrics (New Economic) History

Before understanding the historiographical debates over the Williams Thesis, it is first necessary to form a basic understanding of the two major undercurrents of historical thought that dominate the discourse: Marxian economic historical theories and cliometrics economic historical theories. Both marry economic theory to the processes and impacts of history but differ drastically in the theoretical models of interpretation by which economics can be applied to the study of history.

To begin with the former, it should be noted that there is no uniform “Marxian theory” that could be applied to the study of economic history. Rather, this article uses the term as a general description of the socially oriented narrative models of interpreting history inspired by several Marxian theories related to its study; primarily Marx’s “historical materialism” and “primitive accumulation” theories. Historical materialism, developed by Karl Marx in the 1850s along with his theories regarding the foundational principles of capitalism, posits that all human behavior and social institutions stem from collective economic activity; according to Marx, the wheel of history turns on the economic and material dialectics of societies. Marx further developed a branch theory of historical materialism that accounted for the accumulation of capital through the dispossession of material resources through violence in volume one of *Das Kapital*, which he in turn argued was one of the foundational catalysts of capitalist systems.

Though first published in 1867, this theory, known as the “primitive accumulation theory” came to be at the heart of the historical debate on slavery’s role in the development of British capitalist industrialism made famous by the Williams Thesis. Such theories laid the foundations for scholars like Williams to interpret economic history through a socially oriented narrative lens, with a heavy focus on the relationship between capital accumulation and systems of human inequality.

Cliometrics historical theory, also known by its original title “New Economic History,” took the interpretation of economic history in an entirely new direction. First developed in the economic boom of the post-World War II United States, cliometrics history “arose from the confluence of advances in economic theory, econometric techniques, and technology” that brought economic prosperity to the forefront of the American zeitgeist in the 1950s. According to Claude Diebolt and Michael Haupert in their 2021 article “Cliometrics: Past, Present, and Future,” the cliometric movement was born from a burgeoning post-war interest in economic forecasting through the accumulation and analysis of raw data. Spearheaded primarily by American economic historians and sponsored by government directives to find statistical patterns of economic growth through historical data, this movement “served as a catalyst for the change in emphasis from narrative to quantitative studies in economic history.”^2 The cliometric movement would also forever set up a tension among economic historians,
separating them into camps of “traditionalist” economic historians working from the social narrative model of interpreting history, and “new” economic theorists working from a quantitative model. This tension has been played out among historians on several historical debates since the 1950s, but perhaps none so hotly and for so long as the Williams Thesis.

The Williams Thesis and Its Early Cliometrics Critics

Trinidadian scholar and politician Eric Williams’ 1944 Capitalism and Slavery is the published version of his 1938 dissertation “The Economic Aspect of the Abolition of the West Indian Slave Trade and Slavery.” As the name of the original version suggests, Williams’ primary aim in both works was to explore the economic foundations of the abolition of slavery in the Atlantic world. However, it is another one of his theories, outlined in the third chapter of Capitalism and Slavery, for which the book is so notorious. The Williams Thesis, as it is best known by historians, asserted that “the profits obtained [from slavery] provided one of the main streams of that accumulation of capital in England which financed the [British] Industrial Revolution.” The Williams Thesis thus laid the foundational origins of the British Industrial Revolution at the feet of the Atlantic slave trade, and it is for this theory that the book has accrued controversy in the field of economic history. Williams’ Thesis rested on the assertion that surplus profits created by the “triple stimulus” to the British economy by the Triangular Trade, as well as the surplus of individual wealth accumulated by British Caribbean planters, formed the necessary capital for the creation of infrastructures vital to an industrial economy.

To support this, he made great use of broad correlations between the development of mercantilist foreign trade stimulated by slavery and the advent of seaport and trading centers, such as Liverpool, Bristol, and Glasgow, and the subsequent development of such towns as centers of industrial growth. He also pointed to the vast accumulation of wealth by individual profiteers of the slave trade (traders and plantation owners) whose profits from slavery Williams argued averaged 30 percent. However, this particular argument, and the Williams Thesis overall, has come under fire among some economic historians (particularly those belonging to the school of cliometrics), for shoddy statistical data analysis and overgeneralizations. Historian Kenneth Morgan outlines one potential reason for Williams’ generalization in his 2000 Slavery, the Atlantic Trade, and the British Economy 1660-1800, in which Morgan asserts that Capitalism and Slavery had been written “at a time when statistical presentation in economic history was much less rigorous than today.” Still others have pointed to Williams’ own economic philosophies as sources of inherent bias. His Marxist tendencies (upon which he built his successful bid for the office of Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago in 1962) formed the ideological foundations of his theories. Particularly apparent through his conclusions is the influence of Karl Marx’s primitive accumulation theory, an influence that can be clearly seen in Williams’ assertion that the principle driving force behind British capitalism (and therefore, industrialism) was the incentivization of slavery through the violent colonization of land in the Atlantic. The Marxist undercurrents of the Williams Thesis have laid it bare to yet more critique among cliometrics historians, who
tend to argue that Marxist economic theory does not account for accurate methods of analyzing statistical data at the micro level.

By all accounts, Williams wrote *Capitalism and Slavery* at an inconvenient time. Though in his own Caribbean islands, the wave of post-war decolonization sweeping countries previously ravaged by imperialism brought Marxian theory to the forefront of scholarly study in 1944, American scholarship took a decidedly more quantitative turn. The booming economy of the United States in the latter half of the 1940s had elevated economists to status of great importance. According to Diebolt and Haupert, “Their [economists’] rigorous, mathematical models, applied to copious data collected by the likes of the NBER, became the standard by which other social sciences were measured. At the same time, there was a growing interest in predicting business cycles and understanding economic growth. It was natural that economic historians would join this movement.” It was at the same time as Williams published his thesis that Simon Kuznets, the so-called “father of cliometrics,” revolutionized the use of qualitative data in the analysis of history. It is unsurprising then, that the first cliometrics critiques of the Williams Thesis emerged quite soon after its publication.

The first arguably came in 1952 with the publication of Hyde, Parkinson, and Marriner’s article on the economic fluctuations of Liverpool in 1793 (“The Port of Liverpool and the Crisis of 1793”). Williams predicated his thesis on the idea that steady capital accumulation from the profits of slavery (both overall and from the private accumulation of individual slave merchants) formed the basis of British capitalism, that would later transform towns like Liverpool into industrial centers of production. Hyde et al.’s evaluation of the economic stability of Liverpool’s slave merchants argued that that capital accumulation in the city was anything but steady, or even outrageously profitable. One of the authors, Bradbury Parkinson, an accountant by trade, insisted that analysis of the ledger accounts of Liverpool’s merchant firms demonstrated evidence of drastic fluctuations in prices of colonial products from the West Indies and frequent insolvency of banking firms. Though not a direct attack on the Thesis, Parkinson’s methodology of analyzing the output-to-profit ratios of slavery at the micro-economic level would be picked up by more cliometrics historians, such as Roger Anstey and Richard Bean, each of whom massively extended the breadth of available data regarding slave profits from primary sources. This in turn laid the groundwork for cliometrics historians Stanley Engerman, Paul Thomas, and Richard Bean to pick apart Williams’ data analysis using similar cliometrics methods.

Economist Stanley Engerman stands as perhaps one of the staunchest and long-standing critics of the Williams Thesis to come out of the New Economic school. He first showed himself as such in his 1972 article “The Slave Trade and British Capital Formation in the Eighteenth Century: A Comment on the Williams Thesis,” in which he used similar micro-analytical methodology to Parkinson’s ledger-book examinations to directly attack the Williams Thesis’s capital accumulation through profit theory. He argued that Williams’ “frequent citing of high profits is often due either to a comparison of the cost of producing the goods traded for slaves with the prices received for
the slaves of the New World…or else to a comparison of African prices and New World prices…omitting the costs of shipment and [slave] mortality.” Taking these two things into account when analyzing the slave-profit data compiled by Anstey for the Caribbean between 1761 and 1780, Engerman calculates that Williams’ original claims of slave traders’ profits reaching 30 percent were wildly overexaggerated, and in fact probably only amounted to roughly 7 percent. Engerman perhaps could have noted, though conspicuously did not, that a 7 percent annual growth rate still represents a significantly large margin. However, he appears to scoff at the number, concluding from it that the “low share of industrial investment using the more probable estimates [of slave profits] should give some pause to those attributing to the slave trade a major contribution to industrial capital formation in the period of the Industrial Revolution.” To Engerman, accounting for the massive base of capital that he believed would be required to launch an industrial economy from a 7 percent profit margin from the slave trade simply made no mathematical sense. Unfortunately, and perhaps somewhat detrimentally to his argument, he neglects to ever identify exactly how large that profit margin would have to be in order to catalyze an industrial boom.

Still, Engerman’s theory, which came to be known as the “small-ratios theory,” dominated the historiographical scene of the 1970s. It was picked up and expanded upon, for instance, by Paul Thomas and Richard Bean in their 1974 article “The Fishers of Men: The Profits of the Slave Trade.” Additionally, they used similar cliometrics analysis of the market competition of slave profits in the Caribbean to sweep the legs from under the Williams Thesis’s theory of capital accumulation through the wealth of individual slave traders. Analyzing the market structures and staple crop industries of the major slave islands of the Caribbean, Thomas and Bean conclude that “the competitive nature of the staple crop industries in British-America precluded the long-run existence of economic profit.” Slavers, they argue, could not have formed the capital necessary to stimulate long term economic growth necessary for industrial growth in such a competitive environment. In corroborating Engerman’s small-ratios theory and dismantling Williams’ theory of wealth accumulation among individual slavers, Bean and Thomas effectively enshrined quantitative data analysis as the sharpest arrow in the quiver of the cliometrics anti-Williams Thesis historians of the New Economics school in the decades to come.

The entrenchment of this cliometrics model through the 1970s and 80s is most likely generational in nature. Engerman, the creator of the small-ratios theory and decades long critic of the Williams Thesis, was a graduate student under Simon Kuznets (the “father of cliometrics”) and lifelong friend and colleague of Robert Fogel, with whom he helped pioneer the quantitative study of history in the 1960s. Unsurprisingly, with such a professional pedigree, Engerman went on to lead the charge of the New Economic historians in the debate on the Williams Thesis, and continued to champion the anti-Williams camp right up to the 2000s. This indicates that even as the economic boom of the two decades following World War II fell into decline by the 1970s, the cliometrics historians who came into the majority during the New Economic school’s peak did not abandon the methodologies and theories that had
shaped them. However, they were joined in the 1980s by a new wave of scholars whose tendencies toward a more Marxian interpretation of history reignited the Williams Thesis debate, this time riding to its defense.

**Defending the Thesis: The Rise of Atlantic Economy Theory**

There have been scores of economic historians who have come to the staunch defense of the Williams Thesis since 1944, but none perhaps so ardently as the Nigerian historian Joseph Inikori did in his 1981 article “Slavery and the Development of Industrial Capitalism in England.” In this article, Inikori lays the first major scholarly foundations and sets himself up as one of the founding theorists of what would become known as the Atlantic Economy theory, which posits that Caribbean slavery formed the basis of a globally connected economy that ultimately incentivized industrial production. Cliometrics historians had been lambasting Williams’ original thesis for its apparent myopia to the actual input-to-profit ratios of slavery on the British economy since the early 1950s, but in this work, Inikori strikes back in defense of the thesis by arguing that “The contribution of the slave trade and slavery to the expansion of world trade between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries constituted a more important role than that of profits.”

Williams’ critics therefore miss the mark, according to Inikori, by focusing so intently on the micro-economic aspect of slavery’s role in capital accumulation. Rather, he argues, the focus should remain on slavery’s role in the “growth of demand for manufactured goods, which provided both the opportunity for more industrial investment and the industrial profits to finance it.”

Thus, the Williams Thesis holds up: slavery, profit ratios aside, laid the groundwork for a macro-economic pipeline from Atlantic mercantilism to British industrialism.

Inikori was not the only historian to ride the wave of Atlantic Economy theory in the 1980s; in fact, dozens of economic historians increasingly turned toward it. While Inikori may have formed the theoretical basis of the Atlantic Economy Theory, it was economic historian Barbara Solow that gave it its name in her 1991 book *Slavery and the Rise of the Atlantic System*. Even before that, however, Solow was following Inikori’s lead in her 1987 article “Caribbean Slavery and the Industrial Revolution: Capitalism and Slavery in the Very Long Run” (later re-published in 2004 as part of her edited volume *British Capitalism and Caribbean Slavery: The Legacy of Eric Williams*), in which she argues that slavery “was important to the economic growth of Great Britain at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution,” and, while admitting that it might be going a bit far to say that slavery caused the Industrial Revolution, it “played an active role in its pattern and timing.”

To justify this, she points to the high rate of returns on British investments in the colonial trades, stimulated by what she calls the “slave-sugar complex” of the Atlantic slave system.

For instance, according to Solow’s research, capital investment in the Atlantic colonies amounted to 37 million pounds in 1793 alone, which, if one assumes that growth of exports leads to growth of industry, as Solow does, would be a considerable factor in the development of British industrialism, seemingly lending credence to the Williams Thesis.

She further argues that this complex formed the basis of a wide-reaching network of international
trade that further guaranteed flow of capital, which in turn increased levels of national output, by which “the British colonial empire enjoyed an extension of the market and a concomitant division of labor, which encouraged British manufacturing activity in particular.”

Like Inikori then, she dismisses previous cliometrics arguments regarding the ratios of profit to capital accumulation in favor of a macroeconomic emphasis on slavery’s role in providing economic stimulus to industrial growth via large-scale investment into a vast economic complex of international trade. On this point, historians William Darrity and David Richardson follow suit in 1989 in their respective “Profitability of the British Trade in Slaves Once Again” and “Accounting for Profits in the British Trade in Slaves: Reply to William Darity,” maintaining that the sugar-slave complex of the Caribbean Atlantic economy had a direct impact on the export growth of British capitalism in the eighteenth century, which formed the capital investment necessary to stimulate industrial growth in the nineteenth.

As the 1980s gave way to the 1990s, the Atlantic Economy theory grew in influence, finding its most ardent expression (and the one that made the Atlantic Economy theory practically orthodoxy within economic history in the final years of the twentieth century) in Robin Blackburn’s 1997 book *The Making of New World Slavery*. Blackburn not only restated the Inikori-Solow argument of export-growth stimulating long-term economic trends toward industrialization, but also revitalized for the first time since Williams himself the Marxian theory of primitive accumulation in the foundations of the British Industrial Revolution. In the final chapter of his book he argues that slavery’s contribution of cheap raw materials to the British Atlantic economy provided the stimulus of capital necessary to jump-start an industrial economy; “The pace of capitalist industrialization in Britain was decisively advanced by its success in creating a regime of extended primitive accumulation and batten[ing] upon the super-exploitation of slaves in the Americas.”

Combined with the previous pro-Williams scholarship of the 1980s, Blackburn’s book seemed to secure the Atlantic Economy theory’s role as the working model for understanding the relationship between slavery and British industrialism among historians at large. Thus, the 1980s and 1990s saw the defense of the Williams Thesis grow to effectively drown out the cliometrics voices of the previous two decades.

This trend of historians turning away from cliometrics to embrace a Williams-supportive macroeconomic relationship between slavery and British industry in the 1980s could be traced back to the publication of Immanuel Wallerstein’s seminal opus on modern historical economic theory, *The Modern World-System*, in 1974. In this book, Wallerstein put forth the World-Systems theory, which supposed that the world economic system is divided into a hierarchy of three zones: core countries, semi-peripheral countries, and peripheral countries. The theory asserts not only that core countries (economic superpowers, such as Japan, the United States, and Britain) dominate the world economic system through heavy industrialization, but that that dominance is built primarily off the core countries’ exploitation of countries in the periphery zones. Within the framework of the World-Systems theory, the development of the Atlantic Economy theory revitalizing and validating the original Williams
Thesis seems almost to be a forgone conclusion. It is not surprising then, that Inikori and Solow, both dedicated World-Systems theorists, would make that connection.

In Inikori’s case, his political tendencies may have also played some role in his application of Atlantic Economy theory to the defense of the Williams Thesis. Inikori, much like Williams himself, was a Marxist scholar, and Marxist theory formed a large basis of his scholarship. Indeed, he freely admits in “Slavery and the Development of Industrial Capitalism in England” that “the analytical framework of the present article is designed to capture…long term processes [regarding the British Industrial Revolution] by combining some neoclassical tools with the super-structure model of Marxist analysis.”

It is worth considering whether the Marxist connections between Inikori and Williams could in some way inform the former’s staunch defense of the theories of the latter. However, it is more likely that rather than Inikori’s holding some sort of communistic camaraderie with Williams as a fellow Marxist, it is actually the Marxist underpinnings of the World-Systems theory that inspired Inikori’s Atlantic Economy theory, and that could account for Inikori’s tendency towards the Williams Thesis.

Deeply inspired by Marxist theory of worldwide economic connection, Wallerstein’s own World-Systems theory reshaped historical scholarship from the 1970s onward. As we have seen, Inikori was joined by other such Marxist-inspired historians as Barbara Solow, Robin Blackburn, William Darity, and David Richardson in the defense of the Williams Thesis using this theory as the basis for their own Atlantic Economy theory. This points toward a general historiographical tendency to rely on Marxist ideology in the study of Atlantic slavery between late 1970s and the 1980s. This is unsurprising, considering the fact that these two decades marked the culmination of a revisionist renaissance of historical scholarship spurred on by the social upheaval of the 1960s, in which the previously ignored role of institutions of inequality (like slavery and capitalism) in founding Western institutions that remain to this day are brought to the forefront of scholarly discourse. It is not surprising that Atlantic Economy theory developed side-by-side with Critical Race Theory. Thus, Marxian preoccupations with systems of inequality may have informed historical scholarship of the 1970s and 80s, resulting in a generation of historians that found a lot to be said for the Williams Thesis’ original supposition that slavery formed the basis of Britain’s industrial economy.

**The Rebirth of Cliometrics**

It was not until the late 1990s and early 2000s that the cliometrics scholars returned to make another concentrated critique of the Atlantic Economy theory and the Williams Thesis. Ironically, it was the publishing of Blackburn’s *The Making of New World Slavery* that reanimated the New Economic theory camp. David Eltis and cliometrics veteran Stanley Engerman’s 2000 “The Importance of Slavery and the Slave Trade to Industrializing Britain” seems at times to be a direct attack on Blackburn’s arguments specifically, and in doing so also attacked the Williamsian basis of the Atlantic Economy theory and the Marxian primitive accumulation theory, arguing that “while slavery had important long-run economic implications, it did not by itself cause the British Industrial Revolution. It certainly ‘helped’ that Revolution along, but its role
was no greater than that of many other economic activities.”16 True to cliometrics form, Eltis and Engerman focus on the raw numbers in their take-down of Solow and Blackburn’s theories regarding the “slave-sugar complex.” Claiming that the Atlantic Economists ironically limit themselves too much by focusing on only one sector of the British Caribbean economy (sugar), they point to the fact that sugar production made up only 2.5 percent of the British national income, leaving the remaining 97.5 percent of its income to come from other industries, several of which (including iron, textiles, and sheep farming) were largely domestic in nature.17

Additionally, they criticize Inikori, Solow, and Blackburn’s seemingly intentional ignoring of the larger picture of Britain’s place among other European nations in export growth. According to their reasoning, Britain’s capital investment in the colonies via slavery was actually relatively small compared to other countries within the same time span, even going so far as to say that, “If economic activity on so modest a scale could contribute significantly to industrialization, then we might expect Europe’s first industrial economy to have been Portual, not Britain.”18 In pointing to slavery as the primary stimulus in Britain’s industrial revolution while conveniently ignoring the fact that other nations who also made heavy investments and experienced export-growth did not experience that same industrial growth, they essentially accuse pro-Williams historians of confusing correlation with causation.

This same argument was picked up and further cemented by new-to-the-scene cliometrics historian C. Knick Harley in his 2004 “Trade: Discovery, Mercantilism and Technology,” in which he argues that French and Spanish trade to the West Indies was far more extensive than Britain’s, citing the French domination of the importation of sugar and coffee to Europe and Spain’s larger Caribbean population accounting for a much larger trade market than Britain in the eighteenth century. Despite this, neither Spain nor France saw the same explosion of industrialism in the following century that Britain did. Thus, in Harley’s own words, “The British Empire’s size or trading contribution can hardly have made the decisive contribution to Britain’s lead in the emergence of modern economic growth.”19 Harley also takes the opportunity in this article to revive an old cliometrics stand-by, attacking the original supposition of the Williams Thesis that profits from the slave trade accounted for the capital stimulus necessary for the industrial revolution: “Williams’s view is now seen as overblown and the slave trade as not exceptionally profitable.”20

The revitalization of the cliometrics stance on the Williams debate in the early 2000s is easy to understand in the context of the global economic issues pertinent to those years. Like in the origins of cliometrics history, this regeneration of New Economic historians was born from economic upsets. But instead of an economic boom creating scholarly interest in quantitative data methods being applied to the study of history, it was the global financial crises of the millennium, and especially those of 2007-2008 which “renewed the attention to economic history to escape from the recession.”21 This could provide better explanation for the renewal of academic interest in closely examining historical economic patterns. However, other rising trends in the quantitative analysis
of history also emerged at the time that complicated the cliometrics orthodoxy on the Williams debate.

By the mid-2000s, Harley was establishing himself as the new vanguard of the cliometrics argument, but fellow economists Ronald Findlay and Kevin O’Rourke complicated the hardline stances of the New Economic camp in their 2007 book *Power and Plenty: Trade, War, and the World Economy in the Second Millennium*, to the point that even Harley would have to concede. Findlay and O’Rourke seem on the outset to support the Atlantic Economy theoretical tenets at the heart of the Williams Thesis. In fact, they go so far as to say that “the link between the Industrial Revolution and the extension of the slave plantations in the New World on which the essential raw material was cultivated could not...be more obvious.”

This conclusion is at first surprising coming from such quantitative-leaning economists as Findlay and O’Rourke, and yet more surprising is an apparent about-face coming from Harley in response in his 2013 “Slavery, the British Atlantic Economy, and the Industrial Revolution.” In this, he concludes that “Eric Williams was certainly right to bring interaction between industrializing Britain, slavery and the Atlantic economy into the centre of discussion of British change in the eighteenth century.”

To account for this seemingly uncharacteristic concession by the cliometrics historians, one must go back to the 1980s and consider the rise of New Trade theory. This theory, though rooted in quantitative data analysis akin to New Economic theory, posits that network effects have a large impact on increasing returns in international economies. In an ironic twist, New Trade theory actually espouses the same basic ideas that formed the World-Systems theories and Atlantic Economy theories of Wallerstein, Inikori, and Solow (note the correspondence of the development of the Atlantic Economic theory and the New Trade theory). However, unlike Atlantic Economy theory, New Trade theory is ultimately a quantitative methodology with highly capitalist (and decidedly anti-Marxian) undertones. Thus, for all its foundational similarities to its Marxian counterpart, it falls squarely in the purview of New Economic historians. This ironic convergence of theory could account for the apparent willingness of the new generation of cliometrics historians to lend more credence to the Atlantic Economy theory, and by extension some portions of the Williams Thesis. Harley, Findlay, and O’Rourke, after all, were all economic historians who, though inspired by the older cliometrics troupers like Engerman, were schooled themselves in the New Trade theory of the 1980s.

While their New Trade theory tendencies may have opened the New Economic camp to the ideas of the Atlantic Economy theory, they never lose sight of their cliometrics roots decrying the Williams Thesis’ Marxian preoccupation with primitive accumulation and high profits arguments. It should be noted that Harley, Findlay, and O’Rourke all eagerly avow in their respective works that that Williams’ original arguments based in primitive accumulation were patently false.

**The Latest Take: New Historians of Capitalism (and their critics)**

At last we come to the most recent scholarship regarding the Williams Thesis, which appears to be at somewhat of a crossroads. The cause of this convergence seems to be the explosion of the New History of Capitalism
(NHC) theory in the late 2010s, and currently extending into the early 2020s. The NHC is a decidedly Marxian school of thought, having risen from “the intersection of social, economic, and intellectual history that arose in the work on the ‘making of the working class’ in the 1960s and 1970s.” At its core is a firm conviction that slavery was a crucial contributor to the development of Western capitalism, and by extent, a foundational component of the industrial revolutions of Western countries - particularly Britain and the United States. As such, it was almost inevitable that the Williams Thesis found new champions in the generation of historians coming to majority in this time.

Several major works come to the forefront of this movement in the late 2010s and early 2020s, the first of which is Sven Beckert and Seth Rockwell’s 2016 Slavery’s Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development. It should be noted that Beckert and Rockwell’s book (as its title suggests) is primarily focused on the development of American capitalism through slavery, as indeed, is the scholarship of most NHC theory. However, Beckert and Rockwell’s conclusions draw expansively from the Marxian theories of Williams’ original thesis, especially in identifying Atlantic slavery “as the primary force driving key innovations in entrepreneurship, finance, accounting, management, and political economy that are too often attributed to the so-called free market.” Their staunch defense of the original tenets of Williams revitalized the debate over the slave origins of Britain’s industrial revolution as well. Where they differ from previous Williams’ defenders, however, is in their insistence that the data truly relevant to understanding slavery’s connections to capitalism and industrialism is not in the eighteenth century (where almost all historians on both sides of the debate have focused their attention up to this point), but in the nineteenth.

Clearly inspired by Beckert and Rockwell is the work on this very subject by Mark Harvey, in his 2019 “Slavery, Indenture and the Development of British Industrial Capitalism.” Here he not only reaffirms Williams’ broad connections between slavery and industrial formation, but also concludes from analyzing patterns in production, exchange, distribution, and consumption in the British market system of the early 1800s that “the British industrial revolution [was] characterized by its hybridity and heterogeneity, always combining varied regimes of exploitation: metropolitan wage labour, directly-owned British Caribbean and Mauritian slavery, and US Deep South slavery.” His conclusions not only understand industrialism as a direct result of slavery, but the two institutions as intrinsically feeding and building off of one another in an interconnected system of capitalist exchange based on a racially and economically hierarchical power structure.

The latest NHC historians to take up the debate are Stephan Heblich, Stephen J. Redding, and Hans-Joachim Voth’s, whose 2022 “Slavery and the British Industrial Revolution” also focuses on the critical assessment of data from the nineteenth century. Specifically, they use a dynamic-spatial model to analyze the relation of investments in slavery to capital accumulation. Their findings prompt them to conclude that “greater slavery wealth promoted local economic growth and led to a reallocation of economic activity away from agriculture, and towards manufacturing, the diffusion of new manufacturing technology (cotton...
mills), and the adoption of steam power – the key new
technology of the Industrial Revolution.” New to the
pro-Williams argument is their ultimate conclusion that
slavery’s foundational role in British industrialization
comes not primarily from slave trading in the eighteenth
century, but from slaveholding in the nineteenth. This
particular point also reaffirms the Williams Thesis’
original supposition that the accumulation of wealth
via slave owners contributed heavily to the foundations
of industrialism.

The New History of Capitalism theory and its
proponents’ reaffirmation of the Williams Thesis, howev
however, is not without its critics in the late 2010s and
2020s. Gavin Wright, a defender of the cliometrics
camp since the 1970s, attacks what he sees as the
overly generalizing Marxian assumptions of the New
Economic historians. In his 2016 review of Beckert
and Rockwell’s Slavery’s Capitalism, he decries the
entire NHC school’s hardline stance on slavery’s
pivotal role in the development of industrialism as
‘bluster and bombast.’ His 2020 “Slavery and Anglo-
American Capitalism Revisited” is as direct critique
by NHC historians to that date. On the Williams
Thesis specifically, he concedes that “the slave trade
and slave-based commerce were core contributors to
British economic development during the eighteenth
century,” but he refutes all claims of the new historians
of capitalism that slavery directly contributed to the
industrial development of the nineteenth century,
arguing that “the new imperial regime [of that century]
required neither ‘captive’ markets nor ‘captive’
workers.”

Historians Trevor Burnard and Giorgio Riello
also lob criticisms of the New History of Capitalism
theory in their 2020 “Slavery and the New History
of Capitalism.” Overall, they cite NHC’s greatest
weakness as an overreliance on the broad connotations
of the World Systems theory and taking for granted
the origin of industrialism in slavery (as argued by
the Williams Thesis) as an inherent truth. Specifically,
they state that, “it stresses the transformative role of
American raw cotton in British industrialization after
the invention of the cotton gin, but provides a narrow
view of economic change, in which slavery and the
plantation economy are taken as the sole motor of early
modern global economic change.”

The recent explosion of New History of
Capitalism in the 2010s and 20s is quite timely; the
current trends in historiography, especially by the
younger generation of historians, lean toward large
global frameworks of the World-Systems Theory.
In particular, currently in vogue is the analysis of
a “particular kind of rapacious capitalism emerged
after the Columbian exchange of the late fifteenth and
sixteenth centuries, in patterns of colonial conquest,
expropriation of native American lands, and abusive
labour relations.” And just as the World-Systems
theory rose from the resurgence of Marxian socialism
in the wake of sweeping social upheaval of the 1960s,
so this New History of Capitalism has most likely
emerged from the Marxian underpinnings of responses
to the issues of racial and social inequalities of the past
five years. Marxian academic movements addressing
the historical origins of inequality of all types are
currently on the rise in the age of such social movements
as the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and the
increasing tension surrounding wealth inequality. And
just as the BLM movement reemphasized the Critical
Race Theory (both in academia and in the public discourse), so is the social upheaval of our times reviving the Marxian tenets of the World Systems theory in the New History of Capitalism movement. However, with older cliometrics critics already leaping into the ring to decry them, it remains to be seen if the NHC school’s defense of the Williams Thesis will prove to be successful in finally turning the debate in its favor.

**Conclusion**

Since its publication in 1944, the debate over the Williams Thesis has swung like a pendulum back and forth within the historical profession. Seemingly every economist or economic historian has cut their teeth on the subject at least once. The pattern that emerges from the close analysis of the historiography of the various contribution to the question of the thesis suggests that one can predict which way the pendulum will swing based on society’s general criticism or support of global capitalist systems and social power structures at the time the contribution is made. In times when economic prosperity or crisis prompts a societal interest in the predictions of financial success through quantitative methods, the historical schools will meet these demands in the study of history using cliometrics historical methodology. In times when social upheaval revives the Marxian spirit of denouncing intrinsic systems of inequality, the historical milieu will shift back to a broader interpretation of history through the lens of social interactions, rather than statistical ones. It thus becomes quite clear why the Williams Thesis has been so hotly debated for over 70 years. Standing at the precarious crossroads of both social and economic history, it is not only one of the likeliest candidates for causing division between the quantitative and social models of history, but is perhaps even doomed to remain so. Until the general historical world (or indeed, the world in general) can decide whether to see history through a quantitative or social lens, the Williams Thesis is nearly impossible to prove or disprove objectively, as the historiography regarding the matter suggests.

**Note on Author:** Jennifer Agel completed her Master in Arts in Teaching (History) in 2023. Her research project was completed in the fall of 2022 under the mentorship of Dr. Brian Payne. She plans to continue her career as a secondary teacher, with ultimate plans to pursue a PhD.

**Notes**

17 Eltis and Engerman, “The Importance of Slavery and the Slave Trade to Industrializing Britain,” 132.
18 Eltis and Engerman, “The Importance of Slavery and the Slave Trade to Industrializing Britain,” 130.
20 Knick C. Harley, “Trade: Discovery, Mercantilism, and Technology,” 197


**References:**


