New Insights on Slavery in the British Atlantic World

Slavery defined the Atlantic world. African forced labour produced the primary materials that drove European mercantile economies. The plantation complex lay at the core of societies from Brazil and the West Indies to the American mainland and West Africa. Philip Curtin and Bernard Bailyn bounded the
Atlantic world’s ‘moment’ in world history by slavery’s rise and fall. From the 1640s, skyrocketing European demand for sugar fomented a socioeconomic revolution. Their insatiable appetite for sugar, combined with the crop’s intensely demanding and unforgiving agricultural process, doomed slaves to lifelong physical and psychological abuse. As Sidney Mintz, Simon Smith, Robin Blackburn, and David Eltis amongst many others have demonstrated, slaves’ blood and tears forged complex international trading, social, and political networks. Slaves resisted in any way possible – whether feigning illness to regain a day of rest from the fields or escaping into the mountains and fomenting rebellions.

Slavery is also a story frequently told. The civil rights movement, popularisation of slave narratives, and the rise of Atlantic, global, and interdisciplinary history have all propelled slavery into the forefront of contemporary discourse. Scholarly and public efforts to both discuss the nature of and atone for slavery has rightly forced many Americans and Europeans to accept the violent, oppressive nature of their collective past. But with so many books, articles, films, and novels available, what else can really be said?

Justin Roberts and Nicolas Draper carefully and adeptly demonstrate that, by shifting our perspectives towards slavery, plenty new insights and discoveries remain to be uncovered, with important ramifications for the history of slavery, Atlantic and Enlightenment studies, economic history, and imperial scholarship. By examining slaves beyond traditional tropes of rebellion and struggle, scholars can learn about other, equally important facets of slavery’s complex and multi-layered web, its diverse willing and unwilling actors, and profound consequences.

In Slavery and the Enlightenment in the British Atlantic, 1750–1807, Roberts argues that Enlightenment conceptions of order and organisation, time and space, and humanism and redemption strongly influenced the daily regimens of slaves across the British Atlantic. The plantation became an experiential site where the ‘dark side of the Enlightenment’ was played out (pp. 7–8). On Barbadian, Jamaican, and Virginian plantations, owners and managers increasingly experimented and toyed with, and ultimately adopted new mathematical, ‘scientific’, and logistical approaches to maximising slave efficiency, health, food rationing, and productivity.

Roberts’ approach is three-pronged. Slavery and the Enlightenment is at once a valuable labour history, an analysis of 18th-century business and managerial practices, and an exploration in key societal relationships. In the vein of recent Atlantic scholarship, most notably the work of Eltis, Philip Morgan, Jack Greene, and Andrew O’Shaughnessy, Roberts authored a transnational study, comparing contemporaneous plantation infrastructures in the Lesser Antilles, Greater Antilles, and North American mainland. He supports this approach with a fascinating, comprehensive corpus of primary quantitative and qualitative data gleaned from plantation logs, diaries, surviving letters and correspondence, period manuals, and registers.

The Enlightenment is remembered as an age of progressive, defiant intellectualism: Nicolas de Condorcet, Benjamin Franklin, Voltaire, John Harrison, Adam Smith, and Denis Diderot, to name but a mere few, challenged longstanding paradigms of man’s place in the universe. Their writings, inventions, and struggles gradually but fundamentally altered modes of trade, travel, and individualism. But Enlightenment philosophers’ conceptions of how the world should operate often reinforced slavery’s position at the heart of the Atlantic socioeconomic system. Plantation owners and overseers applied new conceptions of resource extraction and maximisation, and time management and efficiency in sinister and dehumanising ways.

Roberts deftly conveys this sinister side to Enlightenment thought both through the narratives he recounts as well as via the language he wields to analyse plantation life and labour. Slaves were ‘fixed capital’, units-for-life with individual talents and group functions that managers creatively harnessed to account for seasonal variation, nocturnal cycles, and slaves’ health (pp. 38, 40–2). Enlightenment discourse seeped into complex moral and economic balances. Plantation owners, from George Washington in Virginia to Elizabeth Alleyne in Barbados, strove to unite their personal aspirations with economic needs and shifting moral sensibilities. Washington, in his highly successful effort to establish himself as a large-scale gentleman farmer, diversified his crops and sought every available tested and experimental means of quantifying and manipulating productivity, working hours, and slaves’ own talents (e.g., pp. 89–93). Caribbean planters practiced similar
efforts, but important differences existed. Sugar’s arduous growing, harvesting, and production requirements forced Caribbean planters to adopt time- and record keeping advancements. Virginian plantations, less reliant on solely sugar cultivation, were also less bound by the needs for precise time keeping. The gradual adoption of quantification and time management on the North American mainland then was ‘a testament to the strength of the growing interest in the clock as a way of compelling time discipline’, as well as more generally in Enlightenment approaches to organisation and efficiency (pp. 72, 70–90 passim).

Apart from its careful analysis of Enlightenment influences in plantation management, Slavery and the Enlightenment’s greatest strength lays in its detailed examination of slaves’ daily work regimens. Roberts criticised the bulk of mid to late 20th-century scholarship as far too centred on determining slaves’ agency and supposed ‘uniqueness’ in the early modern world, and too little interested in how slaves actually lived, survived, and operated under their master’s yoke to maintain the plantation economy:

We need to reimagine slaves as much more complex than just politicized actors engaged with their master in an endless contest for freedom … scholars much avoid fetishizing the violence within slavery or casting the system as unique. They need to recognize it as part of an early modern world in which most laborers (and whole groups of people, such as women or children) experienced some degree of coercion (p. 4).

Overseers organised slaves into ‘gangs’ – groups of men, women, and children classified by skills, health, age, and endurance – who were sent out to field duty, sugar house work, crop cultivation, or fixing, mending, and plantation upkeep. Managers expected gangs to operate as single units (p. 134) to maximise daily productivity, and were routinely cycled between chores to increase efficiency, account for seasonal variations in temperature, climate, and sunlight, and control slaves’ health: ‘In this case, determining how draining each chore would be on the health of his own slaves’ (p. 83). Again, important distinctions existed between Barbadian, Jamaican, and Virginian systems. Slaves were less likely to be rotated and diversified on land-tight sugar-exclusive Barbadian plantations than on larger Jamaican farms or crop-diverse Virginia establishments. Yet even on Barbados, slaves were expected to perform a broad range of domestic and field tasks. Slaves across North America shared in the common misery of ‘breaking ground,’ the rapid process by which the soil was turned, holes were created, and sugar and other crops were planted.

As Enlightenment-driven efforts at ‘slave amelioration’ spread, Africans were encouraged to spend Sundays tending their diminutive personal plots (if available). On some plantations, skilled labourers were permitted to work on other plantations’ odd jobs in their spare time for food or money (p. 151). At the same time, gangs and families competed with one another for easier work, better food rations, and greater trust and leverage with masters. Far from uniting against their master, slave families jockeyed for power and prestige, allying with and competing against rival families and networks to survive under an extraordinary variety of environmental, physical, and social obstacles (pp. 240–5).

Roberts’ attention to even the most mundane parts of slaves’ lives – how many hours they worked each day, which gang worked in what capacity, and how individuals and groups ensured their survival and the plantation’s success – should prove enormously useful for Atlantic history scholars seeking to understand the intricacies of colonial economic life. Chapter four, an analysis of slaves’ health, sickness, and treatment, is drawn largely from primary evidence, tracts, and accounts, providing historians with one of the first comprehensive studies of how ill slaves were housed, treated, ‘hospitalised’ (a nebulus term in any 18th-century sense), and pressured to return to work as soon as possible (for example, p. 166). This chapter in particular utilises an interdisciplinary literature, engaging with slavery studies and history of science scholarship as well as anthropological evidence and medical analysis to convey how slaves’ health determined their short- and long-term future.

Slavery and the Enlightenment triumphs as an economic history, and will be particularly valuable to historians seeking to analyse the complex social and hierarchal frameworks underpinning 18th-century trade.
Roberts’ book is not, however, a narrative-driven text. It does not have the vivid biographical contextualisation of Vincent Carretta’s *Equiano, the African* (2005), derived from Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative* (first published 1789), or the family-based, intertwining intellectual histories of Emma Rothschild’s *The Inner Life of Empires* (2011). The book’s approach and intended scope understandably precludes it from following the lives of individual slaves in a single community, as Pedro Welch accomplished in his *Slave Society in the City* (2003).

The same Enlightenment philosophies that at once promoted slave amelioration alongside ruthless time-keeping and harsh productivity also brought about an equally fascinating paradox: the increasing pressure to emancipate the slaves while compensating slave owners – but not the slaves themselves – for their economic loss. In *The Price of Emancipation: Slave-ownership, Compensation and British Society at the End of Slavery*, Draper examined the political and economic minutiae of the compensation process between 1833 and c.1840. Thanks to an Economic and Social Research Council (ECRC)-backed initiative, Draper’s databases are now available online alongside the paperback release. Apart from small, selective studies on compensation, remarkably little has been published on this critical question in the history of British slavery. Christopher Brown’s ground-breaking 2006 history, *Moral Capital: the Foundations of British Abolitionism*, focused on the Atlantic-wide intellectual forces behind the end of the slave trade (1807) and their eventual emancipation (1833), rather than detailed financial considerations.

Abolitionist efforts to combat slavery via the courts stretched back to at least the mid 18th century. But anti-abolitionists long maintained a strong hand, stressing the vast economic losses both they and Britain would supposedly suffer if the slaves were to be freed. Individuals both in the British Isles and throughout the empire earned income from slave-derived work in both diverse and indirect ways. Draper poses an important and long-unanswered question: who in Britain owned slaves? Through tracing back via complex compensation claims, cases, and remittances, he persuasively demonstrates the broad swath of British slave ownership. Beyond the mercantile and urban elite classes traditionally associated with absentee West India plantation management, rural elites, church leaders, manor residents, and ‘polite’ upper-middle and upper class families owned small-scale holdings in Atlantic slave operations. In short, numerous men and women from many walks of life earned income from the world of slavery, even if they did not expressly identify themselves as part of that culture (pp. 3–4, 204–32). In promoting this thesis, Draper examined a vast archive of numerical data, contextualising statistics, compensation requested and paid, and slave numbers, alongside Parliamentary debates, fiery personal and public exchanges between abolitionists and slave owners, and the accounts of the government’s Commissioners of Slave Compensation.

By the 1820s, even a number of absentee landlords agreed that the amelioration and eventual demise of slavery was in British society’s best moral interest (p. 75). British domestic society, which had long observed the West India elites with some curiosity, humour, and disgust, pressured urban elites to answer for their plantations, reports of systematic abuse, and increasingly questionable sources of income. The Slave Compensation Commission ultimately handled claims of tens of thousands of slave owners, stretching from Maria Macandrew of Edinburgh, whose charges Mrs E. Clark and Mrs A. Steel, both of Tobago, received £37 10d and £31 3s 5d respectively for several slaves, to Britain’s foremost financial dynasties: N. M. Rothschild, Baring Brothers, and the Duke of Cleveland. (pp. 108–11, 119, 158, 207).

Draper justifiably does not attempt to examine slaves’ opinions of the compensation process, nor of their perceptions of British-based owners (p. 16). It is a difficult question to undertake, given the immense rarity of surviving slave accounts. Instead, he recounts the frequent, vicious, and polemic arguments between abolitionists and slave owners in Parliament, newspapers, and private correspondence. In so doing, he provocatively conveys the money, livelihoods, and prestige at stake. In 1831, for instance, the *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter* printed the names of 41 slave-owning individuals in an effort to publicly humiliate them. They were previously unknown, the newspaper argued, ‘residing among ourselves … claiming the name and character of English gentlemen’ (p. 29). Slave owners responded in kind, calling out abolitionists for their personal discretions and failings, and promoting their efforts to ameliorate slave conditions and convert their chattel to Anglicanism. Other British-based plantations owners took out editorials and commentaries to clarify the nature of their slave holdings. Some were ‘merely’ domestic servants; others were treated with
fairness, kindness, and proper food rations. Sympathetic merchants, MPs, bankers, and gentiles bolstered both sides’ financial and political prowess, demonstrating the power of the West India lobby and the force of public disgust with the slave system.

*The Price of Emancipation*’s only weakness lies with the slaves themselves. Draper briefly mentions that slaves received no compensation from the British government. The Abolition Act urged planters to maintain their newly ex-slaves on their plantations as paid apprentices for a duration of time, but many owners simply turned their workers out. But Draper chose not to further investigate this issue. Perhaps no record of debate still exists, but what did abolitionists and anti-abolitionists have to say about compensating slaves? Was the prospect ever seriously entertained? If so, how and where did this discussion take place? More broadly, were black abolitionists or lobbyists active in Britain and the Atlantic colonies involved in conversations concerning compensating slaves, their owners, or both? Although by no means obligatory, *The Price of Emancipation* would have also benefited from greater comparative analysis, with particular focus on contemporaneous French compensation efforts.

*Slavery and the Enlightenment* and *The Price of Emancipation* are geographically wide-ranging histories, stretching from the British Isles to the American mid-Atlantic and the Caribbean. Thousands of individuals were involved in maintaining and eradicating the slave system, as well as claiming and fighting compensation. The inclusion of annotated maps in future editions will substantially aid visualisation of the plantation network’s sheer size, as well as the advances and limitations inherent in 18th-century communication. Roberts could have also employed non-traditional, artistic primary sources – paintings, sketches, even music lyrics – to deepen our understanding of slaves’ routines, lives under Enlightenment experimentation, and their eventual freedom. But these are small qualms. Both books deserve be recognised as landmark additions to Atlantic history, the history of slavery, Enlightenment analysis, and economic history. Roberts’ and Draper’s extraordinarily detailed and exacting studies will undoubtedly prove to be essential reading to any scholar seeking to delve into the dark world of colonial slavery and capitalism.

### Notes


2. B. W. Higman, ‘The making of the sugar revolution’, *In the Shadow of the Plantation: Caribbean History and Legacy*, ed. in Alvin O Thompson (Kingston, Jamaica, 2002), pp. 40–2. [Back to (2)]


Justin Roberts is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.