# CAPITALISM AND SLAVERY

*Hassan Mahamdallie*

Queens Park Savannah sits in the middle of the capital of Trinidad and Tobago, Port of Spain. It is a vast open field, famous for being the focus of Carnival, the cultural explosion of freedom that marks the start of Lent in the run up to Easter. Outside of Carnival, the Savannah is the popular evening destination for families and couples out enjoying themselves, queuing at the food stalls for the street food such as Indian inspired 'doubles', made of fried dough and channa with pepper sauce, gyros introduced to the island by Syrian-Lebanese Christian immigrants, jerk chicken and fresh coconuts. The Savannah has had various uses in the past two hundred years, as a cricket ground, horse racetrack, pleasure park, and even an aircraft landing strip.

But originally, the land on which the Savannah sits was a slave plantation, owned by the Peschier family, who were of French origin but had emigrated to Switzerland (possibly as part of the Huguenot exodus fleeing religious persecution). The original settler Henry Peschier was granted acreage by the Spanish colonial authorities in 1782. Using slave labour, Peschier cleared the land and began to grow cane sugar.

In 1817, the heirs to the estate sold two portions of the estate (one named Paradise, the other *Malgretout* (French for 'despite everything' or 'unbelievable but true') to the equivalent of the Port of Spain town council for £6,000, on condition that the walled off family cemetery remained in their hands. This was agreed.

The descendants of Henry Peschier continued in the slave plantation business up until abolition. According to the database complied by the Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery (run by University College London), Joseph Peschier and his wife Marie Celestine Dolores owned two plantations in Carapichaima on the north/south corridor of the island. In 1836, in the run up to emancipation, Joseph Peschier

received £7,000 compensation from the British government for the 'loss' of his 138 slaves, a goodly fortune for those times. Family members Charles and Francis Peschier also owned a slave plantation in the west of the Island, named *Plein Palais* (likely named after the eponymous esplanade in Geneva). At abolition, they received £4,052 6s 2d in compensation for the 'loss' of seventy-seven slaves. The emancipated slaves received not a penny from the British Exchequer.

Liberation for the slaves did not come until two years later, after the compensation claims of their owners had been settled. In all, the British government paid out £20 million in compensation for the planters' 'lost business assets', the equivalent of 40 per cent of the Treasury's annual income. However, that was not the end of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery in the Americas. Slavery in Brazil was legal up until 1888. Elsewhere slave bondage in Saudi Arabia was officially abolished in 1962, although it most likely persisted for some time after that.

The Peschiers are buried in the graveyard that still sits in Queens Park Savannah. It is said that the 'European' bloodline of the Peschiers has died out, but there are today families carrying the Peschier name living in Port of Spain who can claim to be directly descended from the French-Swiss family.

Everywhere you go in Trinidad, or any of the former Caribbean slave colonies, you are standing on the historical sediments of the transatlantic slave trade and slave economy, those who suffered and died, and those who prospered vastly from it, in their man-made diabolical 'Paradise'. But it is also the case that wherever you stand in modern Britain, your feet are planted on a geography also fundamentally shaped by West Indian slavery. It is in the DNA of British history, politics, society, arts, architecture, and cityscapes. The legacy of slavery is still hotly contested today, along essentially the same ideological lines it was opposed or supported back in the 1800s.

It is therefore entirely fitting that it was a Trinidadian from Port of Spain, ensconced in the libraries of Oxford, who irrevocably proved the link between that abominable trade and the rise of Britain as the first and most powerful industrial capitalist economy and giant imperial power.

On its western boundary, the Queens Park Savannah is contained by the Maraval Road, upon which sits the Queens Royal College, its imposing

red and grey brick colonnaded colonial edifice facing the park. During colonial times 'Queens College' served as the leading boys' secondary school, serving up a decidedly classical English curriculum of algebra, geometry, arithmetic, Latin, French, English, geography, European history and Greek or Spanish, for those whose families aspired for a career for their sons in the colonial administration or even a university scholarship abroad. Novelist V. S. Naipaul and his (underestimated and more humane) brother Shiva went to Queens Royal College, as did the economist Lloyd Best, the radical left activists CLR James and Darcus Howe, the carnival designer Peter Minshall, and numerous prominent athletes, scholars, politicians, and lawyers.

But perhaps the college's highest achiever was Eric Eustace Williams, who was a pupil in the 1920s before winning a scholarship to St Catherine's College Oxford in 1932. Later in life he would go on to found and lead Trinidad and Tobago's Peoples National Movement (PNM) and become the country's first post-independence prime minister in 1962. He ruled the country with an increasingly authoritarian hand until his rather lonely death in office in 1981 at the age of sixty-nine.

Aside from his political achievements, which were considerable from whichever political viewpoint you care to look, Williams's most abiding legacy is a book a little under 200 pages in length, which changed forever how we look at the transatlantic slave trade, its history, its dynamic and its contemporary legacy. *Capitalism and Slavery*, originally written by Williams as his Oxford doctoral thesis and first published in 1944 , is a magisterial, penetrating, and devastating analysis of the economic and political relationship between those two entities – capitalism and slavery. It is bolstered by a mass of empirical data and source material. In today's parlance, Eric Williams had the receipts.

Williams wrote in the preface to *Capitalism and Slavery*: 'the book…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 not a study of the institution of slavery but of the contribution of slavery to the development of British capitalism'. (I have kept the term 'Negro' as it is used by Williams, whilst recognising it is not an acceptable description today).

In addition to *Capitalism and Slavery*, Williams published two books at the time of independence designed to educate the Trinidadian population to their own history. The first was *History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago* (1962) and a year later *Documents of West Indian History* 1492-1655. In the forward to the first Williams set out his stall: 'It would be… unfortunate…if Trinidad and Tobago were to enter on its career of Independence without a history of its own, without some informed knowledge of its past.' The dedication in the second book reads: 'To the young people of the West Indies as an aid in their struggle against the legacy, the mentality and the fragmentation of colonialism.'

In these books Williams is forensic in marshalling evidence to defend his three pronged thesis. Firstly, a refutation that the British slave colonies were an historical anomaly from which nothing more general could be inferred or deduced. Secondly, he argued that the boundless wealth generated by means of slavery 'created the industrial capitalism of the nineteenth century'. Thirdly, that a combination of slave revolts, particularly the Saint-Domingue (Haitian) revolution of 1791-1804, the anti-slavery movement in Britain that can lay claim to be the first mass political movement in history, and the iron-clad determination of the new industrial barons to end the trade monopoly that the West Indian planters enjoyed, led to the ending of the transatlantic slave trade and then slavery itself in the West Indian colonies. Williams also lays to rest the canard that still lingers, that the slave system was abolished as soon as the great and the good of the British establishment woke up to its iniquity, or as Williams drily remarked: 'British historians wrote almost as if Britain had introduced Negro slavery solely for the satisfaction of abolishing it.'

Eric Williams was not a Marxist, although as with many post-war independence leaders in Africa and the Caribbean at the time, he tinctured his politics with socialist language. This was more a product of the Cold War than individual ideological conviction. Like his prime ministerial counterparts, Michael Manley in Jamaica and Cheddi Jagan in Guyana, Williams was obliged to steer a course between the two imperial blocs – the US and the Western powers on one side and the Soviet Union and its satellites on the other.

However, what is true is that his writings, particularly *Capitalism and Slavery*, did adopt a Marxist analytical framework. As the scholar of critical

history, Christian Høgsbjerg, sketches out in his excellent recent appreciation of Williams, there are three monumental and complimentary works produced by Black authors in the first half of the twentieth century that draw on Marxism: WEB Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935) that maps the brief flowering of democracy in the southern states of America in the period after the Civil War; CLR James's *The Black Jacobins* (1938) that tells of the story of the Haitian Revolution and its leader Toussaint L'Ouverture; and finally *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944). As Høgsbjerg writes: 'the three books shared the objective of showing that racism and imperial domination experienced by the authors had its origins and material roots in the emerging capitalist system and the barbarism of the slave trade'.

This triumvirate were attacking the roots of racism within the rise of capitalism from different angles, but their intent was the same – to restore not just history, but agency to all those who were fighting for liberation from racism and colonialism. It was an attempt at a radical reimagining of Black people as active participants in not only their own destiny but of that of all humankind, at a time when western continental Europe was in the grip of fascism, driven by a nihilistic racist ideology designating the Jewish people and others as *Untermensch* who should be exterminated. It was not lost on Williams and his pro-independence compatriots that, rather than following through on promises of freedom the European colonial powers had shelved the decolonial project, instead dragging their subjects into yet another World War barely two decades after the first. Later, writing in the long shadow of the Nazi holocaust of the Jewish people of Europe, the Black American writer James Baldwin argued that the coupling of 'Europe' and 'Civilisation' as a historical claim to superiority over the other races on the face of the earth had forever ended. *In The Fire Next Time* (1963) Baldwin argued that that the only way for the western societies to once more advance humanity was for them to accept themselves as they are – not some invented, ahistorical, superior, ethnically pure nation-state that never was. To do this they needed to liberate and make visible all those they had made invisible, de-valued, persecuted and oppressed, and by doing so 'bring new life to the Western achievements and transform them.'

To fully understand why Du Bois, James, and Williams adopted fundamentally the same analytical framework one has to go back to the book that laid it all out in the first place: *Capital – A Critique of Political Economy Volume 1* by Karl Marx, first published in German in 1867. The initial publication of the book coincided with the end of the American Civil War, and the emancipation of the slaves in the south. Marx followed the American Civil War closely, and wrote many articles attacking the confederacy, as well as those manufacturers, particularly in the north of England, who were attempting to circumvent and break the blockade imposed by the Union forces preventing slave-grown cotton reaching the Lancashire mills.

In the opening section of *Capital*, Karl Marx lays out the foundation of his argument – the nature of commodities and its relationship to money. According to Marx a commodity is 'an object outside of us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or other.' Each commodity has a 'use-value' – a usefulness that can be measured, and that has a value.

Against the common argument that the West Indian or American slave system was some kind of pre-capitalist remnant or blip in the onward march of western progress, we can see that the opposite is true. The slave economy was capitalism in its essence laid bare. As historian Peter Colchin has argued: 'slavery was a system of labor in which slaves were valued for their ability to produce commodities for sale.' Not only that but 'slaves also were themselves commodities, valued for the price they could bring on the slave market.' Slaves were bought and sold wherever the market could guarantee the highest price and profit to the seller. Marx's categories of commodity and value cast a different light on the nature of the colonial plantation system. It was not a system of agricultural production in the old feudal way, it was more like the modern factory system to come. As the late Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, American historian of slavery, describes ' the history of the [Caribbean] slave plantation system is to a great extent the history of the large-scale, commercial production of sugar for sale on the international market'. Høgsbjerg recounts how Eric Williams's more radical compatriot CLR James, who played the role of mentor to the younger Oxford scholar, 'had explored how the plantations and slave ships of the Atlantic world were fundamentally modern capitalist institutions…

James described the plantations as 'huge sugar factories' and the enslaved as proto-proletariat [workers] than any group of workers in existence at the time'.

Thus, the first act of Henry Peschier after buying slaves to clear the land gifted to him by the Spanish, was to install a crushing mill to extract the sugar from the cane and a boiling house to refine the product for export and sale.

One of the great strengths of all of Williams's books is the empirical detail that he brings to bear to buttress his argument. *Documents of West Indian History* comprises of a collection of hundreds of primary source material: such as a 1492 contract between King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella and Christopher Columbus, that whatever 'pearls, precious stones, gold, silver, spices and other objects of merchandise' Columbus gets his hands on, he can keep one tenth and the other nine tenths 'being reserved for Your Highnesses'. This was on the eve of Columbus's second voyage to the Indies with a large expedition of seventeen ships and about 1,500 men.

Williams translates for the reader a 1513 decree set out by Ferdinand that the 'Aboriginal Indians' of Puerto Rico were to be relocated from the land the Spanish wished to occupy into model villages 'with love and flattery' and that those Spaniards 'who hold Indians in trust will keep at least one third of them working in the [gold] mines'. The Indians Ferdinand is referring to are the Taino people who had spread out from South America across the Caribbean between 430 BC and 1000AD. Through a combination of enslavement, European-borne diseases, and destitution, there were only a few thousand remaining by 1520 and by 1550 the Taino population had almost been wiped out in Puerto Rico at the hands of the Spanish.

The penultimate chapter of Marx's *Capital Volume 1* is titled *Genesis of the Industrial Capitalist*. Here, Marx summarises the narrative of the beginnings of industrial capitalism – what he termed the era of primitive accumulation (this refers not to people but to the process). Primitive Accumulation is the theft, expropriation, or dispossession of goods or labour without compensation. For Marx this 'genesis' story doesn't start in Bradford or Birmingham or London. It arises in the 'New World'. In an excoriating description laced with heavy sarcasm, Marx writes of the interconnection

between conquest, slavery, capitalist expropriation, and imperial competition:

> The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of Black-skins, signalised the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief momenta of capitalist accumulation. On their heels treads the commercial war of the European nations, with the globe for a theatre.

Marx concludes that 'capitalism (comes into the world) dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt'. He quotes a contemporary commentator on the ability of profit to corrupt and dissolve all past human relations: 'With adequate profit, capital is very bold. A certain 10% will ensure its employment everywhere; 20% certain will produce eagerness; 50% positive audacity; 100% will make it ready to trample on all human laws; 300% there is not a crime at which it will scruple, nor a risk it will not run, even to the chance of its owner being hanged'.

This pungent insight from Marx is really the cornerstone of the framework of *Black Reconstruction*, *The Black Jacobins,* and *Capitalism and Slavery*.

This primitive accumulation Marx described generated wealth which dwarfed all others that had come before. In feudal times the wealth of a baron, lord or even a king was limited by the amount of taxes they could raise from the peasantry and the size of their girth – what they and their hangers-on could consume and excrete. The riches extracted by the overseer's whip from the back of the slaves in the West Indies was such that had never ever been seen before. This is why in an earlier period the monarchies across Europe, famously Elizabeth I, were eager to get in on the game from the outset. Elizabeth sponsored privateers – pirates – to waylay Spanish ships. Elizabeth's 'sea-dog,' John Hawkins (and his compatriot Frances Drake) effectively set up the triangular trade: kidnapping Africans in Sierra Leone, transporting them to Spanish plantations in the Americas, and then trading them for pearls, hide and sugar to sell back on the European market. Elizabeth was so impressed by

the wealth Hawkins initially brought back with him that she became his sponsor (for a considerable cut), lending him her own ships and gratefully bestowing upon him a unique coat of arms bearing a bound slave. In 1660, The Royal African Company was set up by Charles II and City of London merchants to plunder the west coast of Africa of valuable commodities, including engaging in the human trafficking of slaves.

In *Capitalism and Slavery*, Williams traces the enormous volume and impact of the wealth extracted by 'The West Indian Interest.' Williams draws on all sorts of evidence from the time – including popular poems and plays. He cites a popular comedic drama *The West Indian* by Richard Cumberland, first staged at the Drury Lane Theatre in 1771. Cumberland was sympathetic to the planter class, being of aristocratic leanings and having been appointed as secretary to The Commissioners for Trade and Plantations – a body established by the British Crown to promote trade and to inspect and improve the plantations of the British colonies. *The West Indian* opens with a 'tremendous reception being prepared for the young planter Belcour's arrival in England, 'as if it were the Lord Mayor who was expected.' A servant character muses that the kind-hearted libertine is 'very rich, and that's sufficient. They say he has rum and sugar enough belonging to him, to make all the water in the Thames into punch.' Upon arrival Belcour declares that 'my happy stars have given me good estate, and the conspiring winds have blown me hither to spend it.' After its opening in London, the play was subsequently staged in North America, the West Indies, and translated into German, with Goethe acting in it at a production put on at the Weimar court.

Many of the planters were absentee landlords, running their operation from England. Williams spotlights one of the most prominent planter families resident in England – the Beckfords, an old Gloucestershire family dating back to the twelfth century. In 1661, Peter Beckford travelled to Jamaica in search of restoring his family fortune. Fifty years later the Beckford dynasty's wealth was estimated at £1.5 million in the bank, ownership of twenty plantations and 1,200 slaves. The Beckfords were 'in possession of the largest property real and personal of any subject in Europe'.

This grand opulence obscured the brutal nature of its source. Estimates vary, but historians believe that 12.5 million men, women, and children were transported from the east coast of Africa, across the Atlantic, to be

put to work on the slave plantations of the Americas and the Caribbean. Many did not survive the passage. During the eighteenth century alone it is thought that a least a million slaves died in the 'Middle Passage'. The impact on the Africa the captives were forced to leave behind was also profound. As the radical Guyanese historian Walter Rodney (born 1942, assassinated 1980) wrote in his marquee 1972 publication *How Europe Undeveloped Africa*:

> The European slave trade was a direct block, in removing millions of youth and young adults who are the human agents from whom inventiveness springs. Those who remained in areas badly hit by slave-capturing were preoccupied about their freedom rather than with improvements in production… in Africa there was disruption and disintegration at the local level…In this way, the African economy taken as a whole was diverted away from its previous line of development and became distorted.

Back in England, the accumulated riches of the planter class would literally change the contours of the landscape and skyline. The Beckfords had built a family estate in Wiltshire called Fonthill Mansion, 'long regarded as the most attractive and splendid seat in the West of England' according to Williams. The mansion was then followed by the building of an abbey for seemingly no good reason other than the money was there to be spent, 'the construction of which provided employment for a vast number of mechanics and labourers, even a new village being built to accommodate some of the settlers. The abbey grounds were in one section planted with every species of North American flowering shrub and tree, all growing in their natural wilderness.'

However, the flood of money from the slave economy was not only employed in building architectural follies and stately gardens where one could perhaps forget that the delicate plants were ultimately nourished with the blood and sweat of the enslaved and tortured African. West Indian money was crucial to the City of London and to seeding the industrial revolution and the mechanical advances that it needed to expand production wherever in the world raw materials needed to be processed for the marketplace.

Lloyds became a great concern by insuring slaves and slave ships. Originally it has been merely a coffee house in the city of London where

maritime intelligence changed hands. It also acted as a premises where runaway slaves could be returned to their owners. It moved into insuring ships and their human cargo in the early eighteenth century, and thereafter expanded exponentially. One of Lloyds 'most distinguished' chairman was Joseph Marryat, a West Indian absentee landlord with plantations in Jamaica, St Lucia, Trinidad, and Grenada. Marryat became an MP and used his time in the house to scupper any abolitionist bills put forward by parliamentarians such as William Wilberforce.

The town of Liverpool was transformed by slave profits from a struggling port into one of the most prosperous trading centres anywhere in the world. By the end of the 1780s, Liverpool was at the centre of a network of stagecoach services stretching into every part of the county, and a canal system linking the port to the mill industries of Leeds and Bradford. It also boasted three cotton mills, three iron foundries, eight sugar refineries, two distilleries, and fifteen roperies, and had a thriving shipbuilding industry. Wealthy mercantile families perched their mansions at Sefton, overlooking the docks. Later on they would commission the landscaping of Sefton Park, with its famous octagonal Palm House in whose corners are placed statues including those of Captain Cook, Christopher Columbus, as well as navigators Gerardus Mercator and Henry the Navigator.

In *Capitalism and Slavery,* Williams traced the growth of manufacture in Birmingham. 'The Birmingham guns of the eighteenth century were exchanged for men, and it was a common saying that the price of a Negro was one Birmingham gun. The African musket was an important Birmingham export, reaching a total of 100,000 to 150,000 annually'. Williams also established that Birmingham's eighteenth-century industrial hero Matthew Boulton partly financed the development of his business partner, engineer James Watt's revolutionary rotating steam engine, with bank loans from West Indian finance. Williams cites a letter from Boulton to Watt written in 1783: 'Mr Pennant, who is a very amiable man, with ten or twelve thousand pounds a year, has the largest estate in Jamaica, and there was also Mr Gale and Mr Beeston Long, who have some very large sugar plantations there, who wish to see steam in lieu of horses'. As writer Anthony Anderson has summed it up, James Watt's improvements to the steam engine 'converted it from a prime mover of marginal efficiency into the mechanical workhorse of the Industrial Revolution'.

Even the end of slavery in the Caribbean proved to be a massive boon to British capitalism and manufacture. The vast compensation given to the slave owners flowed back into the British economy. Bristol historian, Professor Peter Marshall explains how the West Indian absentee landlords in the west of England turned from 'slaves to sleepers':

> Bristol was awash with cash as the British Government in London had just paid twenty million pounds to slave owners as compensation for their loss when slavery was outlawed in 1807 and in 1833 abolished across most of the British Empire. Bristol slave owners received £500,000 of the pay-out and as one writer has said ' they had a broad willingness to replace slaves by sleepers' and invest in the new 19th century industry.

Some of these cash-rich former slaveholders came together round the table with Isambard Kingdom Brunel to fund the construction of the Great Western Railway. They included the fabulously wealthy Thomas Guppy, whose mother's family had 'interests' in sugar and copper. The Guppys were prominent in the upper class Bristolian social scene and counted the Brunels as family friends. (An historical footnote: William Guppy's nephew Robert Guppy lived in Trinidad, where he classified a fish, which was named *Girardinus Guppii* in his honour). The Managing Director of the Great Western Railway was Christopher Claxton – a scion of Bristol's West Indian families, and a rabid defender of slavery.

In *Capitalism and Slavery,* Eric Williams also answers the question, what came first, capitalism or slavery? He argues that '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.'

Williams points out that the first people used in the 'New World' were the Taino, forced to work in the gold mines. But, as we know, they were effectively wiped out. Poor whites, locked into various states of servitude, indenture and forced labour, were shipped to the colonies to replace the dwindling indigenous labour. The actual conditions of white servitude could approach the conditions of bondage. Daniel Defoe complained that the white servant was a slave, but, as Williams says, 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 their mother.' That is not to say the poor whites were treated well – they were considered by the plantation owners to be 'white trash' of inferior stock, and could therefore be treated abominably without pricking good Christian conscience. But, as Williams describes, the expansion of King Sugar demanded more labour than the 'dregs' of British society could possibly meet. What the earlier experiments with labour, Taino or white did achieve, was to stress test the plantation system. But it took mass African slave labour to set it in motion. Williams concludes:

> Here then is the origin of Negro slavery. The reason was economic, not racial; it had not to do with the color of the laborer, but the cheapness of the labor… The features of the man, his hair, color and dentrifrice, his 'subhuman' characteristics so widely pleaded, were only later rationalisations to justify a simple economic fact: that the colonies needed labor and resorted to Negro labor because it was the cheapest and best…The planter would have gone to the moon if necessary, for labor. Africa was nearer than the moon, nearer too than the more populous countries of India and China. But their turn was to come.

Here Williams hints at the development of the second phase of Capitalism – imperialism. Racism, an ideology invented to justify treating men and women as animals of the field, did not evaporate with abolition – it twisted and mutated to fit the next phase of capitalism – the subjugation of people and continents. In the contemporary capitalism we live in today, it has further multiplied to 'other', oppress, and scapegoat minority groups. It has even the ability to revive old and dangerous prejudices – anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, anti-Roma racism – and breathe new life into them. Racism in relation to capitalism seems, particularly in these turbulent times, to have the qualities of energy in the universe – transferable but indestructible. The truth Williams put his finger on nearly eighty years ago is set to haunt us all for some time to come.

As the early-eighteenth-century radical Black London abolitionist and preacher, Robert Wedderburn, had declared: to defeat racism you must lay the axe to the root.