

THE INTEREST: HOW THE BRITISH ESTABLISHMENT RESISTED THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY

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Taylor, Michael (2020) *The Interest: How the British Establishment Resisted the Abolition of Slavery*, London: The Bodley Head.

My 1972 Penguin edition of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* has a helpful footnote from the translator. In it, she defines 'conscientisation' as 'learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality' (Freire, 1972: 15). Michael Taylor's riveting new book doesn't explicitly use these very 1960s concepts – redolent as they are of Mao Zedong's contradictions and Freire's own earnest attempts to help illiterates in Latin America – but he unpacks the historical realities of the slave trade, of slave holding and of the emancipation of enslaved people in a way that helps the reader in 2021 perceive many of the structural flaws in our contemporary society, and he ends with a challenge so that readers may become activists and agents of social change.

Taylor's doctoral thesis, on which this book is based, was prompted by his dismay at the mythical nature of much of Britain's historical narrative: he felt that much schoolbook history explained slavery as a vile institution emanating from elsewhere that Britain did much to help alleviate and then to triumphantly abolish almost singlehandedly. Instead, he sees Britain's role as much more malign, and the positive contributions of William Wilberforce and other lauded luminaries are offered a much more nuanced and modest role, since he prefers to examine a triptych of very different agents. Firstly, the eponymous West Indian Interest constituted those members of the various elites in Britain that strongly supported the principle and mechanics of slavery in Britain's Caribbean colonies – where 700,000 enslaved people worked for British enrichment. Secondly, the various groups of those enslaved people who refused to submit to slavery and actively rebelled against it, from the slave rebellion and drive to independence in Saint-Domingue – contemporary Haiti – under Toussaint L'Ouverture, through the myriad uprisings and protests in

British-ruled colonies. Thirdly, the incredibly widespread opposition to slavery across so many sections of British society, be they women subscribing funds to disseminate anti-slavery propaganda, or women courageously envisioning and implementing a boycott of Caribbean sugar, or the activities of the Anti-Slavery Society (still going strong today when even more people are enslaved worldwide than in 1832), or the working-class movements that saw slavery for the injustice that it was and is.

In a narrative that never flags and that is far from pedestrian or merely academic, Taylor documents the grip of Tory politicians in the late 18th and early 19th Centuries – he specifically concentrates on the period 1807 to 1837 – and their implacable opposition to the abolition of slavery. He demonstrates clearly how people in the upper reaches of politics, in business and trade, in the legal profession, in the military, in the Anglican church and in the landed gentry worked to block abolitionist sentiments, publications and activities. Kings George IV and William IV joined the pantheon of eminent Prime Ministers – including Canning, Peel, and Wellington – in blocking for as long as possible any moves to free the enslaved peoples in the Caribbean colonies.

He details the many uprisings and rebellions that took place, with hundreds dying for their freedom, and thousands then being even more cruelly treated after the insurrections had been beaten back by an even more aggressive and well-armed colonial response – supported by British military, political, legal and economic might. He draws our attention to the works of Black slaves, writers and activists such as Mary Prince, Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cuguano, whose separate accounts of their enslavement were eagerly read, discussed and heightened the awareness of ordinary people the length and breadth of Britain. He reminds us, too, of the work of historians such as CLR James (1933) and Eric Williams (1964) – West Indians themselves - and Joseph Inikoro, a Nigerian, all of whom mapped out the singular evil of the triangular slave trade, so ably and enthusiastically managed by British elites.

His documentation of the political struggle across England is particularly fascinating. Ordinary working-class men and women had no political power and limited suffrage. Taylor delineates the House of Lords as

an unrepresentative bastion of privilege and self-interest. Rotten boroughs meant that a constituency such as Old Sarum in Wiltshire had just eleven non-resident electors who nonetheless returned two MPs to parliament - but the combined populations of Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds, Bradford and Sheffield (750,000) had no representation in Westminster. The Tories were adamant in their resistance to any social reform – especially electoral reform – and thus constituted a near-impregnable block on any progressive legislation. So ordinary people who were concerned with the slavery question in the West Indies had to target parliamentary reform at Westminster – which they did with gusto.

The Anti-Slavery Society was founded in 1823 but its gradualist, incremental approach, that favoured amelioration of the enslaved people's lot rather than wholesale abolition of the institution of slavery, made little progress against such establishment strengths – until the Society agreed to a more radical splinter group. This was initially called the Agency Committee, which quickly gained financial and moral support from wealthy Quakers, from Dissidents and from a small number of other sympathetic individuals. It developed a strategy of supporting MPs, of publicising issues, and of sending speakers on tours around the country to educate and activate local communities. Indeed, it became an independent entity – the Agency Council - after the Great Reform Act of 1832, when the Whigs insisted on reform of political procedures and were – unsurprisingly – supported by almost everyone outside the establishment in London.

Taylor draws attention to figures such as Daniel O'Connell, the Irish political leader who campaigned for Catholic Emancipation, and his and others' success in this field caused Peel to back down and grant Catholic relief in 1829. The parallels between West Indian slavery and the way British elites treated Irish Catholics and other colonised peoples are made clear without ever losing track of the book's main thread. This vignette deftly illustrates how domestic political squabbles and international conflicts often resolved into the same issue: class politics in which a wealthy and insensitive clique seek to maintain power at all costs – and certainly at the cost of thousands of lives lost and livelihoods made miserable. In retrospect, we can perhaps be pleased that

Peel's definition of Conservative principles – in the *Tamworth Manifesto* – was so absolutely set against social, institutional and political change of any shape whatsoever, that the Tories were bound to fail in electoral terms and, indeed, the Whigs came to power intent only on domestic political reform, but that great leap forwards in terms of electoral democracy enabled the rapid dissolution of slavery – in the West Indies and elsewhere.

Even with full abolition being granted by Westminster in 1832, however, it did not come into effect until 1835, and even then, there was to be a period in which the former slaves would be expected to work for their former masters as 'apprentices' but without the meagre support previously offered to slaves – the basic housing and the occasional meals on festive occasions. So, slavery in all but name continued – just like the Jim Crow laws in the Democrat-controlled Southern states in the United States for the one hundred years after the Confederate side lost the American Civil War. Furthermore, immediately after the abolition of slavery in the West Indies, Britain began to import Indian indentured labour – maybe as many as 500,000 – to drive down the bargaining power of 'freed' slaves and to replace those who refused to do the degrading and arduous work involved in sugar production. And, of course, the final obscenity: compensation was to be granted, not to the freed slaves but to the former slaveholders as compensation for their lost 'property'. Taylor quotes calculations that the compensation offered to some 40,000 slaveholders was worth £350 billion at 2020 values, and took 170 years to be completely paid off (being completed in February 2018), by generations of British taxpayers.

There are many other stories and details in Taylor's rich and engaging book, but for this review, a DE perspective will enable us to draw a few conclusions of relevance, perhaps, to contemporary struggles. Global inequality and the climate crisis are the two most pressing – indeed, existential – challenges facing the world today. In his Epilogue, Taylor details the efforts of Caribbean politicians and others to conceive of justice in a post-enslavement world. Sir Hilary Beckles, Barbadian chairman of the Caribbean Reparations Commission (CRC), presented the case for reparations to the UN General Assembly. Taylor cites as precedents the Australian, US, German and British

governments' payments of reparations for the harms done to, respectively, Aboriginal peoples, Native American and Black American farmers, survivors of the Holocaust, and survivors of the British atrocities during the Mau Mau struggle for independence in Kenya. Apart from financial considerations, the CRC also proposes four specific actions to be undertaken by the UK; a formal apology (and not mere expressions of regret); healthcare, given the appalling levels of ill-health suffered by subsequent generations of West Indian citizens; remediating the illiteracy that has plagued the Caribbean since the abolition of slavery; and, finally, complete forgiveness of debt to all former colonies in the Caribbean.

Taylor laments the inheritance of racism bequeathed by this era to all succeeding generations of Britons. He notes that all subsequent economic models and schools passively accept various versions of the exploitation of workers. The number and range of direct beneficiaries of slavery, which has influenced their thinking, their cultural outputs, their view of the world, is huge, whether we look at George Orwell, Graham Greene or Elisabeth Barrett Browning and myriad others: we are all tainted. And some politicians today have extolled that aberrant and inaccurate picture of Britain at the head of abolitionist movements, when the England of that period was dragged, weeping and wailing, into an action of the most modest level of justice.

So, do we today applaud the attacks on statues of Rhodes or Colston? Do we condemn those British universities that accumulated vast wealth from the fruits of slavery? Taylor reminds us that 'emancipation was entirely contingent upon the collapse of the Tories, the reform of parliament, favourable Cabinet politics, *and* slave rebellions in the Caribbean' (2020: 310). And, of course, huge working-class rallies and petitions, protests and boycotts across Britain. He argues that the truly historic aspect of abolition was the coming together of so many actors and circumstances against the unbelievable wealth, contumacy and sheer racist values of so many politically important people in British history. There is a positive to this sorry saga and that is that abolition was successful - eventually.

In 2021, we now have a remarkable text that is clear, passionate, detailed and intellectually robust. We have a document that can help us examine past practices and perceptions and to see whether contemporary values and understandings will stand us in good stead in any actions we may wish to take against the inequalities and injustices facing the world today. Taylor was only 32 years old when he completed his inspiring book, and we can perhaps hope for his company in the struggles still to come!

References

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