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Seymour Drescher. *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition.* Second Edition. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. xxxii + 279 pp. $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-7179-9; $59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3446-6.

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A Metanarrative of the Economic Historiography of Transatlantic Slavery

The reissue of Seymour Drescher's *Econocide* serves as an interesting marker of both the dynamism and the dogmatism of historical scholarship. His argument offers a systematic and convincing refutation of a thesis that still cannot be entirely dismissed as a basis for understanding British as well as French, Spanish, and Portuguese abolitionist movements. When originally published in 1977, Drescher's work took on the delicate and contentious task of beginning to dismantle the "Decline Thesis" of abolition advanced by the highly respected Eric Williams. Using data produced by scholars responding to Williams's assertions, Drescher contended that abolition of the slave trade and slavery by the British Parliament occurred when both practices were at their most profitable. For decades, scholars had accepted and formulated new understanding of the abolitionist movement in Britain based on the theory that free market capitalism trumped mercantilist capitalism, rendering slavery unprofitable.

In his foreword to the reissue of *Econocide* (which reads as a tribute to Drescher's scholarship), David Brion Davis situates Williams's thesis as a challenge to the "self-congratulatory view of British antislavery and British imperialism" that became the foundation of future economic analyses of the slave system (p. xiii). Williams used data from Lowell Joseph Ragatz's *The Fall of the Planter Class in the British Caribbean, 1763-1833* (1928) to prove that the success of abolition stemmed less from pure morality and more from the growing economic lack of viability of slavery in the Atlantic world. Williams privileged "economic forces" in shaping the "political and moral ideas of the age" and concluded by cautioning that "we have to guard not only against these old prejudices but also against the new which are being constantly created. No age is exempt."[1] While later scholars acknowledged the polemical nature of Williams's work, few questioned the validity of economic decline as the foundation of antislavery until Drescher's methodical and dizzying presentation of fresh data to the contrary. The subsequent controversy incited by his findings did not succeed in wholly supplanting the decline theory; rather, it invigorated fresh generations of scholarship in much the same manner as *Capitalism and Slavery*.

Davis's foreword is a strong marker of the extent to which Drescher's work has changed the trajectory of historiography on African slavery. Though Davis has elsewhere critiqued Drescher's work for evidence of "ideological hegemony,"his foreword argues that *Econocide* "totally destroyed the belief that the British slave system had declined in value before Parliament outlawed the slave trade" (p. xv).[2] He also addresses Drescher's critique of Davis's own work with the apology that he was "especially influenced by the statistics in Ragatz, even though the decline thesis weakened his emphasis on the importance of ideas, moral perceptions, and public opinion" (p. xiv). Such collegiality is noteworthy in that Davis proffers a progress narrative of abolition that is at odds with aspects of Drescher's arguments. Indeed, Davis's foreword pays tribute to Drescher's work as opening a path to new perceptions of the humanitarian efforts of abolition that are far removed from the laudatory and exclusive focus on the abolitionist "Saints."

Drescher's second edition offers a short and very useful review of the trends in economic analyses of the transatlantic slave systems since the original publication of his data. In his preface, he comments on how the reaction to his work has opened "the field for alternative interpretations of abolition" (p. xxiv). He defines "econocide" more succinctly as "the radical termination of a profitable trade by a newly empowered political movement that finally sentenced the British transoceanic slave trade to death" (p. xxvii). One of the most fruitful contri-

butions of this formulation has resulted in a reevaluation of slavery in Latin America. Williams focused heavily on the Haitian Revolution as an act that demonstrated the archaic system of the plantocracy and the instability of slave labor contributing to the success of abolition. However, he did not convincingly discuss the impact of British abolition on South America and the Latin Caribbean. Drescher addresses the gap in Williams's study with extensive data illustrating that British abolition resulted in a significant benefit to the plantation economies of Cuba and Brazil. In his preface, Drescher underscores this claim by noting the work of a historian of Iberian imperialism who used the model of economic self-destruction as a basis for understanding the events surrounding the various Spanish American revolutions. Drescher concludes, "*Econocide*'s basic thesis thus fits Latin America quite well" (p. xxv).

Though he presents no new data, this reissue of his original text functions as a metanarrative of the economic historiography of transatlantic slavery. Both the foreword by Davis and the second preface provide an overview of the significant changes in scholarship, and the original data analysis is still valid. As early reviewers noted, his revisionist argument does not offer fresh perspectives on abolition per se; indeed, the analysis almost allows for a problematic return to the "self-congratulatory" perception of British abolition. However, Davis and Drescher successfully reframe the purpose of the book not only as a refutation or revision of Williams's "Decline Thesis," but also as a flashpoint for new avenues of thought. One of the most valuable contributions of Drescher's refutation is that economic analysis cannot account entirely for social and ideological changes.

For scholars of slavery outside the British context, this challenge can be taken up in reevaluating the multiple influences that created, perpetuated, and eventually abolished slave economies in the Latin world. The data presented on French, Spanish, and Portuguese slave economies provide a useful starting point for more complex analyses. Moreover, the methodology can be fruitfully employed to manage the volumes of new data being compiled on the slave trade and slavery. In his original conclusion, Drescher suggests that we move "beyond" fixed notions in order to "imaginatively" reconsider the complexities of imperialism, capitalism, slavery, and other factors in creating the social movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This point fits perfectly with Williams's admonitions for vigilance, and both sentiments offer important insight into the fluidity of our understanding of the checkered history of the Atlantic world.

Notes

[1]. Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944; repr., London: Andre Deutsch Limited, 1990), 210-212.

[2]. David Brion Davis, "Reflections on Abolitionism and Ideological Hegemony," *American Historical Review* 92, no. 4 (1987): 797-812, esp. 808.

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