

The Overthrow of
Colonial Slavery
1776–1848



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III



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Contents

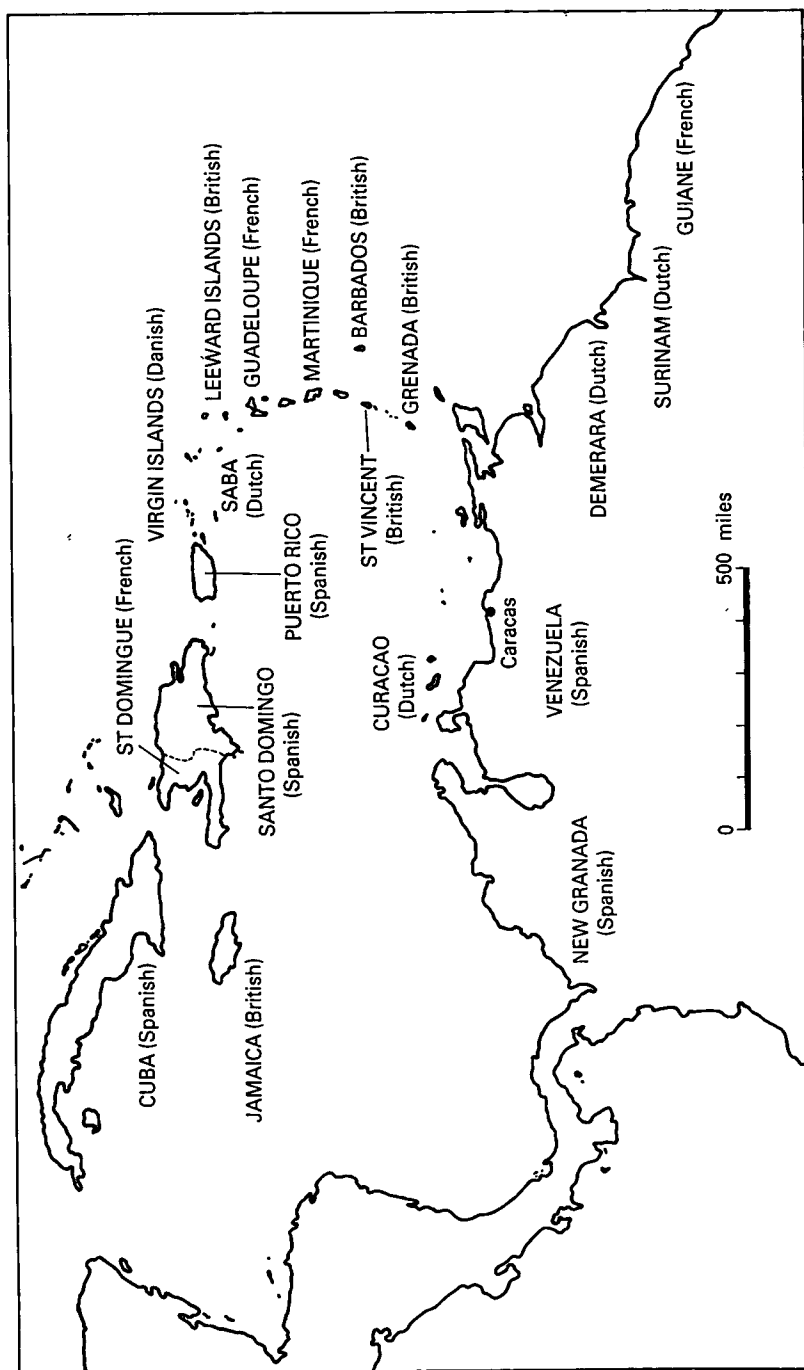
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Introduction:

Colonial Slavery in the New World c. 1770

Behold the peace that's owned by him who feels
He does no wrong, or outrage when he deals
In human flesh; or yet supplies the gold
To stir the strife, whose victims you behold . . .
Perhaps the Cuban merchant too, may think
In guilt's great chain he's but the farthest link.
Forsooth, he sees not all the ills take place,
Nor goes in person to the human chase;
He does not hunt the negro down himself;
Of course he only furnishes the pelf,
He does not watch the blazing huts beset,
Nor slips the horde at rapine's yell, nor yet
Selects the captives from the wretched band
Nor spears the aged with his right hand . . .
He does not brand the captives for the mart,
Nor stow the cargo - 'tis the captain's part . . .
His agents simply snare the victims first,
They make the war and he defrays the cost . . .
To human suffering, sympathy and shame,
His heart is closed, and wealth is all his aim.

The Slave-Trade Merchant (1840), R.R. Madden



The Caribbean in 1770: see also p. 32

Introduction

Around the year 1770 there were nearly two and a half million slaves toiling in the fields, mills, mines, workshops and households of the New World colonies. Slave labour supplied the most coveted and important items in Atlantic and European commerce: the sugar, coffee, cotton and cacao of the Caribbean; the tobacco, rice and indigo of North America; the gold and sugar of Portuguese and Spanish South America. These commodities comprised about a third of the value of European commerce, a figure inflated by regulations that obliged colonial products to be brought to the metropolis prior to their re-export to other destinations. Atlantic navigation and European settlement of the New World made the Americas Europe's most convenient and practical source of tropical and sub-tropical produce. The rate of growth of Atlantic trade in the eighteenth century had outstripped all other branches of European commerce and created fabulous fortunes. Yet this imposing nexus of empire and slavery was about to enter a terminal crisis.

The period 1776–1848 witnessed successive challenges to the regimes of colonial slavery, leading to the destruction either of the colonial relationship, or of the slave system, or of both, in one after another of all the major New World colonies. The contestation of empire and the contestation of slavery were, in principle, dissimilar and distinct projects. Yet in this period they became intertwined, as colonists resisted imperial rule and as the slaves themselves sought to exploit any weakening in the apparatus of social control. All the colonial powers permitted slavery and all the slave systems were integrated within one or other of the transatlantic empires. Large-scale plantation slavery had developed in the seventeenth century Caribbean as a result of private enterprise and freelance initiative; after a few decades of virtual autonomy the planters had acquired the interested protection of England or France, powers which had the naval strength to keep marauding pirates, privateers and colonial rivals at bay. The new slave systems developed within a colonial shell and generated large commercial profits and customs revenues for the imperial metropolis. But for the plantations to prosper, the imperial authorities had to resist the temptation of over-regulating and over-taxing the plantation commerce.

The structures of empire were more immediately vulnerable than those of slave subjugation and exploitation. Slaveholder power was concentrated in the Americas; imperial power was strung out across oceanic sea-lanes and depended on the more or less willing allegiance of the possessing classes in the colonies. As European settler populations reproduced themselves across generations they developed institutions and resources which reduced reliance on the metropolis. By the latter

half of the eighteenth century colonial elites throughout the Americas were acquiring greater self-confidence, whether they were involved in slaveholding or not. The buoyancy of Atlantic trade was such that the commercial monopolies were bursting at the seams in 1770. In the aftermath of the Seven Years War (1756–63) all of the imperial powers recognised the pressure for greater colonial autonomy and sponsored projects of reform. The colonial challenge to metropolitan officials and merchants represented an aspiration to self-government; it was at once a claim to greater economic freedom and an assertion of an embryonic new American identity and civilisation. American demands for liberty and self-determination strengthened attacks on oligarchy and arbitrary rule in the Old World. Yet rejection of the *political* regimes of the Old World did not necessarily imply fundamental changes in *social* institutions. One of the aims of this book is to find out why the crisis in the mode of political domination sometimes detonated a crisis of the social regime, especially the institution of slavery.

This introduction aims to give a sketch of the colonial slave systems of the mid-eighteenth century, establishing their characteristic strengths and weaknesses, on the eve of that 'Age of Revolution' in which they were to play a highly significant role.

The systems of mercantilist control sought to direct colonial trade, and engaged tens of thousands of officials to this end. Britain permitted a species of imperial free trade and did not at all respect the colonial monopolies of its rivals. French merchants were allowed to re-export plantation produce free of duty and received a bounty for the slaves they sold to the planters in the Antilles. The royal bureaucracies of Spain and Portugal asserted direct control of the silver and gold produced in their American possessions. Colonial monopolies in principle enabled metropolitan merchants to skim off a surplus and impede inter-American trade. But the very vigour of Atlantic commerce tended to overspill the prescribed boundaries. Smuggling is likely to have accounted for at least a tenth of all trade despite the customs and excise officials and the regular naval patrols. Notwithstanding Portugal's weakness, and the trading concessions extended to Britain, the merchants of Lisbon and Oporto held their own in the Brazil trade, even if this meant selling British textiles for Brazilian gold. By the 1760s the main *raison d'être* of the Dutch islands was as centres for unregulated commerce.

The different patterns of colonial development produced the division by territory of the New World slave population in 1770 set out in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Estimated Slave Populations of the American Colonies 1770

	Slaves	Total Population
British America	878,000	2,600,000
(British North America)	(450,000)	(2,100,000)
(British Caribbean)	(428,000)	(500,000)
Portuguese America (Brazil)	700,000	2,000,000
French America (Caribbean)	379,000	430,000
Spanish America	290,000	12,144,000
(Spanish Caribbean)	(50,000)	(144,000)
(Spanish Mainland)	(240,000)	(12,000,000)
Dutch Caribbean	75,000	90,000
Danish Caribbean	18,000	25,000

The size of the colonial slaveholdings did not reflect either the geographical size of the different empires or priority in colonisation. Spain, the first and still the largest colonial power in the New World, ranked only fourth as a slaveholding power. Britain and France, which had no slave colonies in 1640, now possessed the most flourishing slave plantations in the New World. The total slave population of Brazil may have been larger than that of the French colonies, but the estimate is uncertain and slavery was somewhat less concentrated in the export sector. Brazil was a colony of Portugal, but Portugal was almost a semi-colony of Britain so that much of Brazil's slave-produced gold came to London. Britain and France had the commercial vigour to create the most productive slave colonies even if the Iberian powers still held sway over immense mainland empires. And, in contrast to the Netherlands, Britain and France had been able to mobilise the requisite strength to defend their colonial conquests in the New World. Though capitalist social relations were more highly developed in Britain than in France, the vigorous development of French commerce and manufacture in the eighteenth century nevertheless ran Britain a close second. French exports of refined sugar or of cotton manufactures exceeded those of Britain in the 1760s; cheap colonial raw materials, supplied under special privileges and exemptions, helped to make possible an enclave of accumulation that employed wage labour.

The use of African slaves had enabled Britain to vault to the premier position as an American colonial power, developing its American possessions until their exports overtook those of Spanish America. By the 1770s the slave colonies of the French Antilles were bidding to overtake the British West Indies. The annual value of colonial exports

The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery

in the early 1770s amounted to £5.6 million for the British colonies, £5.2 million for the French colonies, £1.8 million for Brazil and £4.9 million for the whole of Spanish America. British merchants and manufacturers held a larger lead in supplying colonial markets; their exports to the Americas as a whole were at least twice as great as those of the French. Transatlantic commerce required approximately half a million tons of shipping and employed more than a hundred thousand seamen and dock-workers. Britain's profits on the Atlantic trade derived chiefly from the effective capitalist organisation of marine transport, manufacturing supply and commercial finance; French commercial profits, which in gross amounted to a half of the colonial export trade, were more dependent on mercantilist monopoly.

In the mid-eighteenth century Britain and France were, according to widespread contemporary testimony, the most powerful, the most splendid and the most dynamic states in the world. In their different ways Versailles and Westminster were the exemplary governments of the age. Following Portugal, Spain and the Netherlands they had established a worldwide network of colonies and trading bases. These were the first truly global, trans-oceanic empires in human history. The New World was thought to be the crucial testing ground by such leading statesmen as Pitt the Elder and Choiseul. Even the Abbé Raynal, who endorsed the new philosophical critique of slavery, believed that sugar plantations had replaced gold mines as the sinews of empire. In his *Histoire des Deux Indes* (1770) Raynal urged the Spanish authorities to promote the plantation economy of Cuba so that it could rival the achievements of the Virginian planters, who supplied all Europe with tobacco, or those of the planters of St Domingue, who supplied half of Europe with sugar.

The Atlantic and Caribbean loomed large in eighteenth century wars. Britain and France protected their empires with navies that comprised sixty to eighty 'ships of the line' each, with a swarm of smaller vessels; Spain's naval forces were only a little smaller and included the effective *guardacostas* of the Caribbean. The Netherlands, defeated in Brazil in the seventeenth century, was only a minor American power. British and French conquests in the Caribbean were only sustained because of the deployment of massive naval power and the availability of a steady stream of emigrants. After the Treaty of Ryswick in 1697 there had been few territorial changes in the Caribbean but the threat was there. However, by 1770 an important turning point had been reached. Britain's victories in the Seven Years War had enabled her to eject the French from North America. From this time forward internal upheavals overlaid and displaced imperial rivalry as the key to change in the hemisphere. Slaveholders were to play a leading part in these upheavals,

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whether in the thirteen English colonies of North America in the 1770s, or in the French Antilles in 1788-93, or in Venezuela, New Granada, Peru, and Rio de la Plata in the 1810s and 1820s. The slaveholders of Brazil, and of the British and Spanish Caribbean, played their cards in a different way, avoiding upheaval so far as possible but making their presence felt all the same. American slaveholders in this period were distinctly less conservative than the wealthy and powerful elsewhere; whether mine-owners in Mexico or landowners in Europe. Some observations on the character of the slavery found in the Americas of this epoch will help explain this.

The species of slavery that prevailed in the Americas in the eighteenth century should not be seen as a relic of the Ancient or medieval world. The colonial systems were of very recent construction and were highly commercial in character. They spanned an ocean and were locked in rivalry. The slaves were drawn exclusively from Africa and the great majority of them were subjected to harsh labour regimes. By contrast previous forms of slavery had been less far-flung, less commercial and more heterogeneous. The slaves of the New World were economic property and the main motive for slaveholding was economic exploitation; to this end at least nine tenths of American slaves were put to commodity production.¹

In other societies slavery has had a chameleon-like ability to adapt to the surrounding social formation; like a social false limb it has extended the powers of slaveholders in forms appropriate to the given society – perhaps enlarging a lineage or supplying a trusted core of administrators. In the eighteenth century Americas the use of slaves in agriculture and mining helped to extend the scope of mercantile and manufacturing capital and supplied industrialising regions with needed inputs and outlets. Elizabeth Fox Genovese and Eugene Genovese have identified the impulse to mercantile accumulation as the propulsive force behind the rise of the new slave systems. The New World partnership of merchants and planters led to the creation of an integrated manufacturing and agricultural enterprise. The slave plantations themselves incorporated those advances in agricultural technique compatible with co-ordinated gang labour. The entrepreneurs directing them were usually willing to adopt innovations in processing methods and they had the resources to purchase the products of capitalist industry and commercial farming. The New World planter, purchasing inputs in partial exchange for the commodities supplied, could increase output in response to market pressures far more rapidly than the feudal lords of

Eastern Europe and on the basis of greater complementarity with manufacturing capital. The plantation itself embodied a feat of productive organisation and invigilation. The slave gangs in the fields and the slave teams in the mills were mobilised for labour that was coerced, intensive and continuous. Manuel Moreno Fraginals has explored the ways in which the sugar mills anticipated some of the methods of an emergent capitalist industrialism, with its precise calibration of labour inputs and subordination to mechanical rhythms. The tightly coordinated labour process of the late eighteenth century sugar 'plantation' half resembled the industrial 'plant' of the future.²

Yet these Marxist authors rightly distinguish between New World slavery and a regime of generalised commodity production. The slaveholding enterprises still had roots in so-called 'natural economy' – that is, subsistence cultivation and internal, 'uncommodified' labour. Slaves grew much of their own food, built their own huts and thus, unlike the wage labourer, did not chiefly depend on goods purchased on the market. The slave plantation could usually survive, if necessary, from its own subsistence cultivation and manufacture. The fact that planters had this 'reserve' of natural economy, as Jacobo Gorender has called it, reinforced their capacity to survive times of war, revolution or commercial depression.³ Like the peasant or farmer, and unlike the manufacturer or merchant, the planter could withdraw from the market for long periods and keep his enterprise in being. But he was not bound, in phases of expansion, to the resources of the estate; with beckoning markets his prospects were limited only by his capacity to buy in slaves, supplies and equipment as needed. European peasant cultivators or feudal serf-lords, by contrast, were hemmed in by 'natural economy' and constrained by the given size of the family or estate labour available to them. The capital tied up in his plantation meant that the planter was not prone to relapse into autarchy. Building and maintaining a plantation entailed ongoing economic costs which acted as a spur to renewed commodity production as soon as it was possible; and the economic value of slaves was such that the planter who could not make a profit out of them himself was induced to sell them to someone who would. Once again neither the peasant nor the serf-lord was subject to comparable economic pressure. Since the slaves covered their subsistence needs in only two days labour each week, including nearly all their sparse 'free time', the rate of surplus extraction and gross profit was very high. The slaveholding planter was thus an entrepreneur with both the ability and the motive to be responsive to market pressures. The expansion of supply depended only on the cost of clearing land, of acquiring slaves and equipment, and of paying salaried supervisors.

Europe's craving for exotic commodities was such that these costs could be amply met.⁴

The characterisation offered here refers to the predominant form of American slavery in the eighteenth century. In Spanish America and Portuguese Brazil there were also residues of an earlier, more diffuse pattern. It is necessary to distinguish between the ancillary slavery of early Spanish or Portuguese colonialism and the systemic slavery, linked to plantations and commodity production, which was dominant by the eighteenth century. The 'ancillary slavery' of the Spanish did not involve colonies with slave majorities or the exclusion of slaves from all responsible posts or the denial of human attributes to the enslaved. The introduction of slaves helped to consolidate an imperial superstructure of exploitation that was not mainly based on slave labour. Spanish wealth and power derived from the conquest and exploitation of the indigenous peoples of the continent; outright enslavement of the Amerindians was tried but proved either impossible or so destructive as to be counter-productive. The Indian communities of the sixteenth century Caribbean islands and littoral had been disrupted and demoralised by invasion and overwork; their peoples were destroyed by appalling epidemics, or were absorbed as the conquerors took Indian women. Some fled to inhospitable and marginal swamps, or held out on rocky islands and in jungle backlands. But on the mainland the Spanish conquerors were able to substitute themselves for the previous ruling strata of the Inca and Aztec empires, exploiting Indian communities that were subjugated but not enslaved.

Captive Africans had been introduced to Spanish America to make up for de-population of the worst-hit areas and to strengthen the presence of the colonising power; to sustain centres of administration and lines of communication and to serve the personal needs of the conquerors. The eighteenth century use of slaves in Spanish America retained some of this long-established pattern. African slaves worked as domestics, porters, foremen, dockers, seamstresses, barbers, gardeners, artisans; slaves did toil in gold mines in New Granada, and on sugar estates in Cuba or cacao groves in Venezuela, but these were still fairly modest enclaves in the Spanish imperial economy of 1770. Its silver was mined by wage workers, mostly of Indian extraction but with some blacks or mestizos, or by tribute labour from the Indian villages. Imperial administration in Spanish America directly promoted and coordinated economic activity; royal administrators supervised the supply of food and labour to the mines, allotted mining concessions, purchased tobacco and took charge of the flow of silver back to Europe. There were leaks, of course, but this extensive system of imperial exploitation

contrasted with the *intensive* regime of micro-exploitation on the slave plantations elsewhere in the Americas. It also helped to inhibit the creole elite who were well aware that the imperial state was a direct and crucial factor in their extraction of surplus labour from the underlying producers. By contrast planters directed a self-contained process of surplus extraction, with the colonial state stepping in to levy taxes, establish awkward regulations and furnish external protection. The Spanish American silver mines in the 1770s were yielding fabulous bonanzas – hence the impressive value of Spanish colonial exports – but this left the Spanish American mining proprietors much less interested in colonial autonomy than was the case with the planters.

The Brazilian slavery of the 1770s, with sugar estates in the North East, gold fields in the South, and widespread use of slaves in workshops, households, farms and ranches in every province, reflected the variety of the colony's history. The Portuguese in Brazil had first set up sugar mills in the late sixteenth century and, with Dutch help, developed crucial features of the commercial slave estate. In Brazil as in the Caribbean the indigenous Indian communities were decimated by disease and driven back by conquest. Portuguese merchants had been the first to develop the Atlantic slave trade, supplying slaves cheaply from their own trading posts on the African coast. Newcomers from Africa found escape far more difficult and dangerous than did the Amerindians. Moreover the captive Africans came from societies where agriculture, mining and social relations of enslavement were all more highly developed than was the case for the Amerindians of Brazil, the Caribbean or the North American littoral. Brazil attracted a stream of Portuguese settlers but the landholders (*fazendeiros*) found it easier to overwork captive Africans than to deny all rights to immigrant servants from Europe. The labour force of the early seventeenth century Brazilian sugar mill remained mixed, combining scores of servile Africans and Indians with a dozen or more Portuguese immigrants; and processing was not integrated with agricultural labour as most cane was supplied by independent farmers (*lavradores de cana*). The term plantation was not used of the Brazilian sugar estate.

The early Brazilian colonists demonstrated the profitability of sugar cultivation, using a mixed labour force with a growing predominance of African slaves. Further advance to a full-blown systemic slavery was blocked by erratic demand in Europe, by Dutch invasions and occupation (1624–54) and by a cumbersome and expensive annual fleet system. The discovery of gold in Brazil in the late seventeenth century gave the Portuguese monarchy a powerful incentive to retain the mechanisms of 'extensive' imperial exploitation. The fleets facilitated imperial control and taxation as well as offering protection. But while

gold exports were safely convoyed to Europe the sugar trade was choked. Brazilian slaves continued to produce sugar but in this almost closed economy many were also employed in supplying local markets with foodstuffs and manufactures. The Iberian powers obliged merchants to sail with the annual fleet down to the 1760s; the spontaneous growth of commercial agriculture was inhibited, so that greater scope was given to the Dutch, English and French.⁵

The breakthrough to large-scale plantation production was made by British and French planters, backed by independent Dutch merchants, in the Caribbean around 1640–50. Systemic slavery had to be colonial in character because the slave plantations needed naval and military guarantees to protect them from rivals and the threat of slave revolt. While ancillary slavery helped to reproduce empire, empire helped to reproduce systemic slavery. The plantation was run as an integrated enterprise with privileged access to European markets; soon all menial labour was performed by slaves. Instability and war retarded the plantation development of Jamaica and Saint Domingue until the Peace of Utrecht in 1713 established more favourable conditions both for plantation development and for the organisation of a large-scale slave traffic.

The British and French colonies became, like Brazil but unlike Spanish America, colonies of settlement, as the original inhabitants were killed, marginalised or forced out. Export agriculture itself helped to finance colonisation, as merchants extended free passage to European servants willing to work on the plantations for three or five years. More than half of the white emigrants to colonial North America arrived as indentured servants; the French and British Caribbean also absorbed tens of thousands of these tied labourers, who could be purchased more cheaply than slaves. Altogether some 350,000 servants were shipped to the British colonies up to the 1770s. The white servants or *engagés* could be harshly exploited but they did not offer the planters the chances of building up a stable work force. White servants or *engagés* eventually had to be set free; the Africans were condemned to a lifetime of bondage. In the first decades of the eighteenth century the tobacco planters of Virginia and Maryland also came increasingly to rely on slave labour rather than on indentured servants from England. White servants had defined legal rights and some expectation of finding support within the colonising community, both from the authorities and from the common people. Captive Africans had few rights and virtually no ability to enforce them. They might evoke pity but not solidarity from non-slaveholding whites. White colonists enjoyed a measure of freedom unknown in the Old World while blacks were subjected to a more systematic and ferocious system of enslavement than had ever been seen before.

New World colonial slavery developed in the wake of capitalist advance in seventeenth century Europe. By the 1760s some 60,000 slaves were being brought to the Americas each year, roughly ten times the annual intake of the 1650s and fifty times the number introduced by Spain and Portugal each year in the 1560s or 1570s. Prior to 1580 it is likely that European immigrants outnumbered slave entries to the New World; between 1580 and 1650 the number of African captives arriving in each year was roughly the same as the number of European immigrants. With the rise of 'systemic' slavery slave 'imports' rose proportionately as well as absolutely. The first New World colony where African slaves comprised the majority of the population was the British island of Barbados in about 1645, to be shortly followed by the other British and French controlled islands of the Lesser Antilles, then by Jamaica in the 1660s and St Domingue in the 1690s. African captives only began to be shipped to North America in large numbers in the first decades of the eighteenth century. The discovery of gold in Brazil at the end of the seventeenth century more than doubled the annual import of slaves into that territory. The development of the British and French Caribbean meant that the numbers of African slaves landed in the New World certainly exceeded the number of European immigrants in the period 1650-1700. But it was not until the eighteenth century that a huge disparity opened up with some six million African captives arriving in the New World, five or six times the number of Europeans. At least a million slaves died in this century alone in the course of the notorious 'middle passage' from Africa to the New World, and untold numbers died before reaching the African coast.

This surge in the slave trade reflected a vast increase in the output of the slave plantations. Brazil's entire sugar output in 1620 had been only 15,000 tons annually, a figure probably not exceeded until the 1750s; the tiny island of Barbados alone produced 15,000 tons in the 1670s. By 1760 the British and French slave colonies produced 150,000 tons of sugar annually, rising to 290,000 tons in the years 1787-90. The construction of slave plantations in Virginia and Maryland raised tobacco output from 20 million lbs in 1700 to 220 million lbs in 1775. In 1700 there were some 100,000 slaves in the British colonies and 30,000 in the French colonies; at this time there are unlikely to have been as many as 100,000 slaves in all of Spanish America, or more than 150,000 in Brazil. Thus, despite appalling mortality rates, the slave population of the Americas multiplied six times over from about 400,000 in 1700 to 2,400,000 in 1770, with the British and French colonial slave populations expanding most rapidly.⁶

∠ Why were the Americas the site for this phenomenal expansion and why did it entail slavery? ∠ Capitalist development in Europe generated

new wants that could not be met from European resources. The New World had the climate and soil needed to grow the exotic produce craved by Europeans and maritime transport was cheap. But the Americas were not peopled by cultivators dedicated to commodity production. Indeed the sub-tropical coastal regions most suited to produce these crops were severely de-populated following the disastrous impact of European conquest. The cultivation of plantation products involved the kind of labour which repelled voluntary migrants; the more so since the abundance of land in the New World offered an alternative that was widely preferred to labour on the plantations – even if, as was often the case, this meant fighting the indigenous inhabitants for possession. Portuguese, Dutch, British and French merchants found that it paid handsomely to sponsor the development of plantations. But they only succeeded in staffing them by securing a supply of slaves from the coast of Africa. Competition in the Atlantic marketplace submerged any scruples they had about trading in enslaved Africans, or putting them to forced labour on the plantations, or making money out of the produce of slaves. Prior to about 1760 there were astonishingly few protests at the mass enslavement of Africans despite the fact that, as will be seen in the next chapter, slavery had long disappeared from North-western Europe. New World slavery solved the colonial labour problem at a time when no other solution was in sight. It thus proved to be highly congruent with commercial and manufacturing accumulation in the centres of capitalist advance in Western Europe; first and foremost those in Britain, the Netherlands and the French Atlantic sea-board and its hinterland.

What maintained demand for the slave produce? The plantation products were popular pleasures, with demand for sugar and tobacco often acting as the lure drawing widening circles of the population into a commodity economy; the taxes on these products also supplied a useful revenue for the major states. The new pattern of social relations led to incomes being earned in money rather than kind; sweetened beverages and tobacco were both a consolation and spur, while light, washable, bright textiles made life more pleasant and healthy. Europe's thirst for plantation produce, which it seemed impossible to slake, allowed the supply of sugar, coffee, tobacco or cotton to double in a decade without a collapse in price. Traders and planters were encouraged to pursue the almost limitless prospects of expansion which attended the construction of slave plantations. The new culture of commercialised consumption was oblivious of the human cost that its satisfactions entailed.⁷

What were the internal tensions generated by colonial slavery? In 1770 the British and French authorities were most at risk from rebellious colonists. The British and French settlers, and their descendants, did not believe that being colonists should deprive them of rights; this sentiment was, of course, strongest in the older British colonies of North America but it was also to be found in the French Antilles.

The specific strength of British and French colonial slavery was the decentralised, planter-controlled apparatus for containing the slaves. The strength of Iberian colonisation was concentrated in centres of administration in the colonies themselves.

Colonial slavery bred its own characteristic social antagonisms. Even the wisest of ministers found it difficult to allot privileges and penalties in an effective and coherent way given the spontaneity of the Atlantic economy and its unpredictable responses to changing tastes and changing methods of production. The tobacco planters of Virginia, the sugar planters of the French Antilles and the gold mine concessionaires of Brazil had the disadvantage that their products had achieved a high degree of visibility. Prone in any case to resent merchants and excise officials they were subjected to mercantilist restrictions which made them feel, as Washington once put it, 'as miserably oppressed as our own blacks'. The planters of the British West Indies accepted their position more easily since they knew that the colonial system delivered to them a protected metropolitan market, saving them from the necessity of competing on equal terms with the more efficient French plantations. Likewise the sugar planters of Spanish America or even of Brazil were not yet sufficiently dynamic to feel a keen sense of frustration; though this was not the case with the cacao planters of Venezuela who challenged and evaded the monopoly claims of the Caracas Company in every way they knew until they secured its liquidation in the 1780s.

Aside from a few privileged big-wigs the slaveholders of the New World had a lively dislike of colonial officials since they wished to run their own affairs and since colonial officialdom had the job of administering mercantilist regulation. But at least colonial garrisons gave them some protection. Slaveholders were prone to a more intimate antagonism towards metropolitan merchants and their local agents, especially when, as was so often the case, they were indebted to them. Bringing a slave plantation to the point where a crop could be sold was a protracted, expensive and risky undertaking. The planters often had recourse to credit in buying slaves, equipment or provisions. They often fell into the clutches of the merchants after a war, a hurricane, or a slave revolt had wiped out their crop or an epidemic had carried away half or more of the overworked slave crew. Typically the merchant

charged high interest on loans to planters and could get away with doing so because of the risks involved. But all this meant that the slaveholding planter was giving the merchant-creditor a prior claim on super-profits that had not yet even been produced. The very cash laid out in acquiring a slave represented discounted future surplus to be appropriated by putting the slave to work. There was here a nexus of antagonism between planter and merchant that often intensified hostility to colonial systems which awarded national mercantile monopolies. Usually local merchants aroused less suspicion or hatred since they might be partners in evading mercantilist restrictions and metropolitan creditors. But the relationship between planters and merchants was never an easy one. This included antagonism to slave traders wherever planters felt that they could get along without extra slave purchases. It could even prompt impatience with slavery itself, a sort of desperate longing by the slaveholding planter to jump out of his own skin and into that of some more sovereign landholder and agriculturalist.

The relationship between planters and other layers of the free population of the colonies, while also ambivalent, admitted of more cordiality. The planters bought provisions from small-holders and some supplies from local manufacturers. They engaged the services of overseers, book-keepers, lawyers, doctors and the like. In the plantation zone itself the larger planter would be acknowledged as leader of the local community, holding such posts as magistrate or Colonel in the militia. Despite tensions associated with patronage the planters could usually attract support from other free colonists in confrontations with the metropolis. This planter-dominated axis was strongest in the North American plantation zone but was also found wherever plantation development had taken place. The metropolitan powers had been obliged to allow the colonies to develop their own military capacity both as an insurance against servile revolt and as an auxiliary to metropolitan forces during the wars of imperial rivalry.

Throughout the Americas planters, slaveholders, and the local merchants linked to them, were restive and unruly colonial subjects. This was true in South America and the Caribbean as well as North America. But naturally the prevailing balance of social forces and the vigour of the slave-based economy encouraged variations in the precise goals and methods adopted. The possession of slaves conferred status, and running a plantation gave a habit of command. The planters of the mainland tended to be bolder in defying imperial authorities; those of the Caribbean, perched on large slave majorities, were fiercer in word than deed and often preferred to lobby for influence in the imperial centres. But whatever their location planters inclined to think of

themselves as autonomous agents with an enlightened and rational outlook on life. The species of quasi-capitalist economic rationality embodied in the slave plantation encouraged this outlook and often tilted it in an anti-mercantilist direction. Striving to get a competitive return out of his estate the planter resented commercial restrictions which prevented him from buying the cheapest supplies and selling to any willing customer. British West Indian planters felt these resentments less intensely because empire free trade allowed them to buy cheap North American supplies, cheap English metal implements and textiles, and to find outlets for as much sugar as they could produce. Virginian and Maryland planters looked at it differently because by selling tobacco direct to Europe they could cut out the middleman's commission. The planters of the French Antilles and of the plantation enclaves of Spanish America knew that metropolitan merchants paid them less because of their monopoly privileges and would have liked to have direct access to British manufactures and North American supplies. The owners of gold mine concessions in Brazil felt such resentments less keenly, partly because their concessions depended on royal licences and partly because the mining economy was in decline by the 1770s as deposits were exhausted.

Britain's colonial empire in the Americas allowed a large measure of colonial self-government. It had been held together by its own commercial coherence, by the strength of the Royal Navy and by fear of the Indians and of France. With the exception of Virginian tobacco Britain absorbed by far the greater part of the plantation produce of its colonies. For reasons of dynastic and national aggrandisement France maintained a large naval and colonial establishment; sections of the aristocracy and bourgeoisie both found a nesting ground in the colonial system. But the French colonial *conseils* were as jealous of their rights as the metropolitan *parlements* and probably more representative of the local possessing classes. Britain and France extracted a commercial surplus from their colonies but did not levy large direct revenues from them. The royal governments of Spain and Portugal had a much weaker European base and had come to rely on American revenues generated by the mining economy and some plantation trade. In fact the flow of colonial revenues to Madrid and Lisbon both required and financed a colonial establishment whose spinal column was supplied by an aristocratic military caste. African slaves and free people of colour were still used as an auxiliary force to underpin imperial fortifications, arsenals, naval yards and communications. In 1770 both Spanish and Portuguese America almost entirely lacked the autonomous vigour of the English and French territories; the local-born ('creole') elite had at best a secondary role in government and was, outside plantation

enclaves, generally sunk in provincial torpor.

The most independent and vigorous slaveholders in the Americas were to be found in English North America and in the French Caribbean; towards the close of the eighteenth century some planters in Portuguese Brazil and the Spanish Caribbean began to emulate them. The arc of planter resistance to imperial control – moving from the former to the latter – furnishes one of the themes of this book. It began with the British colonies of North America partly because the planters there were more strongly positioned but also because the imperial power had long tolerated internal colonial autonomy. The strongest Atlantic states, Britain and France, had been willing to concede more to colonial self-government than did Spain or Portugal, weaker as European powers but with formidable imperial bureaucracies. In the year 1770 colonial slavery was strongest where imperial authority was weakest, in the English colonies. Similarly slavery was weakest in Spanish America where metropolitan authority was exercised in the most dirigiste fashion. France and Portugal occupied intermediate positions. Since slavery was inversely proportional to the exercise of metropolitan authority it is not surprising that the first exercise in independence was to make a rather large contribution to boosting the slave systems.

The British empire, though less exacting and constrictive, was also less useful to the North American planters than was the case with the other imperial systems. The departure of the French, and with them of the need for British military protection, also revealed that the empire had long lacked the intrinsic productive rationale which was still retained, to a greater or lesser extent, by the other large empires. French absolutism conferred privileges on the merchants of Bordeaux and Nantes but also helped the Antillean planters. The slave trade was subsidised, planters with a title of nobility were exempt from taxation and the colonial garrisons helped to maintain roads, ports and those systems of irrigation which made St Domingue so productive. The planters of North East Brazil could also compile a similar list of imperial favours in the 1760s, as Pombal sought to foster the plantation economy. By contrast the infrastructure of empire impinged on Virginian planters more simply as a constraint and not a support. This is not to say that narrowly economic motives dictated the pattern and sequence of colonial rebellion; but so long as they were effective the structures mentioned here had an impact on mentality as well as on economic calculation. As for the Spanish American mining proprietors, they were more thoroughly beholden to the imperial authorities than any planter since they depended on them, as noted above, for supplies, labour, licences and transport.⁸

In the Old World the 'intensive' commercial and manufacturing development of the Low Countries had led to a momentous clash with the then most powerful 'extensive' empire, that of the Spanish Hapsburgs; a similar impulse to national liberation appeared in those regions of the New World where there was an intensive development of commerce, farming and planting.

Slaveholding in the Americas was heavily concentrated in the tropical and sub-tropical zone of the Caribbean and of the immediate hinterland of the Atlantic coasts of North and South America. While there were still huge expanses not yet effectively colonised or controlled by an imperial power there were also sectors of the colonial economies in which slavery played a secondary or negligible role. The 25,000 or so black slaves in New England in 1775 were not crucial to farming or ship-building; the coerced cooperation of the slave gang had no commanding productivity edge in mixed farming and manufacture as it did in the cultivation and processing of the plantation staples. However the merchants, farmers and sea-captains of New England found that the slaveholding planters were good customers and resented attempts to limit their trade with the West Indies; as yet there was little they could supply to Europe. The ranchers of South America often engaged some slaves – they sold dried meat to the planters and wished to sell hides and skins more freely to European merchants. The slaveholding gold miners of New Granada and cacao planters of Venezuela smuggled vigorously but still resented metropolitan controls.

The maintenance of colonial slavery had produced different patterns of racial privilege, with different potentials for conflict. In all the colonies whites enjoyed special status and advantages. By 1770 all American slaves were black though not all blacks were slaves. Lower class whites and native Americans owed their freedom from outright enslavement to the resources of communal resistance. Slaveholders appealed to the racial solidarity of whites, and sometimes they even urged Indians to help them maintain black enslavement; but only in the English colonies was there so small a free black population that nearly every black was a slave. In Spanish and Portuguese America sufficient numbers of slaves, or their offspring, had obtained manumission to create a sizeable free black and mulatto population. The free blacks and mulattos were sometimes regarded by the authorities as a counterweight both to the slaves and to the creole elite; they occupied an intermediate status in the caste system and were permitted a separate, if still subordinate, identity. In Brazil the Portuguese had formed black regiments with black officers

in their struggle to eject the Dutch; the Spanish also formed black militias in the eighteenth century. The ranks of the Brazilian *Henriques* or the Spanish American *pardo* or *negro* battalions were often recruited from slaves purchased by the state and offered their freedom in return for a lengthy term of service. Since purchasing slaves for the armed forces was expensive they were sometimes seized from enemies of the Crown. In the French and Dutch Caribbean free people of colour were almost as numerous as the white colonists and received some official recognition as a subordinate buttress to the colonial slave system. The complex racial hierarchy of the Spanish, Portuguese and French colonies contrasted with the bipolar, black or white system in the English colonies with their comparatively large white colonial population. In the plantation colonies of North America a majority white population only barely tolerated the presence of free blacks; in the British West Indies, with their massive slave majorities, the whites found it expedient to be somewhat more accommodating to free blacks and mulattos. In all the colonies free blacks and mulattos could themselves own slaves, but in the English colonies this was quite rare. New World slavery coded 'black' skin as a slave characteristic; free people of colour might be led to deny their blackness – or to deny slavery. Slaveholders of partly African descent shared with 'white' slaveholders a concern for their rights that impelled them towards this difficult choice.

The slaves of the Americas in 1770 were more intensively exploited than any group of this size in history. Yet the immediate threat to empire came not from the exploited but from a colonial alliance including many of the exploiters. While imperial garrisons and squadrons were sometimes available to subjugate slave revolts and contain maroons the planters preferred to stamp out resistance by means of their own patrols and militia. Metropolitan forces had the primary function of protecting colonies from external attack. It is for this reason that the British victory in North America in 1763 was too sweeping for its own good; it emancipated the colonists from their fear of the French and Spanish.

Those who built the slave-based enterprises in each colony were united by language, cultural identity and economic interest; and they had the resources to hire employees and to secure allies amongst the non-slaveholding free population. The slaves, by contrast, had been torn from different parts of a huge continent; they spoke different languages and had different traditions. The sequence of capture, sale and shipment was itself traumatic. Those captive Africans who came

from the more developed regions were more vulnerable, both more familiar with slavery and less familiar with life in the forest than the Bushmen who seem to have comprised a disproportionate number of the maroons. Every effort was made to prevent slaves developing a common outlook or interest, by sowing division within the plantations and preventing communication between them. The slave populations were always a source of apprehension to their masters; but this fear did not paralyse the slaveholders who believed themselves to be better schooled in the necessities of slave control than metropolitan functionaries.

Colonies with large slave majorities could not have survived for over a century or more if they had not reproduced the subjection of the forced labourers effectively. The extraordinary destructiveness and profitability of the plantations continually re-created a labour force that had had little opportunity to discover itself. The slave crews condemned to labour in the plantations of the tropical and sub-tropical zone had such high mortality and low fertility that it required a slave trade of enormous proportions to maintain or increase population levels. Had it not been for this influx the slave populations of the Caribbean colonies would have declined by two, three or four per cent each year in the mid-eighteenth century. Caribbean planters bought more male than female slaves because of their unwillingness to take on the expense of natural reproduction. Between 1700 and 1774 half a million slaves were introduced to Jamaica yet the slave population rose by only 150,000 between these two dates. The fact that the newly arrived slave in the Caribbean had a life expectancy of only seven or ten years, and that the plantation crews were continually replenished by purchases, made more difficult the construction and transmission of a new collective identity. On the other hand the dire prospects of plantation existence did encourage individual escapes and occasional mass break-outs.

Slave conditions and plantation security varied markedly from colony to colony. The 450,000 slaves of English North America were subjected to close and detailed invigilation by their owners, who typically possessed only a few dozen slaves, if that. The whip, the prayer book and the planters' control of foodstocks helped to keep them hard at work from sun-up to sun-down, with evenings often devoted to processing or manufacture. However a milder climate, plentiful land for raising fresh foodstuffs, and the less intense requirements of tobacco cultivation, meant that North American slave populations avoided the very high mortality rates characteristic of the sugar plantations; blacks in North America multiplied almost as fast as the whites. North American planters faced higher slave prices but much

lower interest rates, giving them an incentive to encourage the natural reproduction of the slave labour force. Family ties made North American slaves less willing to run away or revolt than those in the Caribbean.

The low survival rate of Africans in much of the New World partly reflected the fact that they were concentrated in the tropical lowlands where disease took a heavy toll on all immigrants. But overwork, and the consequent neglect of subsistence, certainly helped to kill the slaves. At least two thirds of the Africans arriving in the New World were sent to sugar plantations. In the Caribbean and Brazil the sugar plantations regularly imposed a sixteen or even eighteen hour working day on the slaves; there was nightwork in the mill, and, rain or shine, field work in the day during the long planting and harvesting cycle. The slaves were given bare rations and expected to feed themselves by working for a day, or a day and a half, each week on plots given to them for the purpose. The Caribbean plantations typically contained hundreds of slaves each; the brutalised overseers and drivers to whom they were entrusted did not even have the owners' dubious motive for treating his chattels with some care, namely that they would lose value if he did not. In Spanish and Portuguese America the lot of the plantation slave was generally no better and that of the slaves in the gold workings actually worse – in the latter case there was not even a harvest cycle to limit over-work and exposure to water or weather inflicted heavy mortality. The relative cheapness with which new captives could be bought from the slave merchants and the great value of slave produce – whether sugar or gold – gave a terrible commercial logic to the practice of using up the lives of the slaves in a few years of intense labour. And so long as slave crews were wracked by disease and overwork they found it difficult to resist their oppression collectively.

Throughout the plantation zone the slaves were subjected to, and threatened by, repeated floggings, quite apart from other forms of punishment; slave women were abused by the white men; and the plantation community, if such it can be called, often abandoned to under-nourishment and disease, despond and lassitude, when not galvanised by brute force to attend to the implacable rhythms of plantation labour. The material conditions of slave existence were undoubtedly worse in the Caribbean and Brazil than in North America, where crops and climate were less exacting. On the other hand the large size of plantations in the Caribbean diminished the cultural impact of the slaveholders; this factor favoured African survivals and, eventually, the discovery of new sources of communal identity. Throughout the Caribbean creole languages and dialects, heavily influenced by African vocabularies and structures, became the chief medium of communica-

tion. The large rice plantations of South Carolina tended to this latter pattern, with the inhabitants of that region developing a language of their own, Gullah, just as islanders did in many parts of the Caribbean.

The diversified and traditional pattern of slaveholding in Spanish America, and to a lesser extent in Brazil, encouraged the more privileged slaves to develop their own subordinate incorporation within colonial society and to look forward to the day when either they or their children would be freed. Special religious brotherhoods furnished a cultural medium and a form of social insurance for the comparatively large free black and mulatto population.⁹ In the Spanish and Portuguese colonies there were quite a large number of semi-autonomous slaves, plying a trade or working land under their own direction. Allowed to keep a proportion of their earnings they could buy their freedom, or that of a relative, over twenty years or so – in so doing they also gave their owner the resources to buy a new young slave and thus to perpetuate his or her role as slaveholder.

American slaveholders found it convenient to foster and rely on a layer of more permanent, skilled or responsible slaves who had mastered the complex requirements of plantation agriculture. These were awarded petty privileges and in return were expected to help vigilate or drive their fellows in the slave gangs. Members of the slave elite had extra rations, could choose a mate, and enjoyed at least a margin of manoeuvre in negotiating the pace and content of plantation labour. Often the Caribbean planters would hand over to their chosen 'head people' all the clothing, foodstuffs and rum destined for the slave crew as a whole. In this way the slave elite had a vested interest in the authority structure of the plantation. It is important to recognise the internal strength of the plantation regime. In principle each plantation was a world to itself and only the most privileged slaves were normally permitted intercourse with other plantations. Even the field slaves had some reason to fear life in the wild and to feel tied to the estate, where they would have their own plots and personal attachments. Slave resistance to the plantation regime was endemic, taking a reformist as well as revolutionary form. Slaves would negotiate, via the drivers and overseers, for larger gardens or an extra evening to work for themselves. The absoluteness of the juridical category of slavery may prevent us from seeing all features of the actual slave condition that were important to the slaves themselves. While the plantation regime was a shock to the newcomer those habituated to it came to discriminate between good and bad conditions, good and bad drivers or overseers. They would still long to be free but other objectives could appear more immediate and practical – a larger garden or making life difficult for a hated overseer. By working slowly and 'stupidly', or

seeming indifferent to threats and punishment, the slaves could sometimes bargain for better conditions. The plantation owners and local authorities had superior fire-power, and would use the utmost brutality to maintain servile subordination, but planters and managers sometimes discovered that negotiation was the best way to get the harvest in; the bleak alternatives available to the blacks severely limited the bargains they could strike.

In the French and British sugar islands, where slaves comprised 80-90 per cent of the population, the planters were evidently far more beholden to the guarantee afforded by the colonial state than was the case on the mainland. In the last resort they could always call upon the help of metropolitan garrisons and 'ships of the line' even though they preferred to count only on their own forces. In practice the small size of the Caribbean colonies and the proximity of militia forces greatly reduced the opportunities for slave revolt or escape. Considerations of security and commercial advantage could, however, dispose Caribbean planters against their own national metropolis. During the Seven Years War Britain was able to occupy parts of the French and Spanish Caribbean with the active collaboration of local planters.

The entire colonial process whereby certain West European states carved out empires in the Americas, and developed mines or plantations in them, can be described in terms of a prodigious growth in social powers, some of these co-ordinated by states, many others propelled by private centres of wealth and power. The African captives were introduced into a social formation where the slaveholder disposed not only of the fire-power of his henchmen, but also of the support of his neighbours and clients. Without foodstocks bought in by the planter or his administrator starvation might ensue. Planters and colonial officials controlled local information systems and made recalcitrant blacks the victims of exemplary violence. Even the Amerindian populations were often hostile to black rebels or runaways.

In normal times the slave was trapped within an insidious and many-sided structure of oppression in which slaveholders disposed of economic and ideological resources, as well as political and military guarantees; by contrast the enslaved were divided by background and situation, cut off from their origins but isolated in their new habitat, and enmeshed within vast and complex systems of territorial control, economic exchange and social mobilisation.

Rivalry between the various empires helped to set the scene for attempts by colonists to assert a larger sphere of autonomy and gave some

opportunities for slave resistance: only one decade between 1660 and 1770 was not marked by war between one or other of the Atlantic states.

↙ Colonial mercantilism had protected the infancy of the slave systems and national slave trades but output rose most vigorously as chartered monopolies were disbanded and mercantilist restrictions lifted. Some planters felt sufficiently confident of their position to claim self-government and commercial freedom for the colonies; others preferred to sponsor reform within the metropolis. A few were reactionaries with a stand-pat position and a privileged niche in the prevailing order. Slaveholders did not have a uniform outlook or situation but they tended to the side of progress and at least some of them rose to be amongst the outstanding revolutionary leaders of the age. With the industrial revolution still very much in its infancy in 1770 there was nothing to compare in the Atlantic world with the boom in plantation output and trade over the preceding century and a half. In socio-economic terms the slaveholders of the New World had created a new species of slavery and had been obliged to invent, almost from scratch, the legal and ideological underpinnings of a slave system. This historical experience endowed them with a certain confidence in their own capacities. However there was to be no Declaration of the Rights of Slaveholders. The revolutionary slaveholders chose to stress other identities, and other common interests, usually uniting all free-born citizens. At the limit some planter revolutionaries disavowed not only the slave trade but also slavery as inconsistent with civic liberty and national integrity; they discarded that aspect of their double or triple identity which they found most difficult to justify and preferred to see themselves as citizens and as men of enterprise and learning. That slavery was the ugly side of New World progress was not difficult to understand even for a slaveholder. Slavery was thought degrading long before the moralists and economists explained their own objections.

✓ In his classic study of the *Age of Revolution* E.J. Hobsbawm surveyed the *economic* impact of Britain's industrial revolution and the *political* impact of the French Revolution. There is much in subsequent European and American development, and in the modern world, which can be traced to the momentous implications of this 'dual revolution'. However the history of New World slavery demands attention to another set of forces and impulses: those generated by the *political* impact and example of the Hanoverian state, the Atlantic's premier power, and the *economic* impact of the revolutionary events in North

America, the Caribbean and South America. Even those who fought against Hanoverian Britain found much to admire in it; its political institutions, as we will see, were to be widely imitated in the Atlantic world of this epoch, and came to be associated with plantation slavery uneasily co-existing with half-baked abolitionism. Likewise the Revolutions of 1776, 1789 and after had prodigious consequences for the economic fortunes of slavery in the Americas. They broke down mercantilist barriers to the expansion of the plantations and gave an impulse to the spread of slavery on the mainland; at the same time they gave occasion for a succession of momentous eruptions against slavery in the Caribbean. The literature on the 'Age of Revolution' tends to concentrate on Europe, albeit that R.R. Palmer and J. Godechot stressed the revolutionary democratic impulse of the revolt of the thirteen North American colonies. But developments in the slave plantation zone after 1776 – the rise of new states based on slavery, or the spread of revolution and emancipation from Haiti to Spanish America – have not been given attention commensurate with their significance. The present study, devoted as it is to a vital chapter in the history of New World slavery, will explore this somewhat neglected American dimension.

Of course there is no consensual understanding of the 'Age of Revolution' in Europe, even among Marxists. Hobsbawm's work was notable for addressing the international complexity of a continent-wide and epochal process of 'bourgeois' revolution' in which politics and economics advanced in counterpoint rather than unison. The class struggles of this epoch were by no means confined to the struggle of a rising capitalist class against an obsolete feudalism. Small producers, wage labourers, artisans, petty functionaries, non-capitalist 'bourgeois' all played a part. Sometimes they formed alliances with capitalist interests or helped to remove obstacles to capitalist advance. But a characteristic feature of the 'Age of Revolution' is that popular forces also intervened to safeguard their own interests as best they knew how. This epoch of 'bourgeois' progress did eventually produce national state structures more conducive to capital accumulation than the *anciens régimes*; but it also gave birth to democratic movements and institutions that acted as a check on the power of capital. The course of events in the Americas was to have a similar complexity, marked by popular class struggle as well as bourgeois revolution. This secular and contested process raised American slaveholders to a pinnacle of wealth and power at one moment only to dash them to pieces at the next.

That slaveholders from the Chesapeake to Rio de Janeiro could be protagonists of 'bourgeois revolution' and capitalist development is, of course, thoroughly paradoxical since they were not themselves bour-

geois or capitalist, even if their mercantile associates can be so described. And there is the further problem that while the rise of capitalism in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries manifestly promoted the development of the slave systems in the New World there does, nevertheless, seem to be some link between capitalism and the rise of anti-slavery. In several outstanding studies the abolition of slavery or the slave trade has been identified with the purposes or outlook of a new capitalist and imperialist civilisation. It has been argued that the critique of slavery cleared the path for regimes of industrial wage labour or the imposition of a bourgeois hegemony on every layer of society. Similarly, in a non-Marxist idiom, the advance of rationalisation or of industrial society or of market relations is held to have driven back the primitive social form of enslavement. If slavery developed in the wake of capitalism, as I have insisted above, how was it that capitalist advance also prompted anti-slavery impulses? In the course of this book an attempt will be made to resolve the paradox of how capitalism at once needed regimes of unfree labour and yet unleashed forces which helped to challenge American slavery.

In *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944) Eric Williams developed the argument that slavery belonged to the old world of colonial mercantilism and was rendered redundant by the rise of wage labour in the metropolis and the spread of European colonial rule in Asia and Africa. While *Capitalism and Slavery* contains much powerful argument and marvellous illustration it propounds an explanation of abolition according to which industrial capitalists did away with the slave trade and colonial slavery for essentially economic reasons. Reference is made to broader social tensions and to slave revolts but the main weight of explanation is borne by capitalist economic interest. British abolition is approached as if it were a largely self-sufficient national process and the fate of slavery in independent America is not investigated, either as a test of his thesis or as an influence on British emancipation. Williams did not blink the fact that the development of capitalism and slavery had been intimately related. But he minimised the explanatory problems by holding that slavery had produced capitalism rather than the other way about. In contrast to the Marxist understanding of the origins of capitalism, Williams did not take the measure of agrarian, manufacturing and mercantile capital accumulation in the pre-industrial epoch. For him the New World slave systems, far from being a consequence of capitalist development, were a disposable ladder up which it had climbed. In the end his 'dialectical' schema of capitalism using and discarding slavery is mechanical and unsatisfactory.

In *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution 1776-1823* (1975) David Brion Davis advances a more comparative and complex

interrogation of the abolitionists, illuminating the ways in which they helped construct a new bourgeois hegemony, even while moving against a more primitive mode of exploitation in the plantation zone. This impressive work focuses chiefly on the ideology of abolitionism, presenting only in summary form some of the early struggles over emancipation. While metropolitan controversies are much illuminated the pattern of resistance and accommodation amongst the slaves themselves is not integrated into the analysis. The experience and aspirations of the slaves of this epoch are far more difficult to identify and document than the thoughts of leading abolitionists, but this does not dispense us from making the attempt.

Eugene Genovese's outstanding essay *From Rebellion to Revolution* (1979) explores the development of the slaves' own anti-slavery, arguing that its scope and trajectory were transformed during the epoch of bourgeois democratic revolution. In these sustained works of interpretation, informed by wide-ranging research, Davis and Genovese both qualify and nuance the thesis linking anti-slavery to the rise of bourgeois society. Davis shows that abolitionists often aimed beyond a purely capitalist revision of social relations, while Genovese brings out the ways in which slave resistance was made to prevail against bourgeois egoism and reminds us that bourgeois democratic revolution in Europe itself often involved popular forces imposing democratic progress on reluctant, timid or treacherous bourgeois. Davis and Genovese draw attention to the tensions and contradictions that this entailed and place the rise of abolition movements, and the enactment and outcome of emancipation, in a context of class struggles both within the plantation zone and in the metropolis. Drawing on these approaches the present work seeks to construct a Marxist narrative of the actual liberation struggles in the different areas of the Americas and to establish to what extent anti-slavery, either in intention or result, transcended the bourgeois democratic or capitalist dynamic. The narrative reconstruction offered also seeks to acknowledge the contribution made by slaveholders to a wider bourgeois revolutionary process, to the dismantling of colonial slavery and to the birth of new slave systems. This has involved bringing together colonial and metropolitan politics in a country-by-country account of the fate of slavery in each colony in the revolutionary epoch.

In the 1980s there are signs that the study of abolitionism is becoming a specialised branch of study disconnected from the history of slavery. Abolitionism is seen as an important expression of middle class reform rather than as a response to struggles in the plantation zone itself. That abolitionism led to emancipation tends to be assumed without investigation. Thus abolition is understood as a vindication of

✓ capitalist advance, of the spread of a market model of society and bourgeois confidence in progress. In such work the focus tends to be upon the evolution of social thought and feeling amongst the metropolitan middle classes. Little attention is paid to metropolitan class struggle or to contests concerning the purpose and character of the state; and even less attention is paid to events in the plantation zone itself, to slave resistance and to the role of former slaves in determining the outcome of the emancipation process. While a theoretical critique of these approaches is needed a narrative which traces the advances of slavery and anti-slavery in the Americas can make its own contribution to suggesting their inadequacy, as this book seeks to do.¹⁰

If historians of abolitionism are prone to ignore events in the plantation zone there is also a flourishing school of 'slavery studies' which abstracts from the context supplied by metropolitan politics and economy. Slave life and black resistance are studied in isolation, without reference to their impact on metropolitan decisions. Academic specialisation and division of labour has its own justification but the reasons for the destruction of colonial slavery cannot be grasped if metropolitan abolition and the struggles of the plantation zone are allotted to different departments of knowledge.

✓ The still unsurpassed model for understanding the struggle against slavery is *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* by C.L.R. James (1938). In this work James establishes the impact of revolution in the Caribbean on events in the metropolis and explores the extraordinary fusion of different traditions and impulses achieved in St Domingue in the 1790s. James' story illuminates the essential workings of capitalism, racialism, colonialism and slavery – and the complex class struggle to which they gave rise in St Domingue; it conveys a marvellous sense of the eruption of the masses in history. With a sensibility attuned to the cosmopolitan forces of the age he follows the transatlantic revolutionary impulse as it criss-crosses the ocean from Saint Domingue to Paris and back to the Caribbean again. This is both far more satisfying as explanation, and far more compelling as narrative, than those accounts of struggles concerning colonial slavery which never look outside the plantations or, even worse, never leave the drawing rooms or debating chambers of the metropolis. In some quarters it is supposed that narrative history has little to offer and is incapable of identifying deep-seated structures of economy, mentality or political life.¹¹ The present work was undertaken out of the conviction that if they are real and effective such structures will also be visible at the level of events. And in the further belief that socio-economic forces and the discourses of ideology are so inherently antagonistic and contradictory that they open up a space of

political choice and action which must also be registered if the dynamic ✓ of historical development is to be grasped. The attempt to construct a narrative therefore puts conflicting interpretations to the test. It can help to establish the respective weight and significance of the different forces and factors at work. In the accounts offered below I have tried to place struggles over colonial slavery in context and to show that anti-slavery was often imposed on metropolitan decision-makers by external pressures. Marxist research, in the works of such writers as James, Genovese, Gorender and Friginals, has already made a notable contribution to our understanding of the making and unmaking of slavery in the Americas. But the bearing of this body of work on the mainstream of capitalist development and class struggle has been insufficiently appreciated, and this furnishes an additional reason for the present study. The conclusions offered remain partial and tentative in a field where research and debate advance at a rapid rate.

The first chapter surveys the sources of anti-slavery in the mid-eighteenth century Atlantic world – in popular sentiment, in slave resistance and in philosophy. But it required the crisis of empire for anti-slavery to become a question of practical politics; subsequent chapters trace the eruption of anti-slavery themes in the imperial and revolutionary crises which punctuated the history of the Atlantic powers down to the middle of the nineteenth century. The systems of colonial slavery unravelled very nearly in inverse order to that of their formation, with the crisis of the British and French systems preceding, and helping to precipitate, that of the Iberian powers. It has been suggested that American slavery had an expansionary impetus often frustrated by colonial mercantilism and it is therefore not surprising that the crisis of the colonial systems was provoked by growth rather than contraction. It was altogether appropriate that Hanoverian Britain, aggrandised by slave-related commerce, should have been the first state to be humbled by its own colonists, in 1776–83, and then, in the 1790s, the first to be defeated by insurgent slaves. The planters of English North America were not the richest in the New World but they were embedded in the most dynamic colonial social formation and they were the best placed to challenge metropolitan power. Chapters 2 to 4 explore anti-slavery in Britain and North America, setting both the American Revolution and the rise of abolition in the context of the political order and culture from which they emerged. In subsequent chapters the overthrow of French colonial slavery is similarly considered in its context, that of the crisis of the *ancien régime* and the eruption

of revolutionary forces in France and the Caribbean.

✓ Accounts of abolition and New World slavery often pass rather rapidly over the impact upon them of the revolutions in the French Caribbean and the emergence of Haiti, a black state. It is almost as if James' *Black Jacobins* dispenses them from considering the momentous concomitants and consequences of the only successful slave revolt in history. In fact, James' work should be an inspiration to trace through the impact of the 'first emancipation' on the subsequent struggles over colonial slavery in other parts of the Americas. The detailed account given in chapters 5 to 9 of the disintegration of slaveholder power in St Domingue, of the birth of Haiti, and of the latter's impact on slaves and slaveholders, on the strategists of empire and on the free-floating milieu of adventurers and revolutionaries, seeks to remedy this deficiency, with help from the welcome recent spate of monographs on this subject by Caribbean historians. I hope to show that it is scarcely possible to exaggerate the impact of the Haitian revolution on the fate of colonial slavery.

This conclusion and others emerge from chapters which trace the progress of slavery and anti-slavery in the United States, Spanish and Portuguese America, the British West Indies and the French Antilles. They underline the paradox that while this period of 'bourgeois democratic' revolution and capitalist advance strengthened and extended slavery in some parts of the New World (the South of the United States, Cuba and Brazil), it also set the scene for anti-slavery currents which secured significant slave emancipations in almost every decade from the 1780s to the 1840s and beyond. There can be no doubt that this paradoxical correlation poses a major challenge to historical explanation.

It has recently been claimed that a commitment to historical progress can no longer be sustained. Certainly the history of New World slavery allows of no simple or linear conception of historical advance. But when all due account has been taken of cross-currents and contradictions, the movements for American independence, for republican liberties and for slave emancipation do represent epic achievements in human history and in the making of the modern world. Despite the mixed results of anti-slavery in this period the sacrifices of slave rebels, of radical abolitionists and of revolutionary democrats were not in vain. They show how it was possible to challenge, and sometimes defeat, the oppression which grew as the horrible obverse of the growth of human social capacities and powers in the Atlantic world of the early modern period. More generally they are of interest in illuminating the ways in which, however incompletely or imperfectly, emancipatory interests can prevail against ancient law and custom and the spirit of ruthless accumulation.

Notes

1. For the many varieties of slavery see Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, Cambridge, Mass., 1982; I attempt a definition of this variable institution in a contribution to Leonie Archer, ed., *Slavery*, London 1988.

2. Elizabeth Fox Genovese and Eugene Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism*, Oxford and New York 1983; Manuel Moreno Fraginals, *El Ingenio*, 3 vols, Havana 1978; see also Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*, Chapel Hill 1972; Michael Craton and James Walvin, *A Jamaica Plantation*, Toronto 1970; Gabriel Debien, *Les Esclaves aux Antilles Françaises: XVII-XVIII Siècle*, Basse Terre, Guadeloupe 1974.

3. Jacobo Gorender, *O Escravismo Colonial*, São Paulo 1978 (p. 242 for the argument referred to above).

4. These and other features of the formation of colonial slavery in the New World up to 1776 will be explored systematically in a companion study to the present work entitled *The West and the Rise of Slavery*.

5. J.H. Parry, *The Spanish Sea-borne Empire*, London 1966; James Lockhart and Stuart Schwartz, *Early Latin America*, Cambridge 1983, pp. 98-101, 181-252; James Lang, *Portuguese Brazil: the King's Plantation*, New York 1979, pp. 115-52, 205-18. For the wider context see Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History*, London 1984.

6. The data in this and previous paragraphs have been drawn from Ralph Davis, *The Rise of the Atlantic Economies*, London 1973, pp. 257, 264-5; Fraginals, *El Ingenio*, I, p. 41; Paul E. Lovejoy, 'The Volume of the Atlantic Slave Trade: a Synthesis', *Journal of African History*, vol. 23, 1983, pp. 473-501; David Eltis, 'Free and Coerced Transatlantic Migrations', *American Historical Review*, vol. 88, no. 2, April 1983, pp. 251-80.

7. For the consumer dynamic behind plantation development see Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, London 1985.

8. For an illuminating exploration of the ways in which empires have imposed productive co-ordination see Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, Cambridge 1986, pp. 145-55, 250-98.

9. A.J.R. Russell Wood, *The Black Man in Slavery and Freedom in Colonial Brazil*, London 1982, pp. 128-60; but see also Ronaldo Vainfas, *Ideologia e Escravidão*, Petrópolis 1986, pp. 93-115.

10. For an example of this approach see Thomas Haskell, 'Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility, Part 1', *American Historical Review*, vol. 90, no. 2, April 1985, 'Part 2', *American Historical Review*, vol. 90, no. 3, June 1985; see also the 'Forum' on these articles in the *American Historical Review*, vol. 92, no. 4, 1987, pp. 797-878, with critiques by David Brion Davis and John Ashworth and a reply by Thomas Haskell.

11. François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, Cambridge 1985, pp. 184-204.