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Source: *The Historical Journal*, JUNE 2010, Vol. 53, No. 2 (JUNE 2010), pp. 359-379

Published by: Cambridge University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40865692>

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FREE TRADE, FREE LABOUR, AND SLAVE SUGAR IN VICTORIAN BRITAIN*

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ABSTRACT. *This article reconsiders the sugar duties controversy in early Victorian Britain. Rather than representing the defeat of abolitionism by free trade zeal, the sugar question was a contest of two varieties of anti-slavery thought which had previously co-existed: one believing that slavery's immorality was accompanied by its productive inferiority to free labour and the other asserting that slavery's profits in this world were punished outside the marketplace. West Indian decline after the end of protection led to a revision of free labour superiority, with providential externalities replacing marketplace competitiveness. The episode demonstrates how little most Britons understood the welfare of black freedmen to be connected to anti-slavery after emancipation. A fuller appreciation of the slave sugar debate furthermore recovers an important abolitionist strand in the new 'human history' of free trade.*

British abolition of the slave trade and West Indian slavery removed the nation from the guilt of trafficking and exploiting African captives directly. As a world power, however, Britain found itself at the heart of an international system of trade and finance entangled in slavery. Statesmen continued to be confronted with questions of anti-slavery politics and economics, given their country's role as a pioneer of free labour in the tropics and a hungry consumer of both sugar and cotton. Moreover, the emergence of the 'condition of England' question and free trade ideology meant that post-emancipation policies concerning the sugar colonies would be formulated under different political pressures.¹ In the first decade of Victoria's reign, the question of protective tariffs for the West Indies became a pivot on which wider challenges – of the islands' prosperity, domestic poverty, the lot of free blacks, free trade, and colonial labour shortages – turned. After 1840, these issues crystallized in a bitter contest over sugar. In characteristically florid prose, Benjamin Disraeli addressed the commodity's complex politics:

Singular article of produce! What is the reason of this influence? It is that all considerations mingle in it; not merely commercial, but imperial, philanthropic, religious; confounding

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* The author wishes to thank the editors and anonymous referees of this journal, David Brion Davis, Lawrence Goldman, Simon Morgan, J. R. Oldfield, Steven Heath Mitton, Andrew J. Raledge, and William Whyte – as well as participants of seminars at Oxford and Yale Universities – for their comments on earlier drafts of the argument presented in this article.

¹ Boyd Hilton, *A mad, bad and dangerous people? England, 1783-1846* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 543–58, 572–88.

and crossing each other, and confusing the legislature and the nation lost in a maze of conflicting interests and contending emotions.²

For some abolitionists, such as the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (BFASS), an end to West Indian protection meant ‘a crisis ... in the history of the Anti-slavery cause’; free trade in sugar would represent a betrayal of promises made during West Indian emancipation in 1834 and the end of apprenticeship in 1838.³ They lost.

In this defeat for protection, a belief emerged that the demise of sugar protection signalled a decline in anti-slavery sentiment. The campaign for free trade was the acknowledged successor of anti-slavery agitation, and the Anti-Corn Law League, rather than abolitionist societies such as the BFASS, would continue the tradition of popular agitation.⁴ Historians have tended to depict the repeal of the sugar duties in negative terms, recalling it as the submission of anti-slavery sympathies to free trade ideology.⁵ Few scholars have taken seriously the free traders’ argument that their policies would advance anti-slavery interests.⁶ The repeal of the sugar duties has been recorded as ‘a real defeat for the abolitionists’⁷ by the ‘windy generalities’ of the free traders⁸; a determination by Britons that ‘philanthropy was being bought at too high a price’⁹, or a test of humanity against economic interest.¹⁰ Recently, Seymour Drescher has looked upon the defeat of proposals for freer trade in 1841 as ‘the last unalloyed victory of abolitionism over countervailing economic pressures’, before philanthropy was overwhelmed in 1846 with the passage of the sugar

² Benjamin Disraeli, *Lord George Bentinck* (London, 1852), p. 530.

³ The BFASS complaints are reprinted in *Economist*, 25 July 1846, p. 961.

⁴ Simon Morgan, ‘The Anti-Corn Law League and British anti-slavery in transatlantic perspective, 1838–1846’, *Historical Journal*, 52 (2009), pp. 87–107.

⁵ As noted by Philip D. Curtin, ‘The British sugar duties and West Indian prosperity’, *Journal of Economic History*, 14 (1954), pp. 157–64, at p. 157.

⁶ For three who do, see: David Eltis, ‘Abolitionist perceptions of society’, in James Walvin, ed., *Slavery and British society, 1776–1846* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1982), p. 208; David Turley, *The culture of English antislavery, 1780–1860* (London and New York, NY, 1991), pp. 148–9; G. R. Searle, *Morality and the market in Victorian Britain* (Oxford and New York, NY, 1998), pp. 57–9, 62.

⁷ Christine Bolt, *The anti-slavery movement and reconstruction: a study in Anglo-American co-operation, 1833–1877* (London, New York, NY, and Toronto, ON, 1969), p. 20.

⁸ Howard Temperley, *British anti-slavery, 1833–1870* (London, 1972), pp. 154–5.

⁹ Leslie Bethell, *The abolition of the Brazilian slave trade: Britain, Brazil and the slave trade question, 1807–1869* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 273. For further examples, see Robert Livingston Schulyer, ‘The abolition of British imperial preference, 1846–1860’, *Political Science Quarterly*, 33 (1918), pp. 77–92, at pp. 78–9; Christopher Lloyd, *The navy and the slave trade: the suppression of the African slave trade in the nineteenth century* (London, 1949), pp. 101–3; Elsie Pilgrim, ‘Anti-slavery sentiment in Great Britain, 1841–1854: its nature and its decline, with special reference to its influence upon British policy towards the former slave colonies’ (PhD thesis, Cambridge, 1952), pp. 95–6.

¹⁰ C. Duncan Rice, “‘Humanity sold for sugar!’ The British abolitionist response to free trade in slave-grown sugar’, *Historical Journal*, 13 (1970), pp. 402–18. Rice’s focus was on rebutting Eric Williams’s account: Eric Williams, ‘Laissez faire, sugar and slavery’, *Political Science Quarterly*, 58 (1943), pp. 67–85; Eric Williams, *Capitalism and slavery* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1944), p. 153.

duties act.¹¹ Catherine Hall also suggests that the ‘forward march of free trade’ was part of a decline for ‘abolitionist’ ideas.¹²

While the evidence bears out a charge of institutional fratricide – with middle-class agitation switching from the anti-slavery societies to the Anti-Corn Law League – the case is less clear-cut when it comes to political ideas and humanitarian sentiment.¹³ A focus on the ways in which free traders incorporated anti-slavery concerns into their doctrine reveals new aspects of the moral dimensions to Victorian political economy. The relationship between anti-slavery and *laissez-faire* ideas can only be appreciated in the context of the anti-slavery pluralism which emerged after emancipation. No single abolitionist society or faction was able to command authority for a particular set of policies or methodologies, as had been possible until the 1830s. Indeed, by the 1850s it was noted that anti-slavery commitment had moved ‘beyond the narrow sphere of anti-slavery societies’.¹⁴ To speak of anti-slavery was to speak of ‘England, for no “Christian and philanthropic class” has any monopoly here of hatred for negro slavery’.¹⁵ It was not just the policy of the BFASS that was rejected in 1846, but their remaining pretensions to a monopoly on anti-slavery sentiment in Britain. The fate of anti-slavery sympathies in Victorian Britain can be no more traced from the prospects of a single society – such as the BFASS – than the emergence of a free trade nation after 1846 can be charted through the institution of the Anti-Corn Law League.

The early Victorian sugar question was not a battle to preserve a shred of anti-slavery principle from the ravages of amoral free trade, but rather a contest between two different models of anti-slavery. Protectionist anti-slavery required the British public to pay for their morality. Free trade offered consumers the chance to have their conscience, their sugar, and eat it. By reducing or removing the disparity between duties on foreign and West Indian sugar, free traders could promise moral progress as well as cheaper sugar. Their crucial advantage was a world view where the two emotive constituencies of the debate – poor whites and slaves – would both be better off. By the logic of *laissez-faire* doctrine, which suggested the world could be ordered to benefit all people of all nations, injurious effects to British consumers were symptoms of impolicy, rather than necessarily sacrifices: ‘Justice to Africa’ was not done by ‘injustice to England’.¹⁶ Rather than chart the 1846 act’s impact on West Indian prosperity, this article seeks to demonstrate how attitudes to slavery were re-fashioned by the sugar debates and the subsequent failure of free labour sugar to outperform its

¹¹ Seymour Drescher, *The mighty experiment: free labor versus slavery in British emancipation* (Oxford, 2002), p. 166. Curiously, Drescher accepts Cobden’s anti-slavery sincerity just a few pages later: *ibid.*, p. 174.

¹² Catherine Hall, *Civilising subjects: metropole and colony in the English imagination, 1830–1867* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 338–9.

¹³ On the institutional question, see Morgan, ‘The Anti-Corn Law League and British anti-slavery’.

¹⁴ *Chamber’s Journal*, Apr. 1857, p. 244.

¹⁵ *Times*, 13 Sept. 1861, p. 6.

¹⁶ John Bright: *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1848, XCIX, 748; for other examples of such ‘moral economies’ behind the free traders’ case, see: *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1848, XCIX, 1341–2; *Economist*, 25 July 1846, p. 956.

rivals.¹⁷ The first part looks at the context in which sugar duties came to be targeted for repeal. The following sections investigate the free trade and protectionist cases on their own terms, showing how both required an evolution in anti-slavery attitudes. The final portion considers how free labour ideology evolved in the period after the sugar duties were repealed, and the incident's broader implications for our understanding of free trade and anti-slavery.

I

West Indian protection was all but doomed when Sir Robert Peel's party disintegrated on the question of the Corn Laws and returned the whigs to power. In July 1846, the new prime minister, Lord John Russell, shared a division lobby with his predecessor to vote for a gradual equalization of the duties (intended for 1851, but ultimately delayed until 1854 by a Conservative rearguard action).¹⁸ How had both men changed their opinions in six short years from a time when their parties opposed a radical backbench bill for just this measure?¹⁹

After that date, support for the protection of sugar ebbed as a powerful tide turned against the Corn Laws. The political expediencies which led Russell and his colleagues to embrace free trade are well known, and the intellectual journey of the Peelites has been much debated.²⁰ To some extent, sugar became a second front in the larger war between free traders and protectionists – and, as with corn, the free trade camp was steadily swelled by defectors. The same parliamentarians who decried sugar equalization as a betrayal of planters and freedmen in one year would appear in a later debate arguing that a free trade in sugar was consistent with anti-slavery. Despite rejecting such measures in 1840, the next year Melbourne's ministry became the first to embrace a freer trade in sugar. The whig government fell in 1841, however, when its proposal for a moderate reduction was defeated in parliament.²¹ Figures as diverse as Joseph O'Connell, the Irish radical, and Viscount Sandon – the tory whose motion defeated the 1841 bill for freer trade – switched from fervent support for sugar protection to abolition of monopoly. In 1844, the duties almost claimed a second government, when

¹⁷ For assessments of the economic impact of the equalization of the sugar duties on the free labour colonies, see Curtin, 'British sugar duties and West Indian prosperity'; W. A. Green, *British slave emancipation: the sugar colonies and the great experiment, 1830–1865* (Oxford, 1976).

¹⁸ Schulyer, 'The abolition of British imperial preference', p. 84.

¹⁹ *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1840, LV, 106–7.

²⁰ For the League's influence on whig liberals, see John Prest, *Politics in the age of Cobden* (London and Basingstoke, 1977), pp. 72–102; Anthony Howe, *Free trade and Liberal England, 1846–1946* (Oxford, 1997); Paul A. Pickering and Alex Tyrrell, *The people's bread: a history of the Anti-Corn Law League* (London and New York, NY, 2000). On Peel and Peelite attitudes to free trade, see Boyd Hilton, 'Sir Robert Peel: a reappraisal', *Historical Journal*, 79 (1979), pp. 585–614, at pp. 596–611; Ian Newbould, 'Sir Robert Peel and the Conservative party, 1832–1841: a study in failure?', *English Historical Review*, 98 (1983), pp. 529–57, at pp. 549–52; A. J. B. Hilton, *The age of atonement: the influence of evangelicalism on social and economic thought, 1765–1865* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 248–50.

²¹ *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1841, LVIII, 667, 1241.

Sir Robert Peel narrowly reversed a vote against his easing of the sugar tax – his opponents being an unholy alliance of free traders, who wanted it reduced, and protectionists, who sought a greater colonial preference.²² The whigs' return to power in 1846, after the advance of free trade ideas had conquered the consciences of Peel and scores of his tory colleagues, would see them press for an act for full equalization.

Reappraisal of the sugar debates permits free trade anti-slavery to be examined as a serious political doctrine, rather than a simple betrayal of abolitionism. Arguments against slavery had been paired with support for free trade in earlier decades. Before British emancipation, attacks on West Indian monopoly and West Indian slavery had been in harmony. During the late eighteenth-century campaign against the slave trade, protection had been resented because it meant that the 'laws of our country ... prohibit us the sugar cane, unless we will receive it through the medium of slavery'.²³ From 1821, the East Indian merchant, James Cropper, had argued for British slavery to be attacked on the grounds of free labour superiority; for him, the West Indians' need for protection was evidence that their sinful commerce operated against the economic laws ordained by God.²⁴ Many abolitionists adopted these arguments in support of an emancipation act, although the minister who proposed one in 1833 did not. Lord Stanley insisted that protective duties for the West Indies be increased, not decreased, so as to secure revenue for the £20 million compensation paid to slaveowners and to ease the transition to free labour. Many abolitionists objected to the coupling of protectionism and emancipation, with Lord Brougham complaining that the British consumer would pay, through increased duties, more than the cost of emancipation.²⁵ Free trade anti-slavery, then, was not a convenient invention of the 1840s, but a development of long-standing, if disputed, anti-slavery traditions. While Stanley's caution and pessimism for free labour was a progenitor of anti-slavery protectionism, free trade anti-slavery had intellectual roots in the free labour ideology that permeated abolitionism before 1833.

Before 1840, those MPs who had supported emancipation were likely to be free traders in corn, but not necessarily in sugar.²⁶ The unresolved question of whether free labour would flourish best under protection or free trade would explode over the next ten years, causing a complete realignment of anti-slavery politics.

²² Norman Gash, *Peel* (London and New York, NY, 1973), pp. 242–4.

²³ Anon. [William Fox], *An address to the people of Great Britain, on the utility of refraining from the use of West India sugar and rum* (5th edn, corrected, London, 1791), p. 2.

²⁴ David Brion Davis, *Slavery and human progress* (New York, NY, and Oxford, 1984), pp. 181–4; David B. Davis, 'James Cropper and the British anti-slavery movement, 1821–1823', *Journal of Negro History*, 45 (1960), pp. 241–58; idem, 'James Cropper and the British anti-slavery movement, 1823–1833', *Journal of Negro History*, 46 (1961), pp. 154–73; Drescher, *The mighty experiment*, p. 116.

²⁵ Drescher, *The mighty experiment*, pp. 131–44.

²⁶ Tom L. Franzmann, 'Antislavery and political economy in the early Victorian House of Commons: a research note on "capitalist hegemony"', *Journal of Social History*, 27 (1994), pp. 578–93, at pp. 584–6.

Many pessimists who had advocated gradual emancipation found themselves allied with the most passionate immediate abolitionists of the last decade. Joseph Hume, the radical MP who had defended the property rights of planters (such as his brother) in 1833, opposed the duties alongside the abolitionist orator, George Thompson.²⁷ Free traders ridiculed abolitionist protectionists' flight from free labour doctrine. Charles Villiers took pleasure in 1840 in taunting Dr Stephen Lushington and Daniel O'Connell (who was subsequently convinced that the monopoly should end) that in denigrating free labour, they were 'repeating in words to the joy of the great array of colonial proprietors opposite all the very arguments which, for a quarter of a century, have been urged against themselves [abolitionists] when pleading for the rights of the negro'.²⁸ As he noted, the BFASS lobby's dedication to the freedman had led them to abandon free labour ideology and throw in their lot with protection.

Even if the sugar question was a new manifestation of an old dilemma, early Victorian politics cast it in a new form. As in other branches of the free trade debate, the image of impoverished Britons suffering under the oppressive weight of state-sanctioned protection was a staple for those wishing to ease or equalize the differential duties. The first years of Victoria's reign had seen a miserable depression in industry and the 'discovery' of the miserable conditions endured by many working people – what Thomas Carlyle dubbed 'the condition of England question'.²⁹ A striking example of the living standards of the poor was the halving of per capita sugar consumption between 1801 and 1840.³⁰ Unsurprisingly, the inability of the poor to buy reasonably priced sugar generated much anxiety in the debates of the 1840s, given that it 'had now become a necessary of life'.³¹ In Sir James Graham's words, sugar was 'the only little luxury that many families can enjoy; it renders palatable their rice, their crout, their gruel, their indifferent tea or coffee'.³² Moreover, MPs frequently touted the commodity's role in weaning the working classes away from alcohol and towards the more wholesome refreshments of the coffee shop and tea service.³³ As well as encouraging more temperate diets, reducing the price of sugar to consumers also struck politicians as popular.³⁴

More sugar had to enter Great Britain if the people's ever-increasing demand was to be met, asserted political economists Herman Merivale, in his *Lectures on colonization and colonies*, and G. R. Porter, before a select committee and in *Progress*

²⁷ *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1833, xviii, 458–71; V. E. Chancellor, 'Hume, Joseph (1777–1855)', in *Oxford dictionary of national biography* (Oxford, 2004; online edn 2008: www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/14148, accessed 22 Feb. 2010).

²⁸ *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1840, lv, 97; Earl Grey made a similar appeal in the 1846 debate: *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1846, lxxxviii, 539.

²⁹ Thomas Carlyle, *Past and present* (London, 1840), pp. 1–9.

³⁰ Hilton, *A mad, bad and dangerous people?*, p. 575; John Burnett, *Plenty and want: a social history of food in England from 1815 to the present day* (3rd edn, Abingdon, 1989), p. 15.

³¹ *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1846, lxxxviii, 537.

³² *Ibid.*, 1848, xcix, 1242.

³³ *Ibid.*, 1839, xlvi, 1022, 1840, lv, 80–1, 1841, lviii, 33, 103, 1844, lxxv, 178; *Parliamentary Papers (PP)*, 1840, v (601), pp. 199–202.

³⁴ *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1840, lv, 97.

of the nation.³⁵ Nothing but equalization of the duties would prevent ‘scarcity prices’.³⁶ Even a gloomy article in the *Colonial Gazette*, in 1840, admitted the pressure to reduce prices for the working man was immense. Its columnist went so far as to advise planters to extract good concessions for the inevitable end to their protection.³⁷ In parliamentary debates, only the most inept – or courageous – protectionists questioned whether the price of sugar was a problem that needed to be addressed.³⁸ The more astute, such as Lord George Bentinck, denied the claim that free trade would deliver cheaper sugar than a protected West Indies. By 1848, when Bentinck tried to stave off the phased equalization act of 1846, he cannily branded the protectionist plan as the ‘poor man’s bill’.³⁹ Yet this was hard to sell, coming as it did after years of fellow protectionists arguing that dearer sugar was justified on grounds of morality and national duty.

Some opponents of equalization portrayed it as a betrayal of freed blacks in the West Indies, who had just embarked on their great experiment in free labour.⁴⁰ However, domestic sympathy for West Indian blacks had largely declined since their enslavement and apprenticeship had ended. The perceived contrast of the freedman’s plenty with the British labourer’s need became a central theme for free traders, starkly sketched by Russell when he introduced proposals to narrow the difference in sugar duties on 7 May 1841. He began with a report of the freed blacks’ happiness, declaring, ‘I do not think that we should be justified in giving our attention exclusively to their interests ... whilst the people of this country were suffering from want of the common comforts of life.’ After suggesting that the British worker would swap places with a West Indian former slave, he challenged,

Is the poor man to go into the grocer’s shop (a case which I have heard last year) and, after hearing the price of sugar, turn away in sorrow and despondence because the article is placed beyond his reach? That has been the case under your present law – that has been the effect under your present duty.⁴¹

Just a year earlier, in a private letter, he had written that freedmen’s welfare was more important than sugar production in the short term.⁴² Since then, the British worker had replaced the West Indian black in Russell’s conscience, and other free traders mirrored his concern for ‘our white brethren at home’.⁴³ The freedman

³⁵ Herman Merivale, *Lectures on colonization and colonies* (2 vols., London, 1840–1), I, pp. 200–2; *ibid.*, II, p. 311; W. P. Morrell, *British colonial policy in the age of Peel and Russell* (London, 1966), p. 169; G. R. Porter, *The progress of the nation* (3 vols., London, 1836–43), II, 436–8; *PP*, 1840, v (601), pp. 185–208.

³⁶ *Economist*, 2 May 1846, p. 565.

³⁷ *Colonial Gazette*, 17 June 1840, as quoted in ‘T. H.’, *Are the West India colonies to be preserved? A few plain facts; showing the necessity of immigration into British Guiana and the West Indies, and the utter futility of all efforts towards the abolition of slavery and the slave trade which do not include this* (London, 1840), pp. 6–7.

³⁸ *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1846, LXXXVIII, 522–3.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1848, c, 347–8.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 1841, LVIII, 88.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 1841, LVIII, 31–3.

⁴² Russell to Light (British Guiana), 15 Feb. 1840, in *Select documents on British colonial policy 1830–1860*, ed. K. N. Bell and W. P. Morrell (Oxford, 1928), p. 412; Morrell, *British colonial policy*, p. 151.

⁴³ *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1840, LVIII, 131. See also *Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle*, 25 July 1846, p. 8.

was increasingly portrayed as an impediment to, rather than the instrument of, the triumph of free labour.⁴⁴ Black Britons were subject to what one historian has characterized as ‘a virulent racist counterattack’ when they failed to perform the role assigned to them by anti-slavery theories.⁴⁵

When West Indian slaves lost their shackles, they had ironically lost the only source of the British masses’ sympathy. They were slaves no more, but free labourers – akin to those whites who toiled in England’s fields or dark satanic mills. G. R. Porter stated plainly that, at the moment of emancipation,

it was not proposed to give to these our fellow-citizens greater privileges and immunities than are enjoyed by other labourers. ...[T]o argue that a higher price is needed for the products of their labour than the price at which the same products are yielded elsewhere and by others, is to affirm that something more than freedom was designed for them by the generosity of the nation.⁴⁶

After apprenticeship had ended, only a few ‘friends of the negro’ looked to blacks’ welfare after emancipation. For the majority who had supported emancipation, freedom and the end of sinful abuse was all that slaves had been owed – and the debt had been redeemed. Although a commentator like Herman Merivale expressed concern for the moral development of blacks after emancipation, it was only to warn that their alleged luxury was debasing and undermining the West Indies’ productivity. For Merivale, Britain’s anti-slavery superiority would be tarnished if emancipation resulted in the imagined excesses of Haitian liberation being repeated in the West Indies.⁴⁷ The more progressive abolitionists’ affection or concern for freedmen was rarely shared by politicians or the public. Anti-slavery had always meant something quite different to the majority of Victorians. It would be erroneous to assume enmity for slavery necessarily required revolutionary ideas about race. Research on anti-slavery campaigning before 1833 has increasingly come to appreciate ‘the anti-slavery movement’ as a heterogeneous collection of anti-slaverys, with a variety of emphases motivating different constituencies within the British public.⁴⁸

Distinguishing between anti-slavery and concern for freedmen’s welfare does not excuse unpleasant attitudes, but it does allow recognition of what issues were at stake in the eyes of contemporaries. Catherine Hall rightly observes that Victorians ‘might indeed hate slavery, but their enthusiasm for the racialised others was strictly limited’. Yet where she notes that ‘some abolitionists had lost faith’, it is important to underscore that it was their faith and interest in blacks that had waned, rather than their faith in anti-slavery.⁴⁹ If the sugar duties contest

⁴⁴ *PP*, 1842, XIII (479), p. iv; Drescher, *The mighty experiment*, pp. 218–19.

⁴⁵ Thomas C. Holt, *The problem of freedom: race, labor and politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832–1938* (Baltimore, MD, and London, 1992), p. xxiv.

⁴⁶ Porter, *The progress of the nation*, III, p. 40.

⁴⁷ Merivale, *Lectures*, I, pp. 313, 326.

⁴⁸ Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral capital: foundations of British abolitionism* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2006), pp. 25–9; Turley, *The culture of English antislavery*, pp. 82–3.

⁴⁹ Hall, *Civilizing subjects*, p. 379

had turned solely on the interests of poor whites in Britain, then the verdict of historians and contemporary protectionists could be judged correct; that 'the question was, whether or not the people of England would have slavery and sugar ... cheaper by 6s. per cwt.' or pay 'two-thirds of a penny per pound more for sugar grown by the free hands of British industry?'⁵⁰ As the next section shows, however, supporters of free trade offered serious anti-slavery arguments for their position; arguments that were not logically (if, to our minds, morally) contrary to their impatience with freedmen.

II

Free trade was most obviously an anti-slavery policy for those who had 'the fullest confidence that the power of free labour was equal, nay superior, to slave labour'.⁵¹ Advocates argued that an end to West Indian monopoly created a demand for more sugar that only free labour could feed; it did not encourage traders and owners of slaves.⁵² As Clarendon promised in 1846, 'the assertion made by the advocates of abolition previous to emancipation of the West Indian negroes, was correct, that the work of free men is more profitable than that of slaves, and that they can compete with and drive slave labour out of the market'.⁵³ Earl Grey would later argue that the emancipation act of 1833 would never have been needed if the sugar preference had been abolished – self-interest would have compelled planters to free their slaves.⁵⁴ The government accurately noted that they held to the traditional anti-slavery view, that 'monopoly was a misfortune to commerce, and to the sugar growers themselves'.⁵⁵ State interference insulated the sugar colonies from economic reality and deterred them from the changes they needed to succeed.⁵⁶ As Joseph Beldam, an anti-slavery collaborator of Zachary Macaulay, noted, 'monopoly was considered by abolitionists generally as one of the principal obstacles to agricultural improvement, to colonial prosperity, and to the general interests of freedom'.⁵⁷ In this sense, he thought Britain would effectively concede that emancipation had been a mistake, rather than an example to the world, if the monopoly was retained.

James Ewing Ritchie, an abolitionist free trader who parted with the BFASS in dismay at its protectionism, was similarly passionate about the need for free trade anti-slavery. He confidently predicted that '[m]en have learned at last that slavery can only be destroyed by freedom; that given, the right to buy in the cheapest

⁵⁰ *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1846, LXXXVIII, 44, see also 509.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1840, LV, 79–80; the success of free labour indigo was also cited: *ibid.*, 1848, C, 57.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 1848, XCIX, 1237–8.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 1846, LXXXVIII, 479.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 1848, XCVI, 206.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 1840, LV, 79–80.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 1846, LXXXVIII, 478; *Economist*, 25 July 1846, p. 956, 15 Aug. 1846, p. 1051, 19 Sept. 1846, pp. 1220–1.

⁵⁷ Joseph Beldam, *A review of the late proposed measure for the reduction of the duties on sugar* (London, 1841), p. 17; another old ally of Macaulay, Henry Drummond, argued in similar terms: *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1848, C, 12.

market and sell in the dearest – and the employer of free men will soon be left alone in the field'.⁵⁸ By the same principles on which the Corn Laws had been repealed, monopoly was bad for the consumer and deadened the innovation of the producer.⁵⁹ In particular, Ritchie believed that 'the West Indian monopoly tends directly to keep up slavery' as 'monopoly enables the West Indian planter to pay an unreasonably high price for labour: ... an unnatural demand is created'. This, he believed, deterred other Caribbean colonies from emancipation, out of fear that freed slaves would emigrate to the West Indies.⁶⁰ Ritchie represented a vein of anti-slavery thought that disapproved of the wages that freed people could command in the decade after emancipation. In this manner, the sugar question saw a parting of ways between abolitionists who championed racial equality and those who emphasized the legal and economic aspects of anti-slavery.

Quite apart from the mechanics of economic exchange, free trade was also imagined to have an effect on foreigners' attitudes to slavery. Beldam described this as 'a moral power, which sooner or later, must act beneficially and decisively on public opinion, in every quarter'.⁶¹ In 1841, Russell argued that 'the more free and unrestricted is intercourse, the more the nations of the world are mingled together by the ties of peaceful commerce' and the more civilization and Christianity were spread. Increasing British trade with Brazil would hopefully provide greater influence and leverage, as opposed to refusing commerce with them.⁶² In 1846, Russell branded as 'insanity' any principle which concluded that anti-slavery in America was best served by British abstention from cotton.⁶³ Faith in trade's moral effects trumped any consideration of the fact that American slave cotton had dominated the market against free labour alternatives.⁶⁴ Rather, *The Economist* asked, how could a British tax on sugar discourage the slave trade? Anti-slavery protectionists expected 'the state to do ... by a tax [that] which can only be done by the gradual progress of knowledge and humanity'.⁶⁵ Free trade seemed to foster co-operation and closer relationships; slave-holding nations would be peaceably convinced they were mistaken.⁶⁶ These hopes did not rely on the market superiority of free labour sugar alone, but they suggested that it would triumph through the political and ethical externalities of free trade morality.

Free traders could not just promise cheap sugar; they had to demonstrate that their reforms would not assist the slave trade, or would even combat it. Some, like

⁵⁸ James Ewing Ritchie, *Thoughts on slavery and cheap sugar* (London, 1844), p. 6.

⁵⁹ *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1848, xcvi, 62–4, 71.

⁶⁰ Ritchie, *Thoughts on slavery and cheap sugar*, p. 37.

⁶¹ Beldam, *A review of the late proposed measure*, p. 51.

⁶² *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1841, lviii, 40–1.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 1846, lxxxvii, 1311. See also *ibid.*, 1846, lxxxviii, 24–5.

⁶⁴ On the productivity of Southern cotton, see Robert William Fogel, *Without consent or contract: the rise and fall of American slavery* (New York, NY, and London, 1989), pp. 72–7.

⁶⁵ *Economist*, 1 Aug. 1846, p. 987. See also: *ibid.*, 25 July 1846, pp. 956–7; *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1848, xcvi, 50–2.

⁶⁶ For example: *Manchester Times and Gazette*, 11 July 1846, p. 4; *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1848, xcvi, 85–6; *ibid.*, 1848, c, 59; *ibid.*, 1846, lxxxviii, 24.

Sir Charles Wood in 1848, conceded that free trade may stimulate a small short-term increase in slave sugar production but maintained that open competition was the only way slave labour would be routed in the long run.⁶⁷ The special status of commerce – with its attendant role in the functions of the world – made blunt abstinence from slave produce short-sighted; free traders held that freedom was an absolute good ordained to produce moral results. In this vein, some newspapers berated protectionist abolitionists for not discerning the connection between free trade and anti-slavery: American emancipation would require a free market for alternative exports, like corn. Did they not appreciate that ‘our corn-law is the main prop of the accursed slave-owning interest in that country?’⁶⁸

The sugar question amounted to a test of faith in free trade, not anti-slavery. Free trade doctrine created faith in commerce as a providential panacea to all the world’s ills; God had ordained that ‘the only radical cure for slavery was the free commercial intercourse of nations. Commerce was the great emancipator.’⁶⁹ The development of anti-slavery as another aspect of the free trade creed necessarily de-centred immediate abolitionist priorities – and certainly the welfare of black people. The two sides of the debate differed over whether a free market would produce moral outcomes in two respects: first, in the operation of free labour superiority and, secondly, in promoting freedom-inspiring values.

Despite special pleading for another delay, the date of equalization, as decided in 1848, remained. As chancellor of the exchequer, Gladstone concluded that the duties must finally be decided and the preference for the West Indies ended in 1854.⁷⁰ The Conservatives’ accommodation with free trade, under Disraeli, effectively ended active political discussion of the issue. One pamphleteer looked back to when ‘the philanthropy of 1834 was sacrificed, with the freedom of Africa, in 1846’.⁷¹ Yet such pessimism came from those who saw their cause losing the sugar duties debate of 1846. There is no evidence that Russell, Peel, and others who opposed protection and recanted on immigration restrictions acted out of insincerity towards Britain’s professed anti-slavery credentials. On the contrary, defections from the protectionist side of the debate reflected the slow intellectual triumph of a free trade cause.

III

Protectionist defence of the sugar duties focused on the effect repeal would exert on Britain’s crusade against global slavery. Lord Denman, father of an officer in

⁶⁷ *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1848, XCIX, 855–6.

⁶⁸ *Morning Chronicle*, 11 May, 1841, p. 7.

⁶⁹ *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1841, LVIII, 101; see also Lord Grey’s prediction that free trade in sugar was the most likely way to end the slave trade: *ibid.*, 1846, LXXXVIII, 538–9.

⁷⁰ This marked the equalization of foreign and domestic duties on sugar. The final abolition of the duties was undertaken in 1874: W. M. J. Williams, *The king’s revenue: being a handbook to the taxes and the public revenue* (London, 1908), pp. 38–9.

⁷¹ H. V. Huntley, *Observations upon the free trade policy of England in connexion with the sugar act of 1846* (London, 1849), p. 29.

the navy's West African squadron, argued that admitting slave sugar would run counter to Britain's efforts to suppress the transatlantic traffic.⁷² As his ally Lord Brougham put it, a man who voted for freer trade in sugar 'must see that he held up his hand not only for slavery, but for the extension of the execrable crime, and that most revolting of crimes, the African Slave Trade'.⁷³ In 1841, John Colquhoun, a tory MP, offered a horrific image: cheap sugar would be cheapened 'at the price of blood, and by the sacrifice of human life' since a greater supply of sugar for Britons would require more slaves to be taken to Brazil and Cuba.⁷⁴ Invoking similar images of bloodied sugar, Samuel Wilberforce calculated that one new slave would be needed for every additional ton Britons would consume.⁷⁵ The possibility of admitting foreign free-grown sugar alone, which would have answered this charge, had been found to be unworkable in 1844–5, when attempted by Peel's administration. Discriminating between produce on the basis of how it was produced fell foul of existing trading treaties.⁷⁶ If Britain was to import more sugar, it would have to be produced by foreigners' slaves, procured through the slave trade.

Given the protectionists' inconsistency in admitting other articles of slave produce, free traders argued that Britons 'must look for the amelioration of this evil to some other quarter than the Custom-house'.⁷⁷ While slave produce could be denounced as stolen goods, such a metaphor broke down in practice. A normal shopkeeper could return stolen goods to their rightful owner, but slave sugar excluded from the British market would simply be sold elsewhere.⁷⁸ '[E]very hundred-weight of free-labour sugar we consume, must be replaced by an equal amount of slave-labour sugar', as the logic went.⁷⁹ Why was the same abstinence not applied to cotton, which was credited with employing a million and a half artisans, or tobacco which produced a revenue of three and a half million pounds to the exchequer?⁸⁰ The widespread reliance of Britain's economy on other slave products rendered bizarre the protection of sugar and deterrence of its slave-grown variety.⁸¹ Anti-slavery protectionism could be applied to other such goods, and implied 'a total non-intercourse with the slave-grown countries'. Russell teased, in 1841,

where is the philanthropist who will tell me, 'I have a cup of slave-grown coffee, and by putting a lump of free sugar into it I shall make the potation quite innocuous – and any

⁷² *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1846, LXXXVIII, 514. See also *ibid.*, 1846, LVIII, 136–7; *ibid.*, 1846, LXXXVIII, 503 and 45.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 1846, LXXXVIII, 534.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 1841, LVIII, 121.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 1846, LXXXVIII, 653; Samuel Wilberforce, *Cheap sugar means cheap slaves* (London, 1848), p. 13.

⁷⁶ *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1848, XCIX, 1236–7; *ibid.*, 1848, xcvi, 50–2.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 1846, LXXXVIII, 122.

⁷⁸ So argued Russell, *ibid.*, 1846, LXXXVII, 1314. There was at least one reply to this point: Wilberforce, *Cheap sugar means cheap slaves*, p. 8.

⁷⁹ *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1846, LXXXVIII, 488. See also *Leeds Mercury*, 25 July 1846, p. 4; *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1846, LXXXVIII, 525.

⁸⁰ See *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1840, LV, 82.

⁸¹ *Liverpool Mercury*, 24 July 1846, p. 10; *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1846, LXXXVIII, 482; *ibid.*, 1848, xcvi, 85; *ibid.*, 1841, LVIII, 98.

person, whatever may be his regard for the negro, and however much he may prefer the interests of a man with black skin to one with a white, will be exposed to no reproach – no remorse of conscience – if he qualifies his beverage by the addition I have mentioned.’⁸²

This inconsistency was a font of whig humour; the marquis of Lansdowne mocked that protectionists used a peculiar moral thermometer which ‘rose to boiling point on Cuba sugar, but sank to a most agreeable temperature on Carolina cotton’.⁸³ John Bright argued that ‘the idea of enquiring into the moral condition of every people with whom we trade seems to me most irrational – hitherto no result but injury to our own people has followed’.⁸⁴

In rebuttal, protectionists ridiculed the logic that, because Britons ‘did wrong in admitting one article of slave produce, they were justified in admitting others’. Was it to be a free trade in morals?⁸⁵ Yet the difficulty of imagining a British economy without any slave-grown imports was perhaps the greatest single impediment to excluding slave sugar on anti-slavery grounds. ‘[W]hile our system of manufacture exists’, Merivale suggested, the ‘great social evil’ of slavery must be defeated by other means than the exclusion of slave products.⁸⁶ In 1841, Sandon (then still a protectionist) accepted that total abstinence from slave-grown produce was utterly impractical, but confessed that ‘he had never heard the warmest abolitionist profess it’.⁸⁷ The problem for the BFASS was that they held just such a position: Joseph Sturge and others in the organization came under attack for suggesting that the state should act against all slave produce consumed in Britain.⁸⁸ In the years after the Society’s defeat, they and other protectionist abolitionists promoted the sale of free labour produce by individual shopkeepers. This initiative of private conscience was hardly more popular than state-enforced abstention.⁸⁹ In parliament, sugar dominated discussion of trade with slave-holders throughout the 1840s, although the problems of securing free labour cotton would come to the fore before the American Civil War.

Protectionists naturally held that, far from saving the West Indies, free trade would ‘throw a vast number of estates out of cultivation’ and drive free labour from the marketplace.⁹⁰ For them, it was important to respect traditional and recent national duties to the West Indian planters, whose economic interests they

⁸² *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1841, LVIII, 37–8.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 1846, LXXXVIII, 517. See, similarly, *ibid.*, 1846, LXXXVIII, 537.

⁸⁴ British Library (BL), Add. MS 43845 (Joseph Sturge papers), fos. 13–14: Bright to Sturge, 1 Jan. 1843.

⁸⁵ *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1846, LXXXVII, 1335–6; see also *ibid.*, 1841, LVIII, 86; *ibid.*, 1846, LXXXVIII, 505. The distinction of sugar from all other slave-grown goods had, ironically, been used by Labouchere, when explaining the whigs’ opposition in 1840: *ibid.*, 1840, LV, 86.

⁸⁶ Merivale, *Lectures*, 1, pp. 296–7.

⁸⁷ *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1841, LVIII, 43.

⁸⁸ *Economist*, 1 Aug. 1846, pp. 986–7.

⁸⁹ Ruth Ketring Nueremberger, *The free produce movement: a Quaker protest against slavery* (New York, NY, 1942), pp. 57–8; Temperley, *British anti-slavery*, p. 165.

⁹⁰ *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1846, LXXXVIII, 115–16; *ibid.*, 1846, LXXXVIII, 513.

expected to be ruined by the abolition of duties.⁹¹ Some begged that Britain's free labour experiment was being watched by the world and should not be undermined by unfair competition with slave labour.⁹² Crucially, the protectionists maintained that a cheap and reliable supply of sugar for the common people would be secured only with 'the maintenance of cultivation in the West Indies as a national object'.⁹³ This pessimism hinged on the economic superiority of slave labour. Like others sympathetic to West Indian planters, Gladstone denied there was any example where 'the produce of free labour, could or did compete with the produce of slave labour'.⁹⁴

More surprising, as noted above, was the attitude of zealous abolitionists who recanted on free labour superiority. Lushington tied himself in knots when he argued that reducing duties would express 'utter hopelessness that free labour was able to compete with slave labour' and 'abandon that great experiment as an utter failure'. His position held that blacks would prove as productive free as enslaved, but only after a period of adjustment: a curious cocktail of pessimism and devotion to free labour.⁹⁵ Samuel Wilberforce confessed that '[i]t is not true then that free labour is cheaper than that of slaves, in the sense of a more immediate production of wealth. It is altogether untrue.' This bishop of Oxford and son of an abolitionist 'saint' insisted that free labour was only cheaper than slave labour when the planter could not acquire replacements for those slaves he had worked to death. The sanction of God on free labour was hence only demonstrated by the fact that slave wealth 'brings a curse, not alone on the individual, but on the nation that so obtains it; and thus we see that slave labour, while it produces more immediate riches, produces also evils which are the sure witness of God against it'.⁹⁶ This variety of free labour superiority moved in mysterious ways, its advantages lying beyond mere profit margins.

A more secular form of this argument emerged amongst those who favoured free trade in corn, but believed sugar to be an exceptional case because of the competitive advantages of slave labour: you could not compare it to free labour, just as 'there could be no competition between a racehorse and a steam-engine'.⁹⁷ Protectionists cited the late James Deacon Hume, a free trader, who had rejected free commerce in sugar on precisely such grounds before the 1840 select committee on import duties.⁹⁸ Free labour was now proposed as weak and dependent on state support by both the most prominent abolitionist society and the

⁹¹ A point they made during subsequent West Indian distress: *ibid.*, 1848, XCIX, 758; *ibid.*, 1848, XCIX, 782–3. By contrast, John Bright likened the planters to Oliver Twist, as they continually begged for more: *ibid.*, 1848, XCIX, 1428.

⁹² 'A resident in the West Indies for thirteen years', *The British West India colonies* (London, 1853), p. 4.

⁹³ *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1846, LXXXVIII, 141–3.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1840, LV, 102. See also *ibid.*, 1846, LXXXVIII, 38.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1840, LV, 92.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1846, LXXXVIII, 661; Drescher, *The mighty experiment*, p. 180. The bishop repeated the arguments in an 1848 speech reprinted as Wilberforce, *Cheap sugar means cheap slaves*, pp. 3–4.

⁹⁷ *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1848, XCVI, 103. See also *ibid.*, 1848, XCIX, 1466.

⁹⁸ *PP*, 1840, v (601), p. 119; *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1840, LVIII, 122; *ibid.*, 1848, xcvi, 102; Huntley, *Observations upon the free trade policy of England*, p. 39; Drescher, *The mighty experiment*, pp. 162–3.

protectionists, a heresy from anti-slavery orthodoxy. In many ways, the early Victorian conflict was a collision between two strands and sources of anti-slavery thought that had co-existed before 1838: eschatological evangelicalism and utilitarian political economy. The position of abolitionist protectionists, such as Samuel Wilberforce, aligned with an apocalyptic, sacrificial tendency, while free traders such as Cobden and Russell held to a free labour tradition.⁹⁹ Sincere anti-slavery sentiment found itself divided by the sugar contest, as the superiority of free labour fell into dispute.

IV

As much as the early Victorians debated Britain's future impact on global slavery and how to cheapen sugar, parliamentarians also contested the recent past. Both sides claimed to be the authentic voice of abolitionism and guarantors of freedom-loving national traditions. The completeness with which the pugilists co-opted abolitionist arguments underlines the importance placed on proving the anti-slavery authority of their plans. Bishop Wilberforce conceded that 'I mean by no covert insinuation to suggest that noble Lords who support this measure, are one whit less humane, one whit less sincere and earnest in their desire to prevent slavery and the slave trade than myself.'¹⁰⁰ Others were keener to deny their opponents' sincerity as well as their policies.¹⁰¹ Brougham and Lord Grey engaged the sugar duties issue by attacking each others' record over the emancipation bill of 1833.¹⁰² Audaciously, William Gladstone – whose first parliamentary speech had opposed emancipation – used humanitarian arguments to berate the free trade views of his cousin, William Ewart, in an 1840 debate.¹⁰³ Disraeli admitted that 'no one is a supporter of slavery; every one is filled with natural indignation at the thought of it'. Regarding the whigs' policy on the slave trade, he professed that 'it would be a libel to suppose them indifferent to it' – before insinuating just that.¹⁰⁴ Emancipation was never attacked as a point of principle during the sugar duty debates, but MPs were happy to regret the way in which it had been implemented.¹⁰⁵ Henry Barkly confessed that emancipation was 'the best reparation this country could make for having shared so deeply in the profits and guilt of the Slave Trade', but he would 'hold the people of this country to be responsible, not for having abolished slavery, but for having abolished it badly' and criticized government interference in West Indian immigration.¹⁰⁶

Both sides in the sugar duties debate were anxious to prove that public opinion sanctioned their anti-slavery methods. Lushington tried to argue that thousands of abolitionist petitions over the years had vastly outnumbered those few that

⁹⁹ This division in economic thought is mapped by Hilton, *The age of atonement*, and Davis, *Slavery and human progress*, p. 211.

¹⁰⁰ *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1846, LXXXVIII, 650.

¹⁰¹ For example, there were fierce arguments over partisan credit or blame for British policy towards slavery: *ibid.*, 1841, LVIII, 39; *ibid.*, 1841, LVIII, 46–7.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 1846, LXXXVIII, 536–9.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 1840, LV, 100.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 1846, LXXXVIII, 154, 158.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 1848, XCIX, 754–5.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 1846, LXXXVIII, 139.

protested the price of sugar.¹⁰⁷ Samuel Wilberforce predicted that the masses would ultimately oppose any moves to remove the anti-slavery consensus their Christian spirit had established in Britain.¹⁰⁸ He promised that ‘the mind of the people will insist upon morality and honour; they will dash at once from their lips the chalice you offer to them, tinged as it is with the blood of fellow-creatures sacrificed to the economy’.¹⁰⁹ And yet public outcry against repeal of the duties did not appear. Provincial anti-slavery societies generated petitions as much in favour of free trade as against.¹¹⁰ Richard Cobden boasted that those in his constituency who had most vigorously supported William Wilberforce when he was their MP were against the sugar monopoly.¹¹¹ John Bright warned Joseph Sturge that he was allied with ‘the supporters of monopoly’ and ‘could not affect any election in any Borough of England’ on such a principle.¹¹² As a vote on the 1846 bill approached, *The Economist* similarly judged that tory protectionists could not win an election triggered on the question of sugar protection. The paper suggested that the slavery issue, not protection itself, would be the only aspect on which the public could be moved to oppose free trade. In their estimation, urban constituencies were those where anti-slavery concerns decided how ballots were cast, yet the anti-slavery case for sugar protection could not be pressed credibly.¹¹³ While heavily partisan, this analysis is convincing. Anti-slavery protectionism never had a grip in the firmest anti-slavery constituencies.

If the measures of 1846 should be understood as a victory for free trade anti-slavery over protectionist anti-slavery, what were the long-term implications of such success? The principle that commerce and morality could naturally combine to rout slavery continued to be much contested in the decades after 1846, even if free trade increasingly assumed a hegemonic status in political economic thought. For a decade after the sugar duties bill was passed, a debate raged over exactly how much state intervention, and of what kind, would preserve British anti-slavery commitments. As much as the sugar duties controversy caused bitter divisions over protection, opinion coalesced against free blacks and in favour of more immigration. One of the most significant outcomes of the broader debate about the West Indies was a consensus that more labour was required in the sugar colonies to drive down wages. Protectionists and free traders alike therefore came to share a desire to increase immigration and hence lower wage costs in the West Indies. Since the early 1840s, restrictions on immigration were subjected to a *laissez-faire* critique alongside sugar protection: ‘in both cases a restrictive policy has been found to be fraught with inevitable ill. It were time that they should both retire.’¹¹⁴ Proponents of emigration from India accused humanitarian opponents of ‘virtually encouraging the slave trade’ by their

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 1840, LV, 94–5.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 1846, LXXXVIII, 666. ¹⁰⁹ Wilberforce, *Cheap sugar means cheap slaves*, p. 13.

¹¹⁰ Rice, ‘“Humanity sold for sugar!”’, pp. 411–15.

¹¹¹ *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1848, XCIX, 751–2.

¹¹² BL, Add. MS 43845 (Sturge papers), fos. 13–14; Bright to Sturge, 1 Jan. 1843.

¹¹³ *Economist*, 25 July 1846, p. 953. ¹¹⁴ Ritchie, *Thoughts on slavery and cheap sugar*, p. 26.

intransigence.¹¹⁵ In 1848, new evidence of West Indian distress led Bentinck and the tory protectionists to fight a rear-guard action against free trade in sugar. Rather than retain the sugar monopoly, Russell and the whigs responded with the promise of £500,000 to underwrite the cost of new emigration to the sugar colonies.¹¹⁶ While the Liberals never came to repudiate free trade, decline in the West Indies led them to emphasize other ways of interfering in the success of slave labour; namely by means of the West Africa cruisers.¹¹⁷ To sceptics like *Punch*, the cruisers seemed to be a quixotic alternative to protection. Regarding the slave trade, Mr. Punch suggested:

If I mean that it should cease, I must renounce my toothsome sin,
Resolv'd from this time forth to take no slave-grown sugar in.

But I can't resign cheap sugar; so I'll keep up my blockade,
For appearance sake – by way of demonstration and parade ¹¹⁸

The ministry clung to the navy as the only legitimate means of securing a free labour triumph over slavery – and were seemingly proved correct when Brazilian abolition followed military pressure in 1850.¹¹⁹

Yet the most committed acolytes of *laissez-faire* pursued free trade anti-slavery to its logical conclusion, abandoning hope of coercing an end to global slavery altogether. Radicals like Cobden, Bright, and William Hutt thought that foreign slave-holding would only cease as a result of the cultivation of public sentiment abroad, believing that the comity of nations offered a better route than the bombards of a cruiser.¹²⁰ In doing so, they went further than the free trading liberal ministry could countenance, Russell and Palmerston threatening to resign if defeated on the question.¹²¹ Many sugar protectionists made common cause with free trade pacifists, seeing the cruisers as a fig-leaf for the hated free trade in sugar. The controversy over whether Britain should use naval violence thus led to further evolution (and revolution) in anti-slavery alignments. Two months after Hutt's failed motion to withdraw the West Africa squadron, a new attempt was made to reinstate preferential duties for British sugar. A statistical analysis of those MPs who voted on both these 1850 bills shows just how few were willing to accept the most extreme *laissez-faire* view: of those who backed free trade in sugar, 155 endorsed naval coercion. Just 44 free traders in sugar voted against naval

¹¹⁵ E. Archer, *A letter to the Right Hon. S. Lushington MP and the opponents of free labour, showing that in their opposition to emigration from India to the British colonies they are virtually encouraging the slave trade* (London, 1840). For BFASS opposition, see for example Thomas Clarkson, *Not a labourer wanted for Jamaica* (London, 1842).

¹¹⁶ *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1848, XCIX, 729–36. See also *ibid.*, 1848, XCIX, 1384.

¹¹⁷ Drescher, *The mighty experiment*, p. 191.

¹¹⁸ *Punch*, 20 Mar. 1850, p. 130.

¹¹⁹ Bethell, *Abolition of the Brazilian slave trade*, pp. 325–41.

¹²⁰ *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1845, LXXXI, 1166–7; *ibid.*, 1849, CIV, 785–7.

¹²¹ The differences between Cobdenite and Palmerstonian interpretations of free trade's implications for foreign policy are discussed more generally in Howe, *Free trade and Liberal England*, ch. 3, and Anthony Howe, 'Two faces of British power: Cobden versus Palmerston', in David Brown and Miles Taylor, eds., *Palmerston studies II* (Southampton, 2007), pp. 166–92.

suppression.¹²² Although these figures are somewhat deceptive, given that the cruiser vote became one of confidence in the ministry, they nevertheless show that liberal orthodoxy refused to trust that global emancipation would be the result of a free trade in slaves as well as a free trade in sugar. The question of military suppression compounded the balkanization of anti-slavery politics.

Surprisingly, many of the West Indian planters' sympathizers opposed suppression of the slave trade, because they believed Britain's coastal blockade was an impediment to the immigration of African free labourers to the West Indies. A shortage of labour became a common diagnosis of the sugar colonies' difficulties.¹²³ Objections to such immigration were frequently portrayed as an appalling attempt to protect blacks from hard work. In his popular *West Indies and the Spanish Main* (1859), Anthony Trollope mourned the continued 'idleness' of blacks in the West Indies, with a critique that bore the marks of Thomas Carlyle's racism: 'He [the freedman] is a man; and, if you will a brother; but he is the very idlest brother with which a hardworking workman was ever cursed.'¹²⁴ Could blacks, Trollope asked, be free but also compelled 'as is the Englishman, to eat his bread in the sweat of his brow?'¹²⁵ His anti-slavery sentiment alongside criticism of West Indian blacks summed up much of the debates of the 1840s. When the sugar islands failed to revive in the decades after free trade, a majority of Britons began to question, in racial terms, the capacity of black people and to ponder the exceptional circumstances that had prevented free labour's triumph there. Aside from free traders' suggestions that West Indians mismanaged their estates, consensus came to rest on the need for a larger labour force.¹²⁶ The few humanitarians wishing to preserve the balance of labour in favour of the emancipated black were left isolated.¹²⁷ As seen above, such racial thinking was compatible with anti-slavery sentiment.

The protectionists' and free traders' mutual obsession with the colonial work-force had fundamental implications for British understanding of free labour superiority, as well as ideas about black people in the West Indies. If the sugar duties debate was not the last stand of abolitionism, then perhaps the victory of the free

¹²² This analysis is based on a comparison of divisions on the sugar duties and slave trade bills of 19 Mar. 1850 (*Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1850, cix, 1184–6) and 31 May 1850 (*ibid.*, 1850, cx1, 593–6). There were 331 MPs who voted in both divisions. 45 MPs voted for protection and coercion, 155 for free trade and coercion (the ministry position), 87 MPs for protection and pacifism, and just 44 MPs voted for free trade and pacifism. The comparison excludes both Robert Palmer and Sir Roundell Palmer, as it is not possible to correlate their votes on division lists where they both featured as 'R. Palmer'.

¹²³ For free trader and protectionist arguments that the cruisers acted in this fashion, see: *ibid.*, 1848, xcvi, 1107; *ibid.*, 1846, lxxxviii, 138–40; *PP*, 1847–8, House of Lords, xxii (467), 80–5.

¹²⁴ Trollope was particularly critical of attempts by Brougham and the BFASS to regulate free immigration: Anthony Trollope, *The West Indies and the Spanish Main* (2nd edn, London, 1860), pp. 65–7.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

¹²⁶ *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1848, xcix, 1220–2. See concerns about black labour choices in the Report of the Select Committee on the West India Colonies, *PP*, 1842, pp. xiii, iv–v; *Select documents on British colonial policy, 1830–1860*, ed. Bell and Morrell, pp. 421–3.

¹²⁷ *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1846, lxxxvii, 1336–7. Others who still hung to this concern included the free trade abolitionists George Thompson and John Bright: *ibid.*, 1848, xcix, 1217–19; *ibid.*, 1848, xcix, 1427.

traders should be acknowledged as the last unadulterated victory for free labour ideology. In his speech rejecting Hutt's motion for withdrawing the naval cruisers, Russell modified his view of free labour superiority. He accepted that the West Indies had adapted to the challenges of emancipation and free trade, but believed that the end of slave trade suppression would be disastrous – an unimpeded supply of fresh, cheap slave labour would rout free sugar from the marketplace. Predicting that withdrawal would ensure that 'we have no longer a right to expect a continuance of those blessings which, by God's favour, we have so long enjoyed', Russell ultimately relied on providential duty – and the violent blockade of slave trading – to prove free labour superior.¹²⁸

In similar ways, in the 1850s, other supporters of free trade came to distance themselves from the unadulterated superiority of free labour. New variables were admitted to explain how slave labour could enjoy superior production when the labour supply was restricted and there was a limitless supply of fresh soil.¹²⁹ Even if this was a retreat from earlier social scientific notions of free labour ideology, it should be recognized as a bastard child. For many thinkers, the risk of slave insurrections, the way slavery corrupted an entire nation's values, or the inevitable exhaustion of slave economies' soil, still pointed to the wisdom of Britain's example in making a peaceful transition away from slave-holding. Anti-slavery was still identified with forces of progress, morality, and civilization, but its inevitability and material benefits were reconfigured in less definite and universal terms. The protectionists were defeated over the sugar duties, but economic thought would subsequently be dominated by their view that free labour could only out-perform slave labour given a sufficient supply of labour.¹³⁰

Yet even while the eternal superiority of free labour was abandoned in the years after 1846, its triumph was still understood to be inevitable. Providence, in the form of social externalities, was co-opted by political economy to square the circle of free trade and slave labour. This development was expressed in the belief that slavery could be more profitable than free labour for a planter, but remained harmful to a society's wider moral and economic progress. John Stuart Mill believed that slavery may sometimes be more profitable for individual planters, but stifled innovation and moral sentiment in the longer term.¹³¹ More than a decade after the sugar duties act, John Elliott Cairnes accepted that the sugar colonies' transition to freedom had largely failed, economically, in the West Indies, but he

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1850, cix, 1183.

¹²⁹ Drescher, *The mighty experiment*, pp. 227, 210–11.

¹³⁰ *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1846, lxxxvii, 1315; *ibid.*, 1846, lxxxviii, 116; John Innes, *Thoughts on the present state of the West India colonies* (London, 1840), pp. 14, 28, 39; Ritchie, *Thoughts on slavery and cheap sugar*, p. 26; *Hansard*, 3rd ser., 1846, lxxxviii, 133–4; *ibid.*, 1848, xcix, 1384; Drescher, *The mighty experiment*, p. 165.

¹³¹ J. S. Mill, *Principles of political economy* (2 vols., London, 1848), I, pp. 297–8, 303–39, II, p. 243; for a nuanced account of his view on free labour and comparison with American thought see James L. Huston, 'Abolitionists, political economists, and capitalism', *Journal of the Early Republic*, 20 (2000), pp. 487–521, at p. 496.

was still certain that it was the superior choice for any society. Indeed, he saw the short-term superiority of slave labour as self-defeating, because its productivity was based on exhaustion of the soil. If an economic thinker such as Cairnes came to abandon hope of the West Indies' productivity returning, he did not regret emancipation or ascribe it to the end of protection. He accepted West Indian decline as a sad inevitability, but one that invalidated neither anti-slavery virtue nor free trade ideology.¹³² Mill and Cairnes located the advantages of emancipation beyond the direct comparisons of market superiority. Similarly, Trollope could not bring himself to criticize the end of either slavery or protection. As he remarked, 'Abolition of slavery is good, and free trade is good. Such little insight as a plain man may have into the affairs around him seems to me to suffice for the expression of such opinion.' Like the hand-loom weavers, the planters had sadly found their interests obstructing national progress and were thus ruined.¹³³ In Trollope's view, measures of emancipation and equalization had generally enhanced the nation's wealth, prosperity, and virtue, even if the West Indies itself declined under free labour cultivation. His sadness at the decline of West Indian sugar production ignored explicit consideration of whether slave-grown cultivation had increased under free trade and focused on how a great national institution, the sugar colonies, had declined.¹³⁴

V

Victorian attitudes to free trade and anti-slavery were characterized by conflicting visions of how the market should be framed – whether economic regulation was the nemesis or nursemaid of morality. As Frank Trentmann has argued, market economics were not amorally advanced in place of older 'moral economies' on the basis of their supposed efficiency alone. They were infused with models of economic morality too, even if 'most commentators and social movements today find it impossible to even think of ethics, civil society, and free trade in the same frame'. Free trade was culturally constructed, and '[e]conomic interests need to be relocated within the wider matrix of ideas, values and discursive practices'.¹³⁵

¹³² John Elliott Cairnes, *The slave power* (2nd edn, London and Cambridge, 1863), pp. 65–72, 341–5; Robert W. Fogel, 'The origin and history of economic issues in the American slavery debate', in Robert W. Fogel, Ralph A. Galantine, and Richard L. Manning, eds., *Without consent or contract: the rise and fall of American slavery: evidence and methods* (New York, NY, and London, 1992), pp. 161–3. The omission of Cairnes from Drescher's account of free labour ideology is noted by Adam Rothman, 'Review of Seymour Drescher, *The mighty experiment* (Oxford, 2002)', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 24 (2004), pp. 634–6.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 100–6.

¹³³ Trollope, *West Indies*, p. 104.

¹³⁵ Frank Trentmann, 'Before "fair trade": empire, free trade, and the moral economies of food in the modern world', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 25 (2007), pp. 1079–102, at p. 1090; *idem*, *Free trade nation: commerce, consumption, and civil society in modern Britain* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 2–7, 11–14; *idem*, 'Political culture and political economy: interest, ideology and free trade', *Review of International Political Economy*, 5 (1998), pp. 217–51.

The repeal of the sugar duties marked the last expressions of hope for those who believed that the 'great experiment' would be a means of demonstrating the benefits of freedom to the world. Rather than repudiating free trade as inimical to anti-slavery or repudiating anti-slavery in favour of cheap sugar, political economists adapted their ideas to explain the apparent inferiority of free labour. Therefore, the sugar debate re-shaped anti-slavery thinking about free labour superiority and how Britain could best hope to export her abolitionist revolution abroad. The repeal of the sugar duties did not represent a capitulation of anti-slavery sentiment to economic interest, but a reckoning between two contradictory traditions within the movement for abolition and emancipation.

The conflict was a collision between those who found providence in the laws of the market and those who expected 'special providence' to be expressed in more mysterious ways than the invisible hand – a divide that had existed within abolitionism's evangelical and economical varieties since the 1780s.¹³⁶ The apparent failure of the combination of free trade and anti-slavery led to a search for new variables that explained why free labour would ultimately prove superior – as expressed in the political economy of Mill and Cairnes. Ironically, that meant confessing the possible superiority of slave labour in certain circumstances, and recourse to faith in the providential advantages of a society that rejected human bondage.

It would have been impossible to repeal the sugar duties if such a measure had been widely understood to sacrifice the nation's anti-slavery credentials. Free trade could simultaneously champion its tenets in the name of domestic consumers, West Indian success, and the downfall of international slavery and the slave trade. Its political supporters were convinced of its ability to deliver global emancipation as well as cheap sugar; they did not discard the former in a craving for the latter.¹³⁷ This episode in Britain's transformation into a free trade nation should therefore be remembered as much for Victorians' moral certainty about the defeat of slavery and the moral power of free trade as the temptations of the cheap loaf of sugar.

¹³⁶ The present author will return to this issue in a forthcoming article. On anti-slavery and providentialism, see Hilton, *A mad, bad and dangerous people?*, pp. 184–8.

¹³⁷ This assertion chimes with the conclusion of Morgan, 'The Anti-Corn Law League and British anti-slavery', pp. 105–7.