

# The struggle to end slavery: pro-slavery and anti-slavery perspectives



## Case Study 1: The pro-slavery argument

Source 1: Extract from a list of resolutions passed at a meeting of the Standing Committee of West India Planters and Merchants held 26 April 1831.

That any measure which tends to the decrease of cultivation in the British West India Colonies, and to their consequent destruction, will in the same degree promote the prosperity of Foreign Colonies and of the Foreign slave trade for the extinction of which this Country has made and is making such costly sacrifices. If sugar is to be obtained from a Foreign Country, so far from one slave the less being employed, their number (beyond all reach of the control of this Country) will be largely increased, and from the demand for fresh hands (more especially in the Spanish and Portuguese Colonies) the Foreign slave trade,

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with all the evils of the middle passage, will be continued and greatly extended.

Source 2. Extract from a letter sent to Earl Grey by the Acting Committee of West India Planters and Merchants, dated 25 February 1833.

It will be admitted that, under any change of system, the continuance of active Cultivation in the Colonies by Europeans is not only of vital importance to the interests of the Mother Country, but indispensably necessary to the desired object of raising the Negro in the scale of society: while, therefore, it remains unascertained by actual experiment that the Negro will give continuous labour, and for reasonable wages, as a free man, - and while the weight of evidence and experience discourages the expectation of his willingly consenting to do so, - there must be the greatest danger that any hasty change of system, unaccompanied by regulations calculated to ensure the Slaves becoming an industrious peasantry.

peasantry, and to teach them the duties and obligations of civil society, would lead to the immediate destruction of the Colonies, and throw the Black Population back into a state of barbarism.

That your Lordship may be enabled to judge of the effect which such a calamity would produce on the interests of Great Britain, as well as of the irresistible impulse it would give to the Slave Trade, in which Foreigners still persist, the Committee beg leave to remind you, that the present annual gross Revenue derived from West Indian Produce is Seven Millions, the value of British Manufactures annually consumed in those Colonies is Four Millions and a half; and the number of Ships employed in the direct trade Nine hundred and fifty, - or Two hundred & forty thousand Tons, - exclusive of an extensive cross trade constantly maintained between the Colonies and British America. Also that the British Colonies at present supply nearly one half of the total quantity of Sugar imported into Europe.

Source 3. Extract from a pamphlet entitled *Third Letter to the Right Hon. Earl Grey, First Lord of the Treasury, on the question of Negro emancipation*, by H P Simmons (1834).

Although Admiral Fleming, a shrewd and keen politician, has ventured to assert, (differing from Nelson, Rodney, Jervis, Codrington, and a whole host of renowned and eminent naval commanders) that "the anti-slavery party has produced such an anodyne and soothing influence on the slaves, as to have preserved the islands from the effects of their righteous indignation for years past; and that owing to the efforts of the missionaries, rebellion has been prevented, pillage restrained, and bloodshed and massacre avoided;" there has, however, been positive proof in contradiction to his testimony, that the baptist preachers, and other dissenters from the church, really did poison the minds of the slaves in the Island of Jamaica, and ultimately wrought them up to the crime of rebellion, causing great devastation of property and destruction of life through a considerable portion of that island.

Commodore Farquhar, an authority certainly not less respectable than Admiral Fleming, and who was an eye-witness of the events to which his testimony refers, has recorded it as his solemn conviction, that "the fanatic efforts of the sectarian missionaries were the chief cause of exciting dis-

affection and revolt amongst the slaves." And, unhappily, the confessions of many of the misguided culprits at the place of execution, fully confirmed the lamentable fact. I am morally certain, that this bill for the abolition of slavery will be remembered only as entailing misery on the slave, ruin on the master, and a blot on British legislation, unless it be made so far agreeable to the planters, as to induce them to assist in its operation, by doing them the justice of enabling them to hire their own labourers, so that they may reward them according to their respective merits, and not subjecting the present masters to any claims of these half-freed people, who will probably be rendered doubly ferocious by the songs of congratulation which they will be taught by furious sectarian zealots, who are alike enemies to the planters, the altar, and the throne.

Source 4. Extract from a Memorial sent to Earl Grey from the West India Planters warning against the rumour of emancipating slaves without giving compensation, undated (c.1832).

Knowing from Experience that the Authority of the King's Name is esteemed by the Negroe Population of more importance even than an Act of Parliament, we particularly deplore at the present Moment of Excitement, any formal declaration under the sanction of His Majesty of any measure having for its object, the emancipation of the Slaves, feeling convinced that the moment such a declaration is promulgated in the Colonies their tranquility will be at an end and the lives of the Inhabitants placed in imminent peril.

Should these rumours ————— be verified an immediate cessation of intercourse between the Mother Country and her Colonies must ensue; We as Merchants must necessarily refuse that assistance and accommodation of Credit without which the Cultivation cannot be carried on; We must dishonor all Colonial Bills, decline shipping all Supplies for the maintenance of both black and white Inhabitants, and cease paying all Annuities here upon which so many Families are wholly dependant. In our opinion a state of things would follow the utter destruction of West India Commerce quite irreparable and calamitous in the  
last

last degree to Great Britain.

## **Case Study 2: The anti-slavery argument**

**Source 1. Extract from an anti-slavery pamphlet written by Henry Brougham that counters the economic arguments of the pro-slavers.**

Taken from *A Concise Statement of the Question Regarding the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, 1804.



II. *Question of the Slave Trade as it relates to the Interests of those directly engaged in it.*

1. It has been maintained that the African Trade opens a wide channel for the beneficial investment of capital, and that the Abolition by suddenly throwing out of employment so great a portion of stock, would give a serious blow to the commercial resources of the country.

In order to answer this, it will be sufficient to shew that the trade does not occupy any considerable part of the national capital—that the profits are of the description least beneficial to the country, and that the same capital, if excluded from this employment, would immediately and easily find a more advantageous vent.

According to the public accounts laid before Parliament from the Custom-house books, it appears that the official value of the exports to Africa during ten years, ending 1800, was £ 9,301,941, or £ 930,194 per annum. The average value of the imports from Africa

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during

during the same period, was £ 83,725, leaving the sum of £ 846,469, for the capital employed in the Slave Trade; and although we should allow that the official value is a third less than the real value of goods, the sum would not amount to more than £ 1,128,625, or not one *thirty-fourth* part of the average capital employed in the exports of the country during the same period of time.—And this is the trade which affords a demand for such a proportion of the National Stock, that its cessation must be attended with the instantaneous ruin of the British Commerce.

**Source 2a. Extract explaining the human cost of slavery.** Taken from *Substance of the debate in the House of Commons on a motion for the mitigation and gradual abolition of slavery throughout the British Dominions, 1823.*

And let it not be forgotten, that Slavery is itself not merely the effect, it is also the very cause, of the Slave Trade—of that system of fraud and violence by which Slaves are procured. If Slavery were extinct, the Slave Trade must cease. But while it is suffered to exist, that murderous traffic will still find a fatal incentive in the solicitude of the Slaveholder to supply the waste of life which his cupidity and cruelty have occasioned. Thus, in every point of view, is Slavery productive of the worst consequences to all the parties concerned. Besides all the direct and wide-wasting injuries which it inflicts on its immediate victims, it substitutes for the otherwise peaceful merchant a blood-thirsty pirate trading in human flesh; and, by ministering to pride, avarice, and sensuality, by exciting the angry passions, and hardening the heart against the best feelings of our nature, it tends to convert the owner of Slaves into a merciless tyrant.

Source 2b. Viewpoint of Robert Thorpe, a judge in a trial of slave traders.  
Taken from *The Trials of the Slave Traders*, 1813.

escape. Yet, when we consider the crime, the punishment cannot be considered severe; for what can be more abominable than seizing, selling, and transporting human beings, without any crime against God or man being imputed to them? Our conduct in life is directed by three laws—the law of opinion, the law of the land, and the law of God. You have violated them all; the slave trader is execrated in society, and the law of opinion, would condemn you to solitude; the verdict of the Jury, under which you now wait the sentence of the Court, is declaratory of your violation of the law of the land, and your conscience must convict you of despising the law of God; think of the commandment, “Thou shalt not steal;” it is neither money nor fame, but liberty of which you have robbed your fellow-creatures. Human beings, created and made after God’s image, you have stolen; you have loaded them with irons, plunged them into slavery, and bartered them for the wretched gratification of appetite and avarice; you have not, perhaps, seized on the person yourself, but you have received and sold the stolen body, and that is worse. Consider another great commandment of the Almighty, “Thou shalt do no murder.” How many innocent victims have expired at your threshold; how many torn from their country, parents, or children, have you condemned to disease, to decrepitude, to slavery, and to death?—

**Source 3. An ex-slave's perspective on the harsh treatment meted out to slaves.** Taken from Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa*, London, 1789.

Are slaves more useful by being thus humbled to the condition of brutes, than they would be if suffered to enjoy the privileges of men? The freedom which diffuses health and prosperity throughout Britain answers you—No. When you make men slaves you deprive them of half their virtue, you set them in your own conduct an example of fraud, rapine, and cruelty, and compel them to live with you in a state of war; and yet you complain that they are not honest

honest or faithful! You stupify them with stripes, and think it necessary to keep them in a state of ignorance; and yet you assert that they are incapable of learning; that their minds are such a barren soil or moor, that culture would be lost on them; and that they come from a climate, where nature, though prodigal of her bounties in a degree unknown to yourselves, has left man alone scant and unfinished, and incapable of enjoying the treasures she has poured out for him!—An assertion at once impious and absurd. Why do you use those instruments of torture? Are they fit to be applied by one rational being to another? And are ye not struck with shame and mortification, to see the partakers of your nature reduced so low? But, above all, are there no dangers attending this mode of treatment? Are you not

hourly in dread of an insurrection;  
Nor would it be surprizing: for when

“ ———No peace is given  
“ To us enslav'd, but custody severe;  
“ And stripes and arbitrary punishment  
“ Inflicted—What peace can we return?  
“ But to our power, hostility and hate;  
“ Untam'd reluctance, and revenge, though slow.  
“ Yet ever plotting how the conqueror least  
“ May reap his conquest, and may least rejoice  
“ In doing what we most in suffering feel.”

But by changing your conduct, and  
treating your slaves as men, every  
cause of fear would be banished. They  
would be faithful, honest, intelligent  
and vigorous; and peace, prosperity,  
and happiness, would attend you.

Source 4. Extract of a poem written by Miss Brady on the subject of slavery, 1814. Taken from the Backhouse Papers.

My lips are parched, my tongue is in a flame  
How vain his call, how useless his complaint  
He who on earth had seen the captive faint  
Who with insulting cruelty despised  
The tears that trickled from the Negro's eyes  
And when he wept in anguish for his home  
Said he'd his hand reach, and made him cease his moan  
How wretched is the untaught Negro's lot  
Scorn'd by the World in bondage or forgot  
But doubly wretched is the Christian's fate  
Who adds one load to their overburden'd state  
Why should this helpless race be so oppress'd  
Why should one part - their kindred thus detest  
From Adam spring the Legions of the earth  
From Eve our Mother, every being has birth  
One general chain incircles human kind,  
One great Privilege stands in every mind,  
Freedom is precious to the untaught slave  
As to the elevated sublime or brave  
And he who robs his Brother of his own  
Shall stand convicted at Heavens eternal throne  
Freedom the darling dearest joy of man  
That cheers his pilgrimage thro' life's weary span