In 1750, the majority of the world’s population lived in the great agrarian empires of Eurasia, spanning the globe from China to Austria but also covering large swathes of Spanish America. A smaller number of people, notably in Africa, Australia, the North American interior and in the Pacific, lived in stateless societies. These societies were often nomadic, with economies based on exploitation of agricultural, forest and animal products. A growing number of people, however, lived in emerging commercial societies in northwestern Europe and in their oceanic empires overseas, especially in the Atlantic World. These Atlantic overseas empires were not just harbingers of new political formations. They constituted different types of imperial entities that prefigured the world of the nineteenth century.1 By the late seventeenth century, the most important institution in these overseas empires was slavery. Indeed, in European overseas empires slavery made empire pay and empire made slavery possible. In particular, at least before 1807 and the abolition of the British slave trade, the Atlantic slave trade made the whole enterprise work. For Britain and France, the sugar colonies and the slave trade that supported them were the engine of eighteenth-century European empires. As Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper note for Britain,

The growing number of laborers devoted to cane created a demand for provisions that stimulated the food-exporting economy of New England in the late seventeenth century. Meanwhile, sugar mixed with tea from China and India began to provide a significant portion of the calories of industrial workers in England, whose products went to North America and the Caribbean, as well as to markets beyond the empire, including Africa.2

Little of this would have happened without imperial force to protect planters. Imperial power was important in creating slave labour systems as well as stopping slaves from rebelling and preventing incursions into colonies from other European powers.

There existed on the surface, therefore, little reason either for metropolitan imperial centres to do anything against planter interests or for planters to rebel against imperial authority. The process was symbiotic: what was good for planters was generally good for empire and vice versa. Yet during the Age of Revolutions, from approximately 1760 to 1840, planters led the way in mounting attacks upon the imperial system, often in the guise of gaining more authority to do as they pleased within the slave system. Imperial officials wrongly thought
that the danger of slave revolt in colonies with large populations would prevent planters from taking up arms against the mother-country. They also presumed that planters, as the greatest beneficiaries of an increasingly integrated world of commerce run under mercantilist and imperialist rules, would naturally support imperial ambitions. In addition, the natural tendency towards conservatism that planters often exhibited in their attitudes towards hierarchy, order and ideology predisposed them towards disliking revolutionary change, especially revolutionary change based around ideologies of equality, liberty and fraternity.

Imperial officials were wrong. Although planters did not initiate revolution in any of the plantation systems that experienced dramatic change during the Age of Revolutions—British North America, French Saint-Domingue, Brazil and Spanish America—a considerable proportion of planters in each of these regions became both enthusiastic supporters of revolutionary change after it began and also highly effective opponents of imperial attempts to return to traditional relationships between metropoles and colonies. As a result of their opposition to imperial control, the plantation systems of the Atlantic World were disrupted by considerable strife and were significantly transformed during the sixty years either side of the start of the nineteenth century.

This chapter explores whether that majority of planters who supported revolutionary claims in the Atlantic were sensible in making such choices and what the results of radical change were on the plantation system. Why did significant numbers of planters oppose empire, given the extent to which imperial power was crucial to the creation of slave labour systems and vital to protecting emergent and mature slave systems from attack and depredation from other European empires? What did they hope to gain from challenging imperial authority in imperial settings?

The answers tell us something about the nature of the Age of Revolutions; a great deal about planters and their role in these conflicts; and something about the reconfiguration of empires around the turn of the nineteenth century. Historians have started to move away from an older view that saw empires as a way-station towards the emergence of a nation-state. Empires did not disappear during the Age of Revolutions as people rebelled against their supposed rigidity and unresponsiveness to change and replaced them with more adaptable and dynamic political institutions. The Age of Revolutions is increasingly seen less as a crisis about empire than as a series of crises within empires, and what happened during revolutionary conflict was often not the demise of empire but rather, as in Cuba and Brazil, its revitalisation.

Empire was not on the road to terminal decline in the early nineteenth century. Outside the Atlantic World, empires prospered, notably in Russia. Inside the Atlantic World, while the French and Spanish overseas empires were diminished during the Age of Revolutions, the British overseas empire recovered remarkably well from the loss of the thirteen colonies that became the United States and embarked upon its greatest period of expansion after the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815. Much of this expansion occurred outside the Atlantic, in Asia and the Pacific. But some expansion happened inside the Atlantic World, especially in Africa, which experienced a bout of intensive imperialism in the late nineteenth century. In the Americas, the British combined a continued commitment to empire in Canada and the West Indies with informal empire in Latin America. The plantation world, moreover, in both the British West Indies and in the ‘empire for slavery’ of the American South, continued to expand during and after the Age of Revolutions. It is too simple to see the Atlantic revolutions as incipient signs of imperial demise, even if they represented responses to various kinds of imperial sclerosis.

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Furthermore, instead of seeing the Age of Revolutions as a reaction against empire, it is best to see it as a response to empire. If there occurred some historical progression in respect to imperial conflict in the second half of the eighteenth century, it is that, at least in the Atlantic World, the conflict between empires that dominated the first part of the eighteenth century, culminating in the Seven Years’ War, was transformed into conflict within empires. Civil wars within separate empires took the place of wars between empires as the source of disequilibrium. The most obvious manifestation of this took place in Saint-Domingue where Napoleon’s attempts to reinstate plantation slavery were met with both tacit and active encouragement from Britain, ostensibly its great European and imperial rival, as well as from the United States. As Jeremy Adelman notes, ‘Revolutions were imperial in nature’. Although it is probably best to regard the American Revolution as a colonial revolt against disliked imperial masters which turned into a rejection of monarchy and finally into a reassessment of aspects of imperialism, most Atlantic revolutions generally ‘did not begin as secessionist episodes; “nations” emerged as products of tension wrought by efforts to recast the institutional frameworks of imperial sovereignty’. Planters played a leading role in fostering this disequilibrium.

The mature plantation complex

Alongside the venerable idea of an Age of Revolutions, promulgated first by R.R. Palmer in 1959, a complementary notion derived from the study of empires has emerged in recent years to become, as David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam argue, a testable thesis. This holds that a ‘world crisis’ began in the mid-eighteenth century and lasted into the third or fourth decade of the nineteenth century. It encompasses the Age of Revolutions but adds a global perspective to what has hitherto been seen in mostly regional terms. In particular, it juxtaposes the rise of Western European empires to pre-eminence within Eurasia alongside a terminal crisis for the agrarian empires of Asia and the Middle East. Two of the principal proponents of this thesis are the British scholars C.A. Bayly and John Darwin, both of whom stress the ‘global interconnectedness’ of the ‘geopolitical earthquakes’ of the period.

Bayly, in particular, lays out a broad framework within which the world crisis of the late eighteenth century can be placed. He argues that between 1660 and 1720—a period that follows directly on from what is provided in Bayly’s unspoken model, Eric Hobsbawm’s notion of a general crisis in Western Europe in the long seventeenth century beginning somewhere around 1560—there occurred a broad upswing in global economic activity everywhere in Eurasia and in the Atlantic World. The development of the large integrated plantation, first in Barbados in the 1660s and then throughout the Atlantic plantation world in the early 1700s, proved crucial in stimulating economic development and more importantly in the establishment of institutions that led to the creation of Britain’s eighteenth-century fusion of fiscal issues and military activity under state control. From 1700, and especially after 1750, the Atlantic slave system moved into a higher gear, expanding, becoming more sophisticated, and becoming ever more voracious in appetite. As Bayly puts it, ‘The violence and cruelty of the slave trade and of the exploitation of slaves cannot obscure the fact that this was a flexible, financially sophisticated, consumer-oriented, technologically innovative form of human beastliness’. But as the Atlantic plantation system moved into maturity and great profitability around mid-century, all was not going well in other parts of the world. Around 1720, cracks
started appearing in the picture of broad stability and economic expansion that had characterised the last half-century. Imperial overstretch started to affect Asian and Middle Eastern empires. The major problem was the cost of war, which rose greatly in the first half of the eighteenth century. Most Eurasian empires failed to overcome the financial pressures of warfare. At first the exception seemed to be the overseas empires of Western European nations and their metropolises which acted in Eurasia as the great destabiliser and opportunistic invader. But eventually, as Bayly incisively explains, imperial Europe from the Seven Years’ War onwards started to feel the same stresses from the enormous cost of warfare that Eurasian empires had experienced a generation previously. They felt pressure on fiscal structures most notably when European states were forced to defend their colonial possessions. As William Pitt memorably described the process of warfare during the first global war, the Seven Years’ War of 1756–1763, it was like ‘breaking windows with guineas’.16

Even Britain, which seemed to have worked out a suitable way of creating a viable fiscal-military regimen to support an expensive overseas empire, started to feel the strain in the third quarter of the eighteenth century. So, too, did France, though for more explicable reasons, notably defeat in global warfare. Britain’s attempt to recoup its losses through more intrusive intervention into British America provoked a serious and ultimately successful colonial revolt in thirteen North American colonies. Revolt started off as a protest against taxation and petty tyranny but ended with British North Americans, planters prominent among them, creating a new republic committed to principles of universal equality and to the practical support of the plantation system against the large number of blacks caught up in the plantations’ workings.

Matters seemed to be turning from good to bad everywhere around mid-century. Unlike the previous half-century, the second half of the eighteenth century no longer offered rapid economic expansion, even in Western Europe, the most dynamic and flourishing part of Eurasia. It was also too early for the positive effects of industrialisation to have kicked in. Population growth seems to have overtaken the capacity of farming to innovate in much of Western Europe, and growing numbers of people living in tumultuous and insalubrious cities were prone to riot.17 The Atlantic plantation system, however, seemed a major exception to the general tendency towards ‘world crisis’. By any standard, plantations continued to do well in the years immediately before the American Revolution that began in 1776. There may be some arguments for the economic causation of Atlantic revolutions but in the plantation system revolutions generally occurred while planters prospered. Slavery had made the Atlantic work and planters remained well aware of their value to imperial enterprises. As Barbara L. Solow remarks, ‘What moved in the Atlantic in these centuries were predominantly slaves, the output of slaves, the inputs to slave societies, and the goods and services purchased with the earnings on slave products’.18

By the 1770s, the plantations of the Americas accounted for a remarkably high proportion of the trade of the slave-trading nations of Western Europe. The West Indies and Brazil produced sugar, rum and coffee, while British North America exported tobacco, rice and indigo. The annual value of colonial exports in the early 1770s rose to £5.6 million in the British plantations, £5.2 million in the French colonies and £1.8 million in Brazil. Total exports to Spanish America (mostly bullion but also including plantation produce) amounted to £4.9 million. Saint-Domingue alone probably accounted for 40 per cent of imports into France, Europe’s largest, most populous and wealthiest country. In addition, the slave trade was booming with 1.3 million Africans landed in the Americas, mostly in
the Caribbean and Brazil, between 1761 and 1780, the means whereby, despite horrific mortality, the slave population of the Americas increased from under one-third of a million people to 2.3 million by 1770.19

The wealthiest plantation societies, Saint-Domingue or Jamaica, had turned into economic powerhouses that far outstripped in average wealth and dynamism those colonies in Atlantic America that had not committed themselves so fully to African slavery. On the eve of the American Revolution, Jamaica, for example, was as important to Britain in terms of wealth as a large county such as Lancashire or Sussex. The beneficiaries of such wealth creation were Jamaican planters, who took advantage of Jamaica’s natural advantages in the production of a high-value commodity export to establish an extremely profitable system of slave management in which they successfully manipulated complex agro-industrial technology, a complicated integrated trade network and, most importantly, a brutal method of labour exploitation that used and discarded overworked, badly fed and abused slaves of African descent.20

One reason for the dynamism of the eighteenth-century plantation system, especially in the British and French Empires, was its easy relationship, despite slavery, with principles of capitalism. Under the influence of Adam Smith and his disciples, and following an industrial revolution in Europe, which, despite the arguments of Eric Williams, was probably very little dependent on wealth brought into Europe by slave-owners and the plantation system, slavery in plantation America came to be thought of as a retrogressive, backward, technologically and entrepreneurially challenged, and morally reprehensible system that would soon be replaced by more modern, dynamic and capitalist economic systems.21

But it would be a great mistake to transpose economic ideologies from the mid-nineteenth century and later retrospectively onto a system that to contemporaries, and to most modern historians, stood at the vanguard of modernity. As Abbé Raynal (or, most probably, Denis Diderot) commented in a bestselling account of the West Indies in the mid-eighteenth century,

The labours of the colonists settled in these long-scorned islands are the sole basis of the African trade, extend the fisheries and cultivation of North America, provide advantageous outlets for the manufacture of Asia, double perhaps triple the activity of the whole of Europe. They can be regarded as the principal cause of the rapid movement which stirs the universe.22

That sentiment could be applied everywhere in the Atlantic plantation world: these ‘factories in the field’ were at the forefront of transitions to modernity. The plantation world was framed by a number of severe traumas of global significance, including the extirpation of the Amerindian population, degradation of the tropical environment, and the triple effects of slavery, sugar and the imposition of the plantation system, leaving it a diminished and regressive world where enslavement gave a nightmarish quality to quotidian existence. It nevertheless represented pioneering modernity. The Caribbean was an area of vital fusions between peoples brought, often unwillingly, from all over the world. It was, as Philip D. Morgan states, ‘a generative front, a cultural frontier, a gathering place of broken pieces’.23

Some metropolitan intellectuals found the dynamism of the plantation system, the confidence of the planter class and the brutality of the slave system deeply disturbing. Abbé Raynal’s *Histoire des deux mondes*, a classic Enlightenment text first published in 1770, included a number of ringing condemnations, written by Diderot, of the practices of colonial
slavery. Enlightenment thinkers generally opposed slavery, even if they also tended towards new and pernicious forms of scientific racism.\(^{24}\) Samuel Johnson, from the conservative side, became a fierce opponent of slavery, although as much from dislike of the pretensions of slave-owners as a principled objection to holding Africans in servitude. He derided Jamaicans for their attachment to liberty while denying it ‘to so many thousand Negroes, whom they hold in bondage’, and famously called for a toast to ‘the next Insurrection’ in the West Indies very soon after Tacky’s revolt had shaken Jamaica to its core in 1760.\(^{25}\) Johnson detested slavery as much as any prominent man of his time but showed no interest in embryonic attempts to end the slave trade. Diderot, for instance, thought that establishing new American plantations was a wise policy for the French. He seems never to have contemplated emancipation.\(^{26}\)

Planters enjoyed a mixed press in European imperial capitals, especially those wealthy West Indians, derided, in the phrase later used about American soldiers in Britain during the Second World War, as being ‘over paid, over sexed and over here’. The derision expressed was that of established elites against over-assertive nouveaux riches and few doubted the importance of planters as bulwarks of empire. Moreover, the abolitionist movement, even in Britain, remained tiny until the 1780s, unlikely to attract much support outside of a small Quaker and evangelical Anglican base. Few American or West Indian planters showed awareness of the movement’s existence until its sudden growth after, and probably as a consequence of, the American Revolution.\(^{27}\)

**The plantation system and resistance**

If, as several historians argue, the plantation system of America contained within its very structure the seeds of its own destruction, especially in periods of breakneck expansion when slave systems relied on massive importations of slaves from Africa, then planters should have been very afraid of how slaves might use the opportunity afforded by revolutionary conflict to gain liberation.\(^{28}\) It was a matter of faith among imperial officials that planters would not join in revolutions, no matter how much they protested against imperial ‘tyranny’, because when push came to shove their overwhelming fear of slave rebellion would stop them from acting.\(^{29}\) Modern historians have tended to accept the view that enslaved people never accepted their lot, that they resisted and rebelled whenever they could, and that when given half a chance they ‘grasped the opportunity to escape and live in freedom’.\(^{30}\) In this reading, the Age of Revolutions not only placed slavery on the ultimate road to extinction, even if that road was paved with many false turnings before the end was reached. Moreover, enslaved people, as intensely interested in philosophical and political debates about liberty as were their masters and mistresses, used the opportunity of revolutionary ferment in the Atlantic World to advance their own freedom.\(^{31}\)

Little evidence exists, however, to support such eschatological readings of the inevitability that slave rebellion at some future time would bring down the plantation structure. For all the historians’ insistence that slave resistance happened continuously, that planters were perpetually afraid of slave discontent and that slave insurrection posed a constant threat, enslaved people were generally ineffectual agents in the destruction of plantation systems. As David Brion Davis states,

How could workers who were relatively free from market forces produce so much or drive such economic growth, especially when historians claim they were
engaged in subtle forms of day-to-day resistance? I have seen no satisfactory answers to such questions, but suspect that the negotiating and bargaining between slaves and masters often led to compromises that actually aided productivity.32

Moreover, as the Caribbean scholar Sidney Mintz reminds us, ‘It is a fact that during the nearly four centuries that slavery flourished in [the western] hemisphere, only a tiny fraction of daily life consisted of open resistance’.33 Indeed, most of life was spent living in daily, even perfunctory, accommodation with the holders of power.34

Excluding the single, and highly exceptional, case of Saint-Domingue, later Haiti, slave rebellions in the Atlantic World failed in all their objectives, invariably resulting in exposure before implementation and, even if put into action, culminating in the grisly public torture and execution of slave rebels. What slave rebellions tended to do, however, was to bring before a previously ignorant or complacent metropolitan population the extent to which slave systems relied on brutality. The Demerara rebellion of 1823 in British South America offers a good example of how a slave rebellion did little to stop the smooth running of the plantation system but through excessive planter brutality towards rebels and, in this case, through making a martyr of a white clergyman, alienated metropolitan opinion about the plantation system at a crucial time. Abolitionism was probably fading in Britain in the early 1820s, but scandals like the Demerara rebellion, and even more so the Christmas rebellions in Jamaica in 1831–1832 helped revitalise public opinion and played an important role in preparing the imperial state to force slave emancipation on a recalcitrant planter class.35

What determined whether slavery would or would not survive was the state. The emancipation of slaves, even in Haiti,36 came always from the state. Planters wishing to retain control over slavery therefore took a very sensible decision in supporting colonial revolts in which they would wield disproportionate influence over political decision-making. The real threat to planter control was not slave rebellion—planters’ weapons of terror combined with monopoly over coercive force meant that slaves had virtually no chance of causing more than minor stress on the plantation system through rebellion so long as the planter class remained unified and planters did not face opposition from the imperial centre, whether in Europe or, in the case of the antebellum United States from a national political regime hostile to slavery.37 Where planters were vulnerable, as loyalist British West Indian planters found out to their cost in the decade after the American Revolution, when a resurgent British abolitionist movement found great traction among sympathetic politicians, notably William Wilberforce and William Pitt the Younger, was when the imperial centre decided that slave-holder interests were not paramount in imperial discussions. The shift to liberal empire and to liberal principles of benevolent authoritarian imperial rule that occurred after the American Revolution in both the British and French Empires spelled trouble for planter autonomy. The subsequent histories of the United States and the British West Indies showed that southern slave-holders were right to strike out for independence in 1776 in order to forestall increasing imperial intrusiveness into how planters controlled property holding the ‘status of persons’, as Saint-Domingue planters euphemistically termed slaves in the French National Assembly in 1790.38

Adam Smith recognised the problem early. In a lecture at the University of Edinburgh on 15 February 1763, Smith noted how slavery formed an important institution everywhere outside of Western Europe. Significantly, however, he did not judge the existence of
slavery necessarily a sign of political backwardness against European civilisational superiority. Under republican governments, not monarchies or empires, slavery, he argued, historically was most harsh and least likely to be eliminated. In the Roman Republic, for example, ‘the freedom of the free was the cause of the greatest oppression of the slaves’. Without a monarch to control what a slave-owner did with his private property, masters could kill their slaves with impunity, knowing that the state would not hold them accountable. The best source of comfort for slaves was an absolutist monarch who might be swayed by prudential concerns about rebellion in order to restrict the slave-owners’ behaviour. In a monarchical government, Smith continued, ‘there is some greater probability of the hardships being taken off. The king cannot be injured by this, the subjects are his slaves whatever happens; on the contrary it may tend to strengthen his authority by weakening that of his nobles’. If a monarch wanted to diminish over-mighty subjects, he might do so by restricting their power over their slaves, even if in doing so he risked noble insurrection (or colonial revolt in the case of an eighteenth-century plantation colony), for ‘to abolish slavery … would be to deprive the far greater part of the subjects, and the nobles in particular, of the chief and most valuable part of their inheritance’.39

Slavery, Smith commented, flourished best under weak government. Indeed, the very establishment of plantation colonies in the West Indies was made possible by ‘the weakness of government’.40 Only in places with strong, possibly arbitrary, government had slaves obtained some justice because ‘the magistrate, when he protects the slave, intermeddles in some measure in the management of the private property of the master; and in a free country, where the master is perhaps either a member of the colony assembly, or an elector of such a member, he dare not do this but with the greatest caution and circumspection’.41

If slavery was difficult to abolish under imperial rule, Smith thought, it was impossible under a republican government. His explanation deserves quoting at length, because it explains very well why planters would support changes that would decrease the extent of imperial oversight and would feel resentful of imperial rules even when, as in most plantation societies in the Age of Revolutions, empire meant less a constraint than a benefit to planter power:

In a republican government it will scarcely ever happen that it should be abolished. The persons who make all the laws in that country are persons who have slaves themselves. These will never make any laws mitigating their usage; whatever laws are made with regard to slaves are intended to strengthen the authority of the masters and reduce the slaves to a more absolute subjection. The profit of the masters was increased when they got greater power over their slaves. The authority of the masters over the slaves is therefore unbounded in all republican governments.42

The history of the United States after the adoption of a pro-slavery constitution in 1787 suggests that Smith’s prediction about slavery in a republican country being impossible to dislodge through normal constitutional processes was correct. Does the Haitian Revolution disprove his case? At first glance, it seems to do so. The advent of republican government in France led in 1794 to the first major general emancipation of slaves anywhere in the world. The formation of the Napoleonic Empire, however, was accompanied in 1802 by the attempted reinstatement of slavery in French America, a policy that was successful in
Martinique and Guadeloupe, if not in Saint-Domingue. Nevertheless, the decree of 16 pluviôse An II, emancipating slaves in all French colonies, came about through an extraordinary confluence of circumstances that make it hard to see it as a purposeful result of the turn to a republican government. Neither Jacques-Pierre Brissot’s Société des Amis des Noirs nor the Jacobin commissioners Léger-Félicité Sonthonax and Étienne Polverel contemplated destroying slavery let alone the plantation system before events, notably the riots of 20 June 1793 in which the city of Cap Français was destroyed, forced their hand. French abolitionists believed as strongly as their opponents that France’s national interest required the maintenance of the colonial plantation system. They thought slavery needed to be ameliorated, not destroyed. It is conceivable that if events had turned out differently, some sort of accommodation could have been reached between ameliorationists and planters.43 Furthermore, there exists little evidence that the black insurrectionist leaders who fought against France for over a decade between 1793 and 1804 were committed to liberty or equality. Despite anachronistic assertions that the revolution was driven by democracy from the start, the insurrection, as David Geggus asserts, was ‘authoritarian from beginning to end’. As David Nicholls argues in respect to later Haitian history, too much should not be read into the seeming prevalence of democracy in the variety of constitutions Haitians made for themselves, as all Haitian governments have tended to be autocratic, even if some of the early mixed-race leaders, Alexandre Pétion and Jean-Pierre Boyer, were politicians in the liberal republican mainstream.44

The extent to which slaves were released from enslavement into liberty as a result of the Haitian Revolution is questionable. It is very difficult to know the intentions of the black leaders and close to impossible to know what ordinary slave rebels wanted. But what little evidence survives suggests that few enslaved people were motivated by Enlightenment ideals of liberty or the ‘rights of man’. What they envisioned was an absolutist monarchy, in which blacks, rather than whites, were on top. A kingdom and an emperor were what they got, first in Haiti as a whole under Jacques Dessalines in 1804 and then in the north of the country under Henri Christophe. Moreover, both Toussaint Louverture and Jacques Dessalines, the key leaders of the revolution in the north, were determined to keep the plantation system going under military rule, forcing black labourers to continue the work they did as slaves, prohibited from leaving their designated workplaces without permission. Henri Christophe did the same, meaning that in that part of the nation where the insurrection aimed at ending slavery had started the great majority of workers remained ‘attached labourers’ controlled by planters in the form of military officers.45 It did not work—forced labour provoked rebellion and ex-slaves preferred a peasant economy to a plantation system, even if this destroyed the productivity of the farms and, by extension, the state. But the developments in Haiti suggest that even people committed to anti-slavery found it impossible to imagine plantation work being done except under conditions of brutality and coercion.46 The liberty to which Haitian leaders were committed did not always coincide with the liberty that ordinary Haitians imagined.47

**Conclusion**

The Age of Revolutions is today strongly associated with its contributions to the end of slavery. The narratives now hold that black people seized their freedom while planters were paralysed by fear of slave insurrection. But if this is the measure by which the Age of Revolutions should be judged, then they can only be seen as a disappointment.
Slavery became entrenched in the United States, making that country less an empire of liberty than an empire of servitude before the Civil War of the 1860s. In Latin America, through the nationalist leader Simon Bolívar, a committed abolitionist, only a few blows were struck against slavery. But with the Iberian governments largely indifferent to abolitionism before the mid-nineteenth century, the two areas with the largest and most dynamic slave systems, Cuba and Brazil, remained in their respective empire and profited from the breakdown of plantation slavery in Saint-Domingue. If planters grew afraid of slaves as a result of ‘liberty talk’ and an increased likelihood of insurrection, they did not show it. Only Spanish Louisiana (destined to be incorporated into the United States) suspended the importation of slaves as a security measure during the Age of Revolutions, and then only briefly. Slave-trading nations imported heavily during the Age of Revolutions.

The one place where the Age of Revolutions provided an important trigger for attacking slavery was, ironically, Britain, a nation that never doubted its commitment to empire and which remained largely immune to politically inspired revolutionary change. The success of the Americans in the War of American Independence convinced an influential minority of conservative evangelicals in Britain that its defeat was a sign of God’s displeasure with its imperial devotion to plantations and African chattel slavery—a commitment that was increasing rather than decreasing just as abolitionism started, beginning with the acquisition of fresh new plantation lands in the West Indies, South America, Africa and Asia during the French Revolutionary Wars. Britain therefore needed to reform from within. As Christopher Brown argues, ‘anti-slavery measures promised not only to redress moral wrongs; they promised as well to assist in the rehabilitation of metropolitan authority’, including the authority of Britons over millions of dependent subjects in its expanding tropical empires. Abolitionist opposition to planter arrogance and assertiveness in claiming ‘rights’ over slave property encouraged the state to make moral interventions into the plantation system and to imagine an empire that was not based upon slavery. The policymakers put that vision into place in developing a new empire, in Asia and especially in the South Pacific, which was to conform to emerging imperial ideas that slavery and empire were incompatible.

Notes
31 Burnard, ‘Slavery and the Causes of the American Revolution’.
The importance of the military successes by black soldiers in the Haitian Revolution was not that they freed slaves from slavery but that they preserved the freedoms granted to ex-slaves by the Jacobin government of revolutionary France that Napoleon wanted to rescind in order to return ex-slaves to slavery. David Geggus, ‘The Haitian Revolution in Atlantic Perspective’, in Philip D. Morgan and Nicholas Canny (eds), The Oxford Handbook of the Atlantic World, 1450–1850 (Oxford, 2011), pp. 533–549.

Mark Graber makes a powerful argument that a long-standing bisectional consensus that issues relating to slavery could only be decided by mutual consensus was upheld in the infamous Dred Scott decision of 1857, meaning that this consensus could be overturned not by recourse to law but only by political fiat by a political party committed to anti-slavery. Such a reading shows that Abraham Lincoln and his Republican Party acted in regard to the South from an imperial, rather than a republican, perspective, using imperial authority to overcome clear constitutional principles. Mark A. Graber, Dred Scott and the Problem of Constitutional Evil (New York, 2006).


Smith, Lectures on Jurisprudence, p. 199.


Smith, Lectures on Jurisprudence, p. 181.

Popkin, You Are All Free.


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Further reading


Armitage, David and Sanjay Subrahmanyan (eds), The Age of Revolutions in Global Context (Basingstoke, 2010).


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