

***Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism*. By Christopher Leslie Brown (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina P., 2006; pp. 496 . Pb. \$22.50).**

Chris Brown's book poses a seemingly simple question, which generations of historians have found complicated to answer: why was Britain's historic complacency for slavery and the slave trade so suddenly challenged in the late eighteenth century? Where did abolitionism come from? The volume revitalizes inquiry into the causes of anti-slavery by focusing on how apathetic distaste transformed into political action from the first abolitionists. The book is therefore shaped by questions of contingency, and fundamentally rejects proclivities towards sentiment or tendencies for humanitarianism. Brown seeks the decisive political action of individuals, rather than explanations based on macro-economic or moral phenomena.<sup>1</sup> While at least one reviewer has complained that the book ends without explaining 'why those hundreds of thousands of British folk signed all those petitions to abolish the slave trade', abolitionist mobilisation is explicitly not his focus.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, his doctoral thesis, which covers substantially different material to *Moral Capital*, suggests his take on that problem. In conceptualizing the anti-slavery story as these three distinct episodes – pre-disposition, disposition, and campaign – Brown in some ways creates a new question for historians by inserting 'disposition' to abolitionism between the two more familiar problems.

Brown thus places himself outside a historiographical tradition that has largely focused on how anti-slavery agitation forced through abolition and emancipation, and on the nature and origins of anti-slavery ideology.<sup>3</sup> The former does not sufficiently engage with origins and impulses, while the latter does not explain how ideas came to be forged into action: if 'ideological frameworks... pre-disposed, they did not dispose'.<sup>4</sup> His book therefore focuses on the 'crystallization of programs to reform or transform imperial and colonial policy', a process occurring after 'ideas and values hostile to slavery and the slave trade' had emerged, but

---

<sup>1</sup> Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 461-2.

<sup>2</sup> Dee E. Andrews, 'Review of Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press 2007)', *Journal of American History*, 93/4 (2007).

<sup>3</sup> Brown, *Moral Capital*, 17-22.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

preceding the quest for parliamentary action.<sup>5</sup> Brown's interest is clearly rooted in the moral choices of individuals; in the fact that 'men and women did not begin life as abolitionists... they became abolitionists.'<sup>6</sup> *Moral Capital* characterizes neglect of this stage in anti-slavery as leading to explanations based on those 'climates of opinion' that David Brion Davis warned against mistaking for explanations for the 'virgin birth' of social movements.<sup>7</sup> Most clearly, he binds his colors to the standard of Seymour Drescher, in believing that the coincidence of anti-slavery and the industrial revolution does not dictate the relationship between capitalism and abolitionism as a 'historiographical point of departure'.<sup>8</sup> A focus on that relationship as an explanation rather than a consequence of abolitionism has, they both suggest, distracted rather than enlightened historians from Eric Williams onwards.

It is therefore the American Revolution rather than the Industrial Revolution that looms large in Brown's analysis. He focuses on discourses about imperial and revolutionary liberty that such a conflict fostered, which he sees as a rare opportunity for critics of the imperial project to argue for slave trade abolition as a form of 'moral capital' for the nation. The transition to abolitionism, he suggests, was contingent; it need not have happened and would not have happened in this time and in this way, had the American war not made the British imperial project – and specifically its responsibility for slavery – a point of debate.<sup>9</sup> *Moral Capital* is as distinctive in its interpretative framework as it is in emphasising the influence of events in Britain's North American colonies to domestic discourses of liberty. At the heart of Brown's thesis – and in his book's title – is John Kane's sociological concept of 'moral capital'.<sup>10</sup> Kane suggests, '[m]oral capital is moral prestige – whether of an individual, organization or a cause – in useful service', and Brown sees the earliest abolitionists seizing an opportunity to win such prestige for themselves and their country.<sup>11</sup>

Conceptualizing abolition as a three-stage process (of disposition, pre-disposition, and campaign) will be an important starting-point for future work on anti-slavery. It leaves open for future research questions of why the exceptional circumstances of the American Revolution

---

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>7</sup> David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975), 215. As cited in Brown, *Moral Capital*, 19.

<sup>8</sup> Seymour Drescher, 'Review Essay', *History and Theory*, 32/3 (1993), 329. Cited in Brown, *Moral Capital*, 29.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 199-206

<sup>10</sup> John Kane, *The Politics of Moral Capital* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

allowed anti-slavery feelings to translate to anti-slavery action – but yet remain unfulfilled until 1807. Indeed, as determinism's nemesis, Brown would not believe that the abolition act was guaranteed by the experience of defeat in the 1780s. (A counter-factual conclusion argues how different abolitionism would have been without the American Revolution). *Moral Capital's* argument raises questions about why British abolitionists, having invested their 'moral capital' in anti-slavery, suffered a recession in the years after the French terror, just when they seemed to have gained the most success. Moreover, *Moral Capital* brings into focus the decisions and moments that confront historical explanations of the rise of antipathy to slavery, abolitionism and abolitionist politics. It will change the field of anti-slavery history by taking scholars back to the drawing board in explaining how the movement emerged, and why it was slave trade abolition rather than emancipation that they targeted.<sup>12</sup> The book's thesis is minutely documented and persuasively argued, but – perhaps like the most important works of history – the way Brown reformulates the question is even more important than the answer he provides.

RICHARD HUZZEY

YALE UNIVERSITY

---

<sup>12</sup> Bob Harris, 'Review of Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press 2007)', *English Historical Review*, CXXII/497 (June 2007), 768.