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The Business of Abolition

Bronwen Everill. *Not Made by Slaves: Ethical Capitalism in the Age of Abolition.*Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020. Pp. 318. Cloth $39.95.

Whether warily examining the labels of garments to identify those made by well-paid workers or trying to navigate a perplexing array of “fair trade” chocolate standards, ethical buying is now a common facet of everyday consumer culture. Manufacturers and distributors have likewise embraced ethical production as a sometimes-cynical means of distancing themselves from environmentally destructive resource extraction, sweat-shop labor, and lopsided trading practices that exploit the developing world. Producers and consumers are, hence, increasingly in agreement that individual economic decisions can transform global capitalism by making it fairer, more transparent, and less harmful to people and the environment.

Given its increasing ubiquity, one would suspect that this “ethical capitalism” is a distinctly modern phenomenon that has recently emerged in an increasingly globalized and opaque economy. Bronwen Everill reveals in her excellent new book *Not Made*by*Slaves* that the roots of ethical capitalism can instead be traced to the Age of Abolition (c.1770–1885). While abolition in 1807 had ended Britain’s, the United States’s, and Denmark’s slave trades, it did not free the millions of enslaved people who remained in bondage on either side of the Atlantic. Neither did abolition halt the growing consumer demand for the tropical staples that those captives produced, such as cotton, sugar, coffee, and palm oil. Atlantic capitalism remained deeply entangled with and reliant upon slavery long after abolition. If abolitionism was to achieve its ultimate goal of eradicating slavery, capitalism needed to be transformed. Free people earning a living wage would grow tropical commodities, merchant houses would obtain those commodities at fair prices, and a network of new stores would vend free-labor goods to antislavery consumers. Those consumers would, via their virtuous economic actions, provide the impetus for this new variant of capitalism. But the supposed innate superiority of free labor would ensure that producers and consumers throughout the Atlantic World embraced the new economic order through self-interest, regardless of their position on slavery. Through the power of the free market, slavery would consequently shrivel and die in the shadow of ethical capitalism.

Everill tells this important history by focusing on Upper Guinea, a region of West Africa enmeshed with slavery. Upper Guinea had, by abolition, long been a key area for the Atlantic slave trade; 1.2 million people were carried from the region’s myriad rivers and bays before 1807. Large numbers of people were also held in bondage in Upper Guinea, especially on plantations growing foodstuffs to provision slave ships. British abolitionists sought to transform the region by founding, in 1787, a new “Colony of Freedom” in a capacious harbor at the mouth of the Sierra Leone river. Populated initially by people formerly in the Americas, the nascent colony was boosted by the arrival of subsequent waves of freedmen as well as thousands of captives liberated from slave ships by the Royal Navy. In 1822, American abolitionists founded a similar colony at Liberia, three hundred miles to the south of Sierra Leone. Merchant houses established themselves in both colonies to export crops grown by free black colonists and to acquire commodities such as ivory, palm oil, rice, beeswax, and pepper from African traders. Upper Guinea is, therefore, an ideal focal point to examine how abolitionists sought to nurture ethical capitalism’s seeds deep in the soils of the Atlantic slave economy.

*Not Made by Slaves*is anchored in the business records of antislavery merchants. Its principal subject is Zachary Macauley (1768–1838), a deeply religious, but also ruthlessly capitalistic, Scottish abolitionist who established the largest antislavery firm trading in Upper Guinea in 1792. Everill supplements Macauley’s voluminous records by drawing on the papers of the Brown family, a Rhode Island firm that sought to profit by “legitimate commerce” in West Africa during the late eighteenth century. Through her focus on these firms, Everillis able to analyze in impressive detail the “quotidian practicalities of ethical capitalism,” offering myriad insights on how merchants sought to adhere to their antislavery principles while simultaneously turning a profit (17). This volume is much more than a business history of two merchant houses, though. Everill has mined an enormous array of official records, pamphlets, petitions, images, material objects and newspapers that tie the everyday practices of ethical capitalism to a wider world of Atlantic commerce that includes African merchants and statesmen, antislavery consumers, American cotton spinners, abolitionist storekeepers, and enslaved people. *Not Made by* Slaves is thus a truly Atlantic-wide study that deftly combines business, economic, social, political, and cultural history; Everill also draws insights from anthropology and archaeology to excellent effect.

 Everill’s broad focus and use of interdisciplinary methods enables her to make important contributions to numerous fields. *Not Made by Slaves*sits firmly within the New History of Capitalism, a growing subfield that has sought to demonstrate the importance of slavery to the making of the modern world by principally studying the antebellum US South. Everilldraws upon this work by taking for granted that slavery was crucial to capitalism’s development. But this book also expands the field by showing how antislavery activists across the Atlantic sought to disentangle slavery and capitalism in the age of abolition. Moreover, Everill encourages historians of capitalism to considerably broaden their focus to include the wider Atlantic World, especially West Africa. African historians will likewise find much of value here, especially Everill’s nuanced analysis of how Africans grappled with the difficult transition away from slavery during the nineteenth century and the mechanics of trade in Atlantic Africa. This volume is also essential reading for historians of abolition. Those scholars have explored the complex ideological and religious motivations of antislavery activists and described at length how abolitionists achieved their aims via political campaigning. But there remains much to be written on the “business of abolition,” both the importance of everyday consumer decisions and the histories of people like Macauley who “sought to make a profit while combatting the slave trade” (3). This volume is, therefore, a major step forward in our understanding of how abolitionists sought to achieve their ends, especially in the economic arena. Exploring the business histories of antislavery merchants and producers will also considerably enhance economic historians’ knowledge of how firms not engaged in the slave trade operated in Atlantic Africa. For these reasons, this is an important volume that will have broad impacts and an equally wide appeal.

*Not Made by Slaves*is divided into seven chapters, each of which analyzes a particular challenge abolitionists faced as they sought to nurture and grow ethical capitalism. Everill opens by explaining how consumer activism first emerged in the late eighteenth century as a direct result of Atlantic slavery’s cancerous expansion. The slave economy furnished consumers in Britain, the United States, and West Africa with access to myriad tropical commodities such as sugar, tobacco, and rum. But the increasingly visible commodification of the millions of enslaved people who toiled to produce those goods also tied slave-grown products with human suffering. Consumers began to appreciate that their individual buying decisions could collectively shape how and by whom commodities were produced. Historians have devoted considerable attention to British consumers’ largely ineffectual attempts to end Caribbean slavery via sugar boycotts. But Everill astutely demonstrates that boycotts were a symptom of a much wider series of “commodification crises” that wracked the Atlantic world (45). African consumers, Everill shows, understood the deleterious effects of their purchasing decisions, and they likewise shunned slave-produced goods; entire polities withdrew from involvement in the slave trade. *Not Made by Slaves*establishes from the outset that ethical capitalism was a phenomenon that was embraced by a surprisingly wide and diverse array of actors, each of whom faced the same moral quandaries when consuming slave-produced commodities.

Everill next details how abolitionist merchants sought to satisfy the growing consumer demand for ethical commodities by developing new ways of acquiring and trading goods in West Africa. Trade in Atlantic Africa had developed along firm lines in the era of the slave trade: Europeans acquired captives for complex assortments of goods that accorded to shifting African consumer tastes; whites also extended generous credits to African sellers. Abolitionist merchants still had to conform to these norms when acquiring slave-free commodities, sparking numerous tensions between their principles and their self-interest. Most trade goods were, abolitionists believed, “Goods of Questionable Morality” that would do little to improve African economies and societies (55). Firearms, for example, were, according to abolitionists, direct drivers of the slave trade because Africans used them to enslave people, sparking a vicious “slave-gun cycle” in which captives were exchanged for further firearms. Abolitionists were forced to continue importing firearms and other “questionable” goods, though, for fear that their African trading partners would otherwise seek business elsewhere. Attempts to abandon the extension of credit in Africa—purportedly a practice that fostered dependency, usury, and corruption—likewise stumbled; Macauley was forced to lend large sums, almost bankrupting his firm in the process. Attempts to implement ethical trading practices in West Africa foundered, Everill shows, in thface of African agency and a trading environment that remained defined by the norms of the slave trade.

When antislavery merchants did obtain slave-free goods, attempts to distribute those products to European and American consumers also proved difficult. There was little to distinguish tropical staples, such as rice, that were grown by freemen from those produced by enslaved people. Converting ethical commodities into finished goods such as textiles added another layer of complexity because it was difficult to prevent small quantities of ethical cotton from being intermixed with larger volumes of slave-grown cotton in manufactories constructed around economies of scale. Abolitionists sought to side-step these problems by labeling their products as ethical, a technique that also enabled them to charge premium prices for their goods. But unscrupulous sellers put counterfeit ethical labels on slave-derived products, hoping to reap the higher prices and attract unwitting abolitionist buyers. Abolitionist merchants faced similar problems in West Africa, where competitors counterfeited the labels that distinguished antislavery traders’ higher-quality trade goods from those proffered by slave traders. Attempts to sell ethical products in dedicated stores that carried no slave-produced items were equally fraught, as storekeepers found it difficult to obtain sufficient volumes of truly ethical produce, and consumers struggled to locate stores with impeccable abolitionist credentials. As national identities hardened over the nineteenth century, “consumer nationalism” further complicated these issues: American buyers sought only etical items produced by their countrymen; British abolitionists hoped to grow the empire by sourcing slave-free goods in India and Egypt (204). These myriad challenges collectively made it difficult for abolitionist producers and traders to develop the self-sustaining commodity chains that would enable ethical capitalism to flourish.

When the invisible hand failed to support ethical capitalism’s expansion, abolitionists sought to instead use the state to “nudge consumers and producers towards ethical behavior” (142). Ethical commodities, abolitionists argued, could not compete on the open market because they were subject to unfair tariffs and regulations; those same barriers incentivized the consumption of unethical products. Tearing down trade barriers would encourage African producers to employ freemen and compete on a level playing field with American slave holders; abolitionist consumers would be able to obtain commodities from growing markets that they knew to be free from slavery’s taint. Ethical capitalists like Macauley, who stood to profit from these new opportunities, used their connections with state actors to lobby for tariff reductions. They simultaneously sought to establish new companies in Sierra Leone and India that would hold lucrative monopsonies on the supply of ethical commodities. Attempts to lower tariffs while controlling the supply of free-labor goods, Everill shows, brought the contradiction inherent to ethical capitalism into sharp relief: how were consumers and politicians meant to disentangle the purported moral underpinnings of the abolitionists’ arguments from their brazen economic self-interest? Abolitionists failed to adequately answer this question, dooming plans for an ethical capitalism nurtured by the state. Thwarted once again, abolitionists attempted a final gambit: by actively supporting the production of tropical commodities by wage laborers, enormous volumes of slave-free products would be brought onto the world market. Those sameorkers would use their wages to purchase the fruits of their own labor, creating a virtuous and self-sustaining cycle of production and consumption. While lofty in theory, the reality was often grim, as abolitionist came to believe that indenture or toil for subsistence wages was an acceptable step toward ethical capitalism because “nothing was as bad as slavery” (198). By the late-nineteenth century, antislavery activists had entered a Faustian pact by accepting that supposedly benign domestic slavery could continue in West Africa as long as cheap tropical commodities flowed from wage workers elsewhere in the world.

Ultimately, then, *Not Made by Slaves*tells a story of failure. The abolitionist vision of a more ethical new form of capitalism, driven by millions of virtuous consumer decisions, did not come to pass. Instead, the Atlantic economy had become, by the close of the nineteenth century, divided between an affluent core of wage workers and a tropical periphery where slavery and other forms of bonded labor persisted. Seen in this way, abolitionism, which we are used to viewing as a successful project, failed to achieve its most ambitious aim of transforming global capitalism. *Not Made by Slaves,*therefore, offers a radical new perspective on abolitionism that emphasizes its failures rather than its accomplishments. As Everill describes in her short epilogue, though, abolitionism’s failure to enact ethical capitalism meant that the baton passed to subsequent generations of activists, who developed fair trade standards and ideas of corporate social responsibility. The fact that these ideas are now such an integral facet of global capitalism demonstrates how the important history detailed in *Not Made By Slaves’* has shaped our modern world.

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