

Not Made by Slaves: Ethical Capitalism in the Age of Abolition

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Recent social media campaigns have promoted #BuyBlack and #BuyIndigenous businesses, and corporations have been working to align themselves with these and other social justice movements in a bid to publicly perform their corporate social responsibility. Coffee companies have built global brands based on their fair-trade partnerships, and key players in the fashion industry have begun to re-think their role as ethical producers and consumers. Each of these campaigns link questions of ethical production and supply chains, fair labour, and ideologies of inequality to consumer choice and demand. They highlight the fact that how we spend our money says something about where our ethical and moral compasses point. While the scrutiny of global capitalism may feel modern, as Bronwen Everill illustrates in her new book, *Not Made by Slaves: Ethical Capitalism in the Age of Abolition*, 'Fair trade didn't just spring up out of nowhere' (p. 244).

A deeply researched book, *Not Made by Slaves* uncovers how a variety of people in West Africa, America, and Britain in the 'Age of Abolition' (1770-1885) argued that it was possible, and indeed profitable, to use consumer purchasing power and choice as a way to undermine reliance on the Atlantic slave trade as a system and on enslaved labour itself. Turning consumers into the moral compass of capitalism, businesses run by abolitionists sought to use consumer self-interest to shift the market towards morally and ethically acceptable production and distribution standards. This was not an attempt to campaign against capitalism; as Everill argues, ethical capitalists like Zachary Macaulay were instead spearheading 'a campaign to reform capitalism' (p.175). These commercially driven abolitionists sought to 'reimagine a global capitalism that would benefit everyone,' and consumers across the Atlantic world were at the heart of their attempts (p.245).

By re-centering West Africa in this story, Everill offers a fresh perspective on abolition and consumer movements in the 19th century. Incorporating West Africa not only shows how Africa fitted within broader trans-Atlantic developments in the moral political economy, but persuasively argues that what was happening on the ground in Senegambia, Sierra Leone, and Liberia was vital to shaping how thinking about ethical capitalism and legitimate commerce (essentially all trade with Africa that was not trade in enslaved people) developed across the Atlantic. Bringing West Africa back into our frame of reference, it becomes clear that ethical capitalism was faced with a number of internal ambiguities—what is 'ethical'? Ethical for whom? Who should benefit from legitimate commerce? What, exactly, was the difference between slavery and low-wage labour? That proved to be both slippery to define and nearly impossible to universally resolve.

As Everill illustrates, there were no easy answers as to whose labour would replace coerced labour. Nor was there any way to ensure a perfectly ethical supply chain. Legitimate commerce advocates and business owners were chasing a moving goalpost, and in pursuit of that goal they rationalised other dilemmas posed by 'capitalism', embracing 'acceptable' forms of slavery, and benefiting from consumer nationalism and imperial expansion.

As consumers were at the heart of the move towards ethical capitalism, they are at the heart of Everill's initial chapters. By the late 18th century, an Atlantic 'consumer revolution' had reshaped the geography of commerce in the Atlantic world. Consumers in port cities and inland regions across the Atlantic integrated new goods into their social, material, and political lives in ways that spoke both to the interconnected nature of trans-Atlantic trade and the specificities of their localities. Selectively combining new goods with existing material objects and cultural practices, consumers in Africa and other parts of the Atlantic world used these goods to create their own local idiom of the larger world of goods. In West African markets, Atlantic consumer goods were given political, fashionable, and moral value that was linked to the political economy of the slave trade; this combination dramatically reshaped the political structures of West Africa as new urban trading centres and forts like Gorée and Elmina developed along the coast and shifted power from inland regions to the coast. As Everill illustrates, it also drew West Africans into broader discourses and debates surrounding issues of over-commodification, luxury, and morality. While West African responses to consumer anxieties reflected and were shaped by local social and religious belief systems, by exercising their power in the market through acts of consumer protest like boycotts and port closures, they participated in the larger backlash against the commodification of everything, including human life, and helped to shape new ideas about consumer responsibility at the end of the 18th century.

If, as the British abstention campaigner William Fox argued 'the slave-dealer, the slave-holder, and the slave-driver, are virtually agents of the consumer,' it was the responsibility of the consumer to act in ways that ensured the goods they purchased were ethically sourced (p. 52). But what goods could be ethically purchased? One flashpoint Everill finds for this question that illustrates the slippery nature of what was and was not rationalized as an ethical good in the eyes of abolitionists, is the West African gun trade. Believing that violence was endemic to Africa as a result of the slave trade—what has been termed the gun-slave-cycle—the directors of the Sierra Leone Company had a somewhat ambiguous relationship to guns and gun powder. While some ethical capitalists felt that the sale of guns was unethical, others like Zachary Macaulay argued that participating in the sale of guns at the Company store in Freetown was an important way to help non-slave trading Africans avoid participating in the slave trade while also being able to defend themselves against slavers. For West Africans, guns supplied by the British had a number of different uses ranging from hunting and crop protection to religious and other forms of ceremonial uses, making them far less problematic amongst African consumers. Ultimately, Company abolitionists justified the sale of guns by assigning moral and political values to the guns and the ways in which they were obtained: 'A gun as a trade good,' one that was purchased from the Company store, 'was legitimate commerce; a weapon as a gift was a sign of corruption or bribery' (p. 76).

As the situational justification of gun sales illustrates, the logic behind what was or was not an ethical good was not always straightforward. There was nothing inherently 'good' or 'bad' about a sugar bowl, but by 'giving it a label, marking its association with a political value,' a sugar bowl could be converted into an ethical object (p. 85). In other words, Everill finds that 'at least one solution to the problem of defining an ethical good was to label a good as ethical' (p. 80). Consumers searching for ways to contribute towards the moral cause of abolition, as well as those looking to take part in the 'taste' or 'fashion' for abolition, could swap out their old sugar bowls for one printed with Josiah Wedgwood's highly recognizable design of a kneeling slave in chains asking 'Am I not a man and a brother?'. While this did not solve the problem of ensuring that the sugar inside the bowl was East India sugar not produced by enslaved labour, it was a way for abolitionist merchants and manufacturers to encourage consumers to think of the brands they bought as part of their reputation and political identity as consumers. Armed with the proper information, consumers could consistently make ethical choices in the market that would indicate not only the moral strength of buying ethical brands, but also the economic benefits of abolition.

From the goods themselves, Everill moves to the roles that credit and government relationships played in keeping the wheels of legitimate commerce turning. Abolitionists viewed credit with suspicion, disliking debt and distrusting its connotations of dependency as well as its believed ties to systematic debt-pawning (pawning enslaved men and women for small loans) in West Africa. Instead, ethically minded capitalists argued that, theoretically, cash transactions were the best way to ensure legitimate commerce. Yet, working with cash poor transactions, ethical commerce was similar to other forms of international commerce in that it relied on a variety of different types of credit to act as a store of value; for both trans-Saharan and trans-Atlantic traders, 'long-distance, long-term debt relationships were fundamental to their ability to conduct trade' (p. 110). As a result, firms like Macaulay & Babington found themselves overextended and looked to the government to create policies that would urge consumers to buy ethically sourced goods.

The desire to create demand for the products produced by legitimate commerce left abolitionist merchants in yet another contradictory position. By the end of the 18th century, government monopolies were particularly concerning for merchants operating in the Atlantic world. But, as Everill notes, for legitimate commerce advocates, it seemed only fair that their commercial endeavours should benefit from the same support that the slave trade had been receiving. The most promising way of ensuring the success of legitimate commerce endeavors in West Africa was to secure government contracts. If speculative agriculture like rice cultivation in Sierra Leone could be funneled through government contracts, legitimate commerce had a higher likelihood of succeeding, which would then undermine the slave trade. Adopting a contradictory rationalization, British merchants operating in West Africa argued that they should benefit from government involvement while lobbying the same governments to remove tariffs that supported some goods over others. In other words, merchants believed that moral commerce could be profitable in the same ways that ordinary commerce was profitable, 'by taking advantage of information asymmetries and network advantages' (p. 171).

As Everill illustrates in chapter six, the proponents of ethical capitalism were trying to preserve a system that was working for most people, with a few tweaks. Ethical capitalists were simply trying to persuade consumers to make decisions that would remove one specific, morally reprehensible, practice from that system. However, in attempting to make ethical capitalism profitable and an affordable alternative to slave produced goods, 'ethical' merchants developed a system of 'moral relativism' that argued for 'a global division of labour in which different standards of "freedom" would apply' to different people, places, and situations (p. 176). Looking for ways to supply consumers with affordable goods not produced by enslaved labour, abolitionists began to portray slavery in the American South and West Indies as a caricature of the system. This allowed them to more easily contrast the forms of slavery practiced on plantations with other forms of indentured or unfree labour found, and exploited, in other parts of the world. By narrowly defining slavery as limited to the U.S. South and the West Indies, ethical capitalists were able to argue that 'nothing was as bad as white-owned plantation slavery, and therefore everything else could be described as ethical capitalism' (p. 184). Further, by contrasting cheap wage labour with 'benign domestic African slavery' and

arguing for the ‘civilizing’ nature of cheap labour, ethical businessmen and consumers found themselves able to overlook their circular logic (p. 195).

In her final chapter, Everill explores the debate surrounding who Abolitionists felt should benefit from emancipation and free labour. In the American context this was heightened as the directors of the American Free Produce Association (AFPA) sought to use American free-labour and promote American manufacturing while questioning whose labour should benefit from the purchase of ethically produced goods. Supporting formerly enslaved worker’s labour was one way to direct consumer dollars as early ‘Buy Black’ efforts illustrate, but increasingly as arguments about free-produce and free-labour were attached to the ownership of land and free-soil ideologies, American abolitionists turned to a white labour force. Justifying inequality as a natural part of the world order and ameliorating inequality by creating distance—both physically and ideologically—between different wage labourers, ethical capitalists helped to produce an economic system in which relative equality stood in for actual equality. The goals of creating a system of ethical commerce did not benefit everyone equally and ‘the economic beneficiaries of a more moral consumerism were by no means guaranteed to be the enslaved, in African or in America’ (p. 237).

Not Made by Slaves is an important intervention into the historiographies of slavery, abolition, capitalism and histories of consumption and business practices. Like all thought-provoking books, it raises as many questions as it answers and suggests further avenues of exploration into the wide-ranging topics covered by Everill in each of her seven chapters. Given the central role consumers and consumer choice played in abolitionist arguments for legitimate commerce however, we hear relatively little from consumers themselves. While Everill notes that the market for ethically produced goods was relatively small, hearing more from consumers choosing to ‘vote’ for abolitionist policies with their market choices could have illustrated the ways in which consumers themselves passively consumed the products or directly grappled with the issues outlined in the book. Everill includes a brief mention of Selina Macaulay’s friend who was driven to ethical brands (for reasons that some might today think of as more performative than deeply invested in abolitionist goals) yet the women who helped to drive ethical consumption as purchasers and proprietors have a relatively small voice in this narrative. Weaving more of these voices into the story of the search for ethical capitalism may have served to offer another dimension to the inherently contradictory and rationalizing nature of the attempt to re-make capitalism towards an ethical (for some) system. This comment aside, *Not Made by Slaves* reminds readers that in order to fully understand trans-Atlantic commercial and ideological networks, West Africa must be considered as a full participant. In centering West Africa, Everill has illustrated that a truly trans-Atlantic history cannot overlook Africa’s central place in broader Atlantic movements.

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