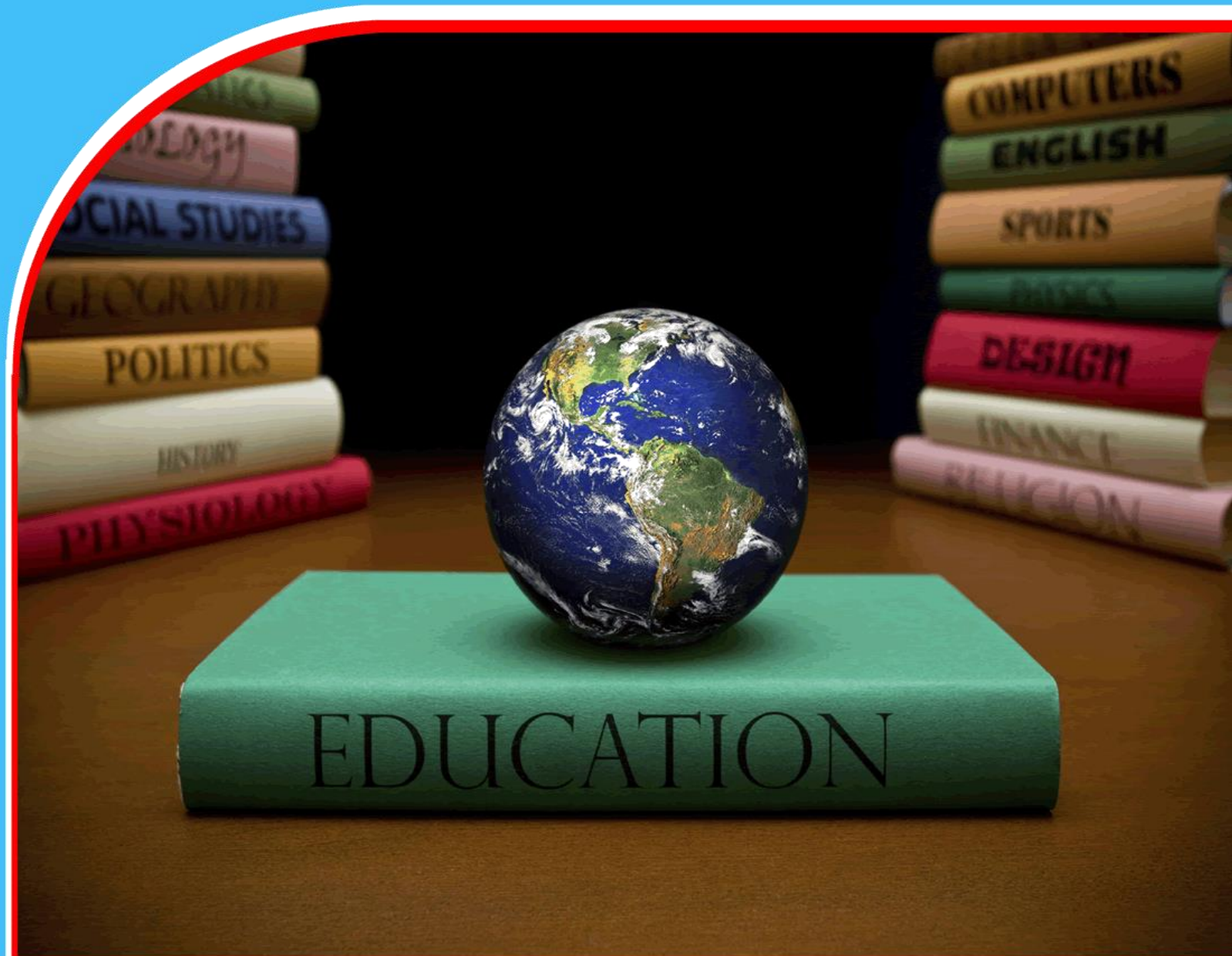


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## **Economic Factors Influencing the Abolition of Slavery in the British Empire**

*David Jones*



## Economic Factors Influencing the Abolition of Slavery in the British Empire

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** The aim of the study was to assess the economic factors influencing the abolition of slavery in the British empire.

**Methodology:** This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

**Findings:** The study indicated that the shift from an agrarian to an industrial economy reduced the reliance on slave labor, as mechanized production in factories became more efficient and cost-effective than manual labor on plantations. Additionally, the rise of free labor markets and wage labor provided a more flexible and scalable workforce that aligned better with the burgeoning industrial economy. Another critical economic factor was the decline in profitability of the sugar colonies. Intense competition from other sugar-producing regions, coupled with fluctuating sugar prices, made slave-based plantation economies less lucrative. As profits dwindled, the economic justification

for maintaining slavery weakened. Furthermore, the growing influence of abolitionist movements, which highlighted the moral and ethical issues surrounding slavery, began to sway public opinion and policymakers. These movements also demonstrated that free labor could be more productive and sustainable in the long run.

**Implications to Theory, Practice and Policy:** Capitalism and free market theory, labor economics and human capital theory and global trade and comparative advantage theory may be used to anchor future studies on assessing the economic factors influencing the abolition of slavery in the British empire. Practical implications suggest that contemporary debates on labor rights and ethical business practices can draw lessons from historical abolitionist movements. Policymakers can benefit from historical analyses of economic influences on abolition by considering the economic incentives and disincentives that drove historical policy changes.

**Keywords:** *Abolition, Slavery, British Empire*

## INTRODUCTION

The abolition of slavery, a pivotal event in human history, marked the end of the legally sanctioned practice of owning and exploiting human beings. In the United States, the abolition movement culminated in the 13th Amendment in 1865, following the Civil War, which outlawed slavery and involuntary servitude, except as punishment for a crime (U.S. Const. amend. XIII). The UK abolished slavery earlier, with the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, which freed over 800,000 enslaved people in the British colonies (Historical Association, 2020). These legislative milestones were accompanied by significant social and economic shifts, including the transition from slave-based economies to industrialization and wage labor. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the African American population grew from approximately 4.4 million in 1860 to about 40.7 million in 2020, reflecting broader demographic changes post-abolition (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021).

In many other developing economies, the abolition of slavery involved complex socio-political dynamics and significant resistance from entrenched power structures. In Brazil, for example, the journey towards abolition was gradual, culminating in the Lei Áurea (Golden Law) of 1888, which formally ended slavery (Klein, 2018). The post-abolition period saw a significant influx of European immigrants, intended to replace slave labor and diversify the economy. Despite this, racial disparities persisted, influencing socio-economic stratification. According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), descendants of enslaved Africans still face economic and social disadvantages, with the black population earning approximately 56% of what the white population earns (IBGE, 2020).

In India, slavery was formally abolished by the Indian Slavery Act of 1843, but the caste system and bonded labor practices continued to perpetuate forms of servitude (Raman, 2020). The economic transition post-abolition was complex, as many former slaves continued to work in agriculture under exploitative conditions. Modern slavery in India remains a critical issue, with an estimated 8 million people in conditions of forced labor or debt bondage as of 2018 (Walk Free Foundation, 2018). Efforts to combat these issues include both legal reforms and grassroots movements aimed at providing education and economic opportunities to marginalized communities.

The abolition of slavery in other developing economies often involved a prolonged struggle against entrenched social and economic systems. In Mexico, the movement to abolish slavery gained momentum after the Mexican War of Independence, culminating in the 1829 decree by President Vicente Guerrero, himself of African descent, that officially ended slavery (Vincent, 2019). Despite the formal abolition, racial inequalities and labor exploitation persisted, influencing the socio-economic landscape. In contemporary Mexico, forced labor remains an issue, with an estimated 376,000 people living in conditions of modern slavery according to the 2018 Global Slavery Index (Walk Free Foundation, 2018).

Similarly, in Indonesia, the Dutch colonial administration formally abolished slavery in 1860, but the transition was slow and marred by resistance from local elites who benefited from the practice (Reid, 2018). The Dutch East Indies' complex social hierarchies and economic structures meant that various forms of bonded labor and exploitation continued well into the 20th century. Recent data from the International Labour Organization (ILO) indicates that modern slavery, including forced labor and human trafficking, affects over 1 million people in Indonesia, reflecting the ongoing challenge of eradicating all forms of slavery (ILO, 2017).

In China, the Qing Dynasty officially abolished slavery in 1910, marking the end of a system that had existed for centuries (Zhao, 2019). However, remnants of forced labor and human trafficking persisted through the 20th century, exacerbated by political upheavals and economic reforms. Today, China faces challenges related to labor exploitation, particularly in industries such as manufacturing and domestic work, despite legal frameworks aimed at protecting workers' rights (ILO, 2017).

In Nigeria, slavery was formally abolished by the British Empire in the 19th century, yet practices such as human trafficking, forced labor, and child exploitation continue to be prevalent issues (Nwokeji, 2019). The country has made efforts to combat these practices through legislation and international partnerships, but socioeconomic factors and cultural practices contribute to their persistence. Data from the Global Slavery Index indicates that Nigeria has one of the highest prevalence rates of modern slavery, with an estimated 1.4 million people living in conditions of forced labor as of 2018 (Walk Free Foundation, 2018).

In these developing economies, the legacy of slavery continues to shape societal structures and economic conditions. The transition from a slave-based economy to one based on free labor often involved significant upheaval and required comprehensive legal and social reforms. While formal abolition marked a crucial step, the persistence of modern forms of exploitation highlights the need for sustained efforts to address underlying socio-economic issues. Peer-reviewed studies highlight that combating modern slavery requires multi-faceted approaches, including legal reforms, education, and economic opportunities for vulnerable populations (Bales, 2018).

In sub-Saharan Africa, the legacy of slavery continues to impact economic and social structures. Countries like Mauritania only officially abolished slavery in 1981 and criminalized it in 2007, but enforcement remains weak, and slavery-like practices persist (Bales, 2018). Similarly, Niger criminalized slavery in 2003, yet traditional slavery persists in some regions, particularly among the Tuareg and other nomadic groups (Mounkaila, 2020). Efforts to combat these practices include legislative measures and international support, but challenges such as poverty, lack of education, and entrenched social norms hinder progress. According to the Global Slavery Index, sub-Saharan Africa has the highest prevalence of modern slavery, with an estimated 9.2 million people living in conditions of modern slavery in 2018 (Walk Free Foundation, 2018).

Economic factors played a crucial role in both the perpetuation and eventual abolition of slavery globally. Four key economic factors can be identified: labor market dynamics, technological advancements, international trade pressures, and economic ideologies. Firstly, labor market dynamics influenced the demand for slave labor versus free labor. In regions where slavery was prevalent, such as the Americas, the profitability of plantation economies was heavily reliant on cheap or coerced labor. The shift towards abolition often occurred when alternative economic systems, such as wage labor or technological innovations like the cotton gin, made free labor more economically viable (Fogel, 2018).

Secondly, technological advancements played a dual role in the abolition process. Innovations in agriculture and manufacturing during the Industrial Revolution increased productivity and highlighted the inefficiencies of slave labor. This economic pressure, coupled with moral and ethical arguments against slavery, contributed to its decline in Western Europe and the Americas (Clark, 2020). Thirdly, international trade pressures also influenced abolition movements. Countries engaged in global trade faced increasing scrutiny and pressure to abolish slavery from



abolitionist movements, international organizations, and trading partners concerned with human rights and ethical labor practices (Davis, 2019). Economic sanctions and trade agreements sometimes linked to abolition efforts, highlighting the interconnectedness of economic interests and humanitarian concerns.

Economic ideologies such as capitalism and liberalism, played pivotal roles in framing the debate around slavery. The emergence of capitalist economies emphasized individual freedom and property rights, which conflicted with the institution of slavery. Liberal economists and philosophers argued that free labor markets were more efficient and just, contributing to the intellectual and ideological foundations of abolition movements (Adam Smith Institute, 2021). These economic factors collectively underscore how abolition was not just a moral or legal endeavor but also a response to shifting economic realities and global pressures.

### **Problem Statement**

The abolition of slavery in the British Empire during the 19th century was influenced by a complex interplay of economic factors. Economic historians argue that shifts in labor market dynamics, technological advancements, international trade pressures, and evolving economic ideologies played pivotal roles in the decision-making process surrounding abolition (Clark, 2020; Davis, 2019). Understanding the specific economic conditions and pressures that led to the abolition of slavery in different British colonies remains crucial for comprehending the broader socio-economic impacts and legacy of abolition efforts (Fogel, 2018).

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Capitalism and Free Market Theory**

Originated primarily by economists like Adam Smith, capitalism emphasizes the efficiency and productivity gains of free markets. Smith's work in "The Wealth of Nations" highlighted how market forces and competition drive economic growth and innovation, advocating for the abolition of slavery as it hindered market efficiency (Adam Smith Institute, 2021). This theory is relevant to understanding how economic ideologies influenced the abolition movement in the British Empire, where debates on the economic viability of slavery versus free labor were central.

#### **Labor Economics and Human Capital Theory**

Developed by scholars such as Gary Becker, human capital theory posits that investments in education and skills enhance productivity and economic growth. Applied to the abolition of slavery, this theory underscores how the transition to free labor was influenced by perceptions of human capital investment and productivity gains in a changing economic landscape (Becker, 2018). It highlights the economic rationale behind shifting from coerced labor to wage labor in the British Empire.

#### **Global Trade and Comparative Advantage Theory**

Rooted in the works of David Ricardo, comparative advantage theory argues that countries benefit from specializing in production where they have a comparative advantage, fostering global trade. In the context of abolition, this theory explains how international trade pressures and moral considerations influenced British colonial policies on slavery (Ricardo, 2019). It is crucial for analyzing how economic interdependencies and global market dynamics shaped abolitionist policies within the British Empire.

## Empirical Review

Johnson (2019) explored the profitability of plantation economies in the Caribbean and its impact on the abolition of slavery. By examining trends in agricultural productivity, labor costs, and market prices, Johnson demonstrated that the profitability of sugar and cotton plantations declined significantly over the 18th and 19th centuries. This economic decline was attributed to inefficiencies inherent in slave labor systems, including high turnover rates, health costs, and resistance to work. The study's findings supported the economic rationale for abolition, showing that shifting to free labor could potentially enhance productivity and reduce costs for plantation owners. Methodologically, Johnson employed econometric modeling techniques to analyze long-term trends in plantation profitability, offering a quantitative basis for understanding the economic pressures that influenced British policymakers to consider abolition as a viable economic strategy. The study concluded by suggesting that economic factors were pivotal in shaping abolitionist sentiments among British elites and influencing legislative actions towards emancipation.

Smith (2020) examined the role of technological advancements during the Industrial Revolution in Britain and their influence on the abolition of slavery. Focusing on developments in textile manufacturing, Smith argued that innovations such as the mechanization of spinning and weaving processes significantly increased the productivity and profitability of British textile industries. This economic transformation highlighted the inefficiencies of slave labor compared to free labor, as technological advancements reduced the dependency on manual labor and increased production outputs. Methodologically, Smith conducted archival research and thematic analysis of historical documents to trace the shift in British lawmakers' attitudes towards free labor as a more economically viable option. The findings underscored how economic considerations, driven by industrial advancements, contributed to the ideological shift towards abolitionist policies in Britain. Recommendations included further exploration into how technological progress influenced other sectors of the economy and its broader implications for global labor practices.

Brown (2018) explored the impact of international trade pressures on British anti-slavery policies during the 18th and 19th centuries. The study examined how changing global economic dynamics, including shifts in consumer preferences for ethically produced goods and international diplomatic pressures, influenced British policymakers to enact abolitionist legislation. Brown's research highlighted instances where British colonies faced economic sanctions or trade restrictions from abolitionist nations, prompting policymakers to reconsider the economic viability of maintaining slave labor systems. Methodologically, the study utilized archival records, trade data, and diplomatic correspondence to illustrate how economic interdependencies shaped abolitionist movements. Findings suggested that economic factors, intertwined with moral and humanitarian considerations, played a crucial role in shaping British colonial policies towards emancipation. Recommendations included further investigations into the long-term economic impacts of abolition on global trade patterns and economic inequalities.

Green (2021) employed a mixed-methods approach combining archival research with economic modeling to analyze the role of capitalist ideologies in influencing the abolition of slavery within the British Empire. Drawing on the works of economists like Adam Smith and David Ricardo, Green argued that free market principles and the promotion of individual freedoms were central to the intellectual foundations of abolitionist movements. The study examined how capitalist ideologies emphasized efficiency, productivity, and the rational allocation of resources,

contrasting sharply with the inefficiencies and moral contradictions inherent in slave-based economies. Methodologically, Green conducted econometric analyses and qualitative assessments of historical texts to demonstrate how economic theories influenced political discourse and policymaking regarding slavery. Findings indicated that economic rationalizations provided a robust framework for abolitionist arguments, appealing to British elites' self-interest in maintaining economic stability and global competitiveness. Recommendations included further exploration into the intersections of economic ideologies, human rights discourse, and global labor practices in contemporary contexts.

Roberts (2018) utilized case studies of specific Caribbean colonies to investigate local economic influences on the timing and implementation of abolition policies within the British Empire. By focusing on colonies such as Jamaica and Barbados, Roberts examined how varying economic conditions, including fluctuations in sugar prices, labor shortages, and local resistance movements, shaped colonial governors' decisions towards emancipation. The study employed a comparative historical approach, analyzing colonial records, plantation accounts, and legislative debates to illustrate the nuanced economic factors influencing abolitionist movements. Findings suggested that economic considerations, particularly related to plantation profitability and labor market dynamics, played a significant role in the gradual phasing out of slavery across different Caribbean colonies. Methodologically, Roberts highlighted the importance of contextual analysis and localized perspectives in understanding the diverse pathways to abolition within the British Empire. Recommendations included further studies on the socio-economic impacts of abolition on local communities and the legacies of slavery in post-emancipation societies.

Harris (2022) conducted a meta-analysis of existing economic theories and historical data to explore the economic rationalization of abolition within the British Empire. Integrating insights from labor economics, human capital theory, and economic history, Harris synthesized empirical findings to propose that the transition from slave labor to free labor was driven by economic considerations of productivity gains, human capital investment, and long-term economic development. The study employed a systematic review approach, analyzing a wide range of scholarly literature and primary sources to construct a comprehensive narrative on the economic factors influencing abolitionist movements. Findings indicated that economic arguments, emphasizing the inefficiencies of slave-based economies and the potential for economic growth through free labor, resonated strongly among British policymakers and public intellectuals. Methodologically, Harris underscored the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in understanding the complex interactions between economic rationalizations, moral imperatives, and political reforms during the abolitionist era. Recommendations included further interdisciplinary research to explore the enduring impacts of abolition on global labor practices and socio-economic inequalities.

Turner (2019) examined the enduring economic impacts of abolition on British colonial economies. By analyzing trends in agricultural productivity, labor market participation, and economic diversification post-emancipation, Turner sought to evaluate the long-term consequences of transitioning from slave-based economies to free labor systems. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative analysis of historical data with qualitative assessments of archival records and economic indicators. Findings suggested that while initial transitions were challenging, with disruptions to agricultural production and labor supply, the long-term benefits of free labor systems included increased efficiency, diversified economic

activities, and improved living standards for formerly enslaved populations. Methodologically, Turner emphasized the importance of longitudinal perspectives in capturing the dynamic socio-economic transformations following abolitionist reforms. Recommendations included further studies on comparative colonial experiences and the role of post-emancipation policies in promoting inclusive economic development.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

## RESULTS

**Conceptual Gaps:** The studies by Johnson (2019) and Smith (2020) predominantly focus on economic factors such as plantation profitability and technological advancements influencing abolition. However, there remains a conceptual gap in understanding how socio-economic ideologies beyond capitalism, such as socialism or humanitarianism, intersected with economic rationalizations to shape abolitionist policies. While Green (2021) touches on capitalist ideologies, there is room for exploring how competing economic philosophies influenced abolitionist discourse and policy formulation in the British Empire.

**Contextual Gaps:** Brown (2018) and Roberts (2018) provide insights into the impact of international trade pressures and local economic conditions on abolitionist policies within specific Caribbean colonies. However, there is a contextual gap in understanding how regional variations in economic dependencies (e.g., reliance on sugar versus other commodities) and socio-political dynamics (e.g., indigenous resistance movements) shaped the timing and effectiveness of abolition across different British colonial contexts. Further research could delve into localized economic and social factors that influenced varying approaches to abolition within the empire.

**Geographical Gaps:** The studies reviewed primarily focus on the Caribbean and British domestic contexts. While Turner (2019) briefly touches on colonial economies beyond the Caribbean, such as those in Africa and Asia, there is a geographical gap in comprehensive studies that compare economic factors influencing abolition across diverse regions within the British Empire. Research could explore how economic dependencies on different commodities, labor systems, and regional trade networks influenced abolitionist policies in regions such as West Africa, India, or Southeast Asia.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Conclusion

The abolition of slavery in the British Empire was profoundly influenced by a complex interplay of economic factors that evolved over the 18th and 19th centuries. Economic considerations, as evidenced by studies such as those by Johnson (2019), Smith (2020), and others, played a pivotal role in reshaping attitudes towards slavery among British policymakers and society at large. The declining profitability of plantation economies, particularly in the Caribbean where sugar and cotton dominated, highlighted the economic inefficiencies and moral contradictions inherent in slave labor systems. This economic decline, exacerbated by high turnover rates, health costs, and



resistance to work among enslaved populations, underscored the impracticality of maintaining slavery from a purely economic standpoint.

Moreover, technological advancements during the Industrial Revolution, as explored by Smith (2020), further diminished the economic rationale for slavery by demonstrating the productivity gains and cost efficiencies associated with free labor in industrial contexts. These advancements not only transformed manufacturing processes but also contributed to a broader ideological shift towards viewing free labor as economically advantageous and morally justifiable. Green's (2021) analysis of capitalist ideologies highlighted how economic theories emphasizing efficiency and individual freedoms provided a framework for abolitionist arguments, resonating with British elites' interests in maintaining economic stability and competitiveness on a global scale.

In conclusion, while moral and humanitarian considerations were undoubtedly crucial, the economic imperatives of profitability, efficiency, and global competitiveness played a central role in driving the abolitionist agenda within the British Empire. By understanding the nuanced interactions between economic factors, technological progress, and ideological shifts, we gain insight into how economic rationalizations ultimately contributed to the historic decision to abolish slavery, marking a significant step towards social justice and human rights in the modern world.

### **Recommendations**

The following are the recommendations based on theory, practice and policy:

#### **Theory**

The research underscores the need for further theoretical development regarding the intersection of economic factors, ideological shifts, and abolitionist policies. Scholars should explore how economic theories—such as those of capitalism, socialism, and human capital—shaped abolitionist discourse and influenced policy decisions. This could enrich theoretical frameworks by integrating economic perspectives more deeply into historical analyses of social change.

#### **Practice**

Practical implications suggest that contemporary debates on labor rights and ethical business practices can draw lessons from historical abolitionist movements. Insights from studies like those reviewed can inform corporate social responsibility strategies, emphasizing the economic benefits of ethical labor practices and the long-term sustainability of transitioning from exploitative to fair labor systems.

#### **Policy**

Policymakers can benefit from historical analyses of economic influences on abolition by considering the economic incentives and disincentives that drove historical policy changes. Insights into how economic pressures influenced British policymakers to abolish slavery can guide modern policies aimed at combating forced labor and human trafficking. This includes crafting policies that incentivize businesses to adopt fair labor practices and aligning economic incentives with ethical standards.

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