
Explaining Costly International Moral Action: Britain's Sixty-year Campaign Against the Atlantic Slave Trade

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When do states pursue costly international moral actions? Although states, private charities, and the United Nations often engage in relatively inexpensive international moral efforts, such as development aid or disaster relief, states almost never pursue more expensive international moral goals requiring significant costs in national income, lives, or risks to national security. The United States passed up the opportunity to bomb Auschwitz and withdrew from Somalia after losing the lives of eighteen soldiers, and no one did anything to save Cambodia. This question is particularly important today as the world faces moral challenges, such as ethnic cleansing and authoritarian human rights abuses. These challenges are likely to be especially costly and risky because they require confronting state governments or local warlords rather than impersonal natural forces or poverty.

In this article we develop a theory of costly international moral action by investigating the most expensive example recorded in modern history: Britain's effort to suppress the Atlantic slave trade from 1807 until final success in 1867. Britain carried out this effort despite its domination of both the slave trade and world sugar production, which was based on slave labor. In 1805–1806 the value of British West Indian sugar production equaled about 4 percent of the national income of Great Britain. Its efforts to suppress the slave trade sacrificed these interests, brought the country into conflict with the other Atlantic maritime powers, and cost Britain more than five thousand lives as well as an average nearly 2 percent of national income annually for sixty years.

Of the three most important traditions in international relations theory, two—realism and liberal institutionalism—focus on states' material interests and therefore cannot offer much advice on how costly international moral action might be accom-

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plished. The third, constructivism, offers more promise because it focuses on the ways in which political discourse can shape states' conceptions of their interests; indeed, a distinct constructivist approach to international moral action is emerging. However, while the logic of this approach does not imply any limit on the scale of goals that might be achieved, most constructivist empirical work focuses on explaining moral efforts that had low material costs and so may not identify the conditions under which states will take on much more expensive moral projects. Absent testing, we cannot know whether causes sufficient to explain undemanding efforts are likely to be similar to those that could explain drastically more demanding efforts, such as British anti-slavery or the most difficult of today's international moral challenges.

Our investigation of British anti-slavery finds that existing theories do not explain the case. Constructivist accounts of international moral action focus heavily on the spread of cosmopolitan ethical beliefs through transnational interaction. However, the mobilization of British abolitionists for their cause as well as their willingness to accept high costs were driven less by other-regarding cosmopolitanism than by a parochial religious and political imperative to reform their domestic society; suppression of the slave trade was one part of a wider program to root out corruption in all aspects of English society. Transnational efforts at persuasion and political assistance played virtually no role, whereas domestic coalition politics, which are not emphasized in the existing theories, played a decisive role at several points.

This case suggests two lessons for costly international moral action. First, we cannot leave out domestic politics. Even when an international moral cause enjoys strong support, its chances of being enacted as state policy may often depend on whether the domestic balance of political power forces one of the mainstream factions into a "saintly logroll" with the moral activists. Second and more important, the British case offers a possible answer to the puzzle of why costly international moral action is so rare. Perhaps the level of commitment to an other-regarding universalist ethic that would be needed to motivate a society to accept high costs for a moral effort designed to benefit only foreigners is virtually never available. Thus costly international moral action may be most likely when it emerges as an included part of a program aimed mainly at domestic moral reform.

Our analysis is divided into four parts. First, we explain why we should study Britain's effort to suppress the slave trade and specify the costs Britain paid. Second, we evaluate the major approaches to international relations theory as explanations for Britain's behavior. Third, we explain the outcome of the British case, including the motivations of the major actors and the determinants of the key decisions. Fourth, we develop a new theory of costly international moral action and discuss possible testing strategies and implications for the likelihood of future international moral action.

Why Study the British Case?

To formulate a theory of costly international moral action the best case to study first is Great Britain's effort from 1807 to 1867 to suppress the Atlantic slave trade, be-

cause it has the most extreme value on the dependent variable: the most expensive international moral effort in modern world history, with most of the cost paid by one country. A second reason to study this case is that it may also be the most successful, at least in its eventual results. It permanently transformed a major international moral norm, virtually eliminating a previously important branch of international trade. Despite some international sales of women in South and Southeast Asia, trade in slaves remains close to zero today. In this part we define costly international moral action, measure the overall cost to Britain of the suppression effort (including lives lost, national security risks, and economic costs), and show that the costs of other well-known moral actions do not approach those of Britain's anti-slave trade campaign.

Definition of Moral Action

We define an international moral action as one that advances a moral principle rather than a selfish interest. Many or most international moral actions, however, involve mixed motives; the moral action is part of a policy that is also designed to advance selfish interests such as the acting state's wealth or power. In at least some such cases the moral act may be nothing more than a side effect of the pursuit of interest—or a rhetorical cover for it.

To avoid confusion we define what we call a costly international moral action as one that is not only explicitly justified on moral grounds but also, on balance, injures the material interests of the citizens of the acting state, such as wealth, loss of life, or national security. In addition many or most citizens should recognize that the policy has costs, even if their estimates of magnitude are vague. An example would be untied development aid, which unlike tied aid has little expectation of returning commercial benefits to the donor.¹ Similarly, humanitarian military interventions by states with little or no strategic or economic interest in the particular dispute would qualify, whereas those that also involved national security interests would not. Thus the United States' liberation of occupied countries during World War II does not qualify; observers disagree as to whether U.S. intervention in Kosovo meets this standard.

Within the state, we cannot reasonably require that the costs of the moral foreign policy be spread evenly across all sections of society, but it should at least be the case that most important political groups—and especially the policy's strongest supporters—pay at least some of the net material costs shared by society as a whole. If a small group managed to shift to others all of the costs of the policy, or even to profiteer on it, that would be better described as a hijacking of the state rather than a genuine moral action. The supporters of the moral policy, however, are likely to gain domestic political influence, since the winners of any policy contest typically do. Therefore, so long as the supporters' political gains do not also yield material benefits

1. Lumsdaine uses a similar definition. Lumsdaine 1993, 29.

sufficient to erase their share of the overall material costs, we cannot exclude such cases; to do so would define away the possibility of costly moral action.²

Costs of the British Suppression Effort

British anti-slavery meets this standard. In the early 1800s the Atlantic slave trade was flourishing as never before, as were the British and other West Indian sugar colonies that depended on it for their labor supply. During the 1790s, 771,000 slaves were imported into the European colonies in the West Indies, the United States, and Brazil, just slightly below the all-time peak in the 1780s, and in 1805 sugar production reached a new high of 310,000 tons.³ The British Empire dominated both trades; British ships carried 52 percent of slaves transported between 1791 and 1805, and British colonies also produced 55 percent of the world's sugar in 1805–1806—and both percentages were rising. At this time Britain's West Indian trade was worth more than all of its other trade with the empire, even above its trade with Ireland.⁴

Nevertheless, the British Parliament abolished the slave trade through two bills in 1806 and 1807, and in 1833 Britain became the first state to emancipate its own slaves. However, initial British expectations that other nations would quickly follow suit were disappointed.⁵ For sixty years almost all of the costs of suppression were borne by Britain, which took the initiative to cajole, bribe, and, where possible, coerce the other slave-trading nations into compliance. It also provided nearly all of the naval strength needed to police slave trade suppression, maintaining squadrons off West Africa, South America, and in the Caribbean for this purpose. Despite agreement by several states at various times to stop trading in slaves, slavers found it easy to simply shift from one flag to another, with the result that the trade continued almost unabated. An average of 525,000 slaves per decade were shipped across the Atlantic from 1811 to 1850. In the end the effort to suppress the Atlantic slave trade would last sixty years until the three main remaining slave-importing states either emancipated their slaves, as France did in 1848, or decided to enforce their own bans on further imports, as Brazil did in 1850 and Cuba in 1867, both under British coercion. In the end direct British efforts accounted for eliminating approximately 80 percent of the slave trade, with the rest eliminated through independent French and American decisions to stop importing slaves.⁶

Persistence in the anti-slavery policy was very expensive for Britain. Because others did not follow Britain's lead, the effect of its abolition decision in 1807 and

2. Thus, although our definition can identify moral action by a state, it does not answer all questions about possible mixed motives of domestic supporters.

3. This represents record levels for all of the major slave importers, except Haiti, which withdrew from the slave economy after a revolt in 1791. See Tomich 1990, 15; Eltis 1987, 248–49; and Drescher 1977, 71, 78.

4. The British West Indies' share of Britain's overseas trade peaked at 21 percent in 1803–07. See Anstey 1975, 38–57; and Drescher 1977, 15–37.

5. The United States banned imports in 1808 but took almost no steps to stop the use of its flag in the trade until 1862. Mathieson 1929, 27.

6. See Eltis 1987, 249; and Bethell 1970, 254–66.

emancipation decision in 1833 was to cut off itself, but not others, from the economic benefits of the slave trade and slave labor for the next several decades. Thus Britain suffered both absolute and relative economic losses. Most serious, British efforts to suppress the slave trade met with suspicion from the other major maritime powers, especially France and the United States, leading to a series of foreign policy disputes that involved at least some risk to British national security. Finally, a number of British sailors, soldiers, and civilian officials lost their lives.

Lives. The organization that suffered the heaviest losses, mainly from disease, in anti-slavery efforts was the Royal Navy's West Africa Squadron, which operated from 1819 to 1869 and had virtually no other mission. The Caribbean and South American squadrons also had some losses connected to anti-slave trade missions. Death rates were also high among the army garrisons at Sierra Leone and elsewhere in West Africa, in numerous inland expeditions, and among officials of the Court of Mixed Commission at Sierra Leone. Overall, the slave trade suppression effort cost about 5,000 British lives.⁷ The equivalent for a country the size of the United States today would be about 55,000 lives.

National security. At times the anti-slavery campaign brought Britain into conflict with the other major maritime powers, especially France and the United States, who saw British anti-slavery patrols as cover for extending British control over oceanic trade. This led to difficulties in British relations with each of these countries, including war scares with the United States in 1841 and with Spain in 1853; disputes with the United States over Cuba, Santo Domingo, and Central America in the 1850s; and a short war against Brazil in 1850.⁸

The single most serious consequence for Britain's national security resulted from the Right of Search controversy with France, which erupted in 1841 because of French popular anger over the Royal Navy's stopping of French merchantmen under an 1831 mutual search agreement; in 1845 Britain was forced to agree to suspension of the agreement. This dispute, in turn, contributed to the inability of Britain and France to repair their *Entente Cordiale* of 1830, which had already been shaken when France and Britain supported opposite sides in the 1840 Eastern Crisis over Egyptian influence in Syria. Anglo-French relations remained poor for several years. The loss of France as an ally forced Britain to seek an alliance with Russia in 1845, which it otherwise would have preferred to avoid because Russia was its most serious ideological and strategic rival. This alliance, in turn, contributed to the Crimean War by encouraging Tsar Nicholas I to act more confidently against the Ottoman Empire than he probably would have had he understood that Britain, despite its relatively poor relations with France, would side against him over the Straits dispute.⁹

7. See Mathieson 1929, 52–56; and LeVeen 1977, 79.

8. See Soulsby 1933, 51–53; and Corwin 1967, 112–13.

9. See Jennings 1988, 146–55; Curtiss 1979, 31; and Bullen 1974.

Economic losses. Anti-slavery forced British interests, which had previously dominated both the slave trade and the supply of goods exchanged for slaves in West Africa, to give up those markets, which were picked up by the Americans, French, Spanish, and others. More important, at a time when world demand for sugar was rising and continuing slave imports allowed competitors to expand production while reducing costs, Britain's abolition efforts caused production in its own West Indian colonies to decline and costs to rise. In the first thirty-five years after abolition of the slave trade, British West Indian sugar production fell by nearly 25 percent, whereas production in competing slave economies rose by more than 210 percent. Britain's share of world sugar production fell from 55 percent in 1805 to 15 percent by 1850.¹⁰

Virtually all elements of British society suffered net economic costs from the anti-slavery effort, certainly including the mainly urban, middle-class Protestant Dissenters who formed the core of the abolitionist movement.¹¹ British taxpayers paid for government efforts against slavery; consumers paid higher prices for sugar and other tropical produce; and manufacturers, shippers, merchants, and bankers who traded with the West Indian colonies or with Africa lost business; their employees also suffered. In addition, for many years British merchants often faced popular hostility in Cuba, Brazil, and other regions that continued to import slaves.¹²

Although Dissenters did achieve political gains attributable in part to anti-slavery, most of the issues on which they confronted the establishment promised them either no obvious economic benefits or only tiny benefits, such as on church rates. The only issue in dispute between the Dissenters (and the middle class generally) and the establishment that had genuinely large economic implications was free trade, but pursuit of this goal actually conflicted with anti-slavery, as we explain later. Perhaps the only people in the entire empire who benefited were the slaves themselves and East Indian and Egyptian agricultural producers who competed with the West Indian slave colonies. We estimate the overall economic cost to British metropolitan society of the anti-slave trade effort at roughly 1.8 percent of national income over sixty years from 1808 to 1867 (see Table 1).

Comparison to Post-1945 International Moral Actions

Most international moral efforts, when compared with the British campaign against the slave trade, have not been costly; efforts on behalf of refugees of war, famine, or natural disaster typically cost trivial sums in relation to the national incomes of the mostly wealthy donor countries, place in danger almost none of their citizens, and involve virtually no international security risks.

The nearest modern analogue to the suppression of the slave trade is the practice of international development aid, which since 1949 has become regularized, so that a

10. See Drescher 1977, 78; Tomich 1990, 15, 24; and Eltis 1987, 6.

11. Williams argues that sugar island slavery was actually in decline and that abolition and emancipation served the progress of British capitalism. Williams 1944. This "decline thesis" is now regarded as discredited. See Temperley 1977; Anstey 1975, 50–52; Drescher 1977; and Eltis 1987.

12. See Temperley 1985; and Eltis 1987, 60.

TABLE 1. *Costs to Britain for suppressing the slave trade, 1808–67*

<i>Source of loss</i>	<i>Percentage of national income (yearly average)</i>
Suppression effort, including diplomatic, legal, and naval costs	0.05
Emancipation indemnity to planters	0.09
Lost customs revenues	0.08
Slave trade, including supplies to slave traders	0.55
Reduced exports to West Africa	0.17
Reduced exports to British West Indies	0.54
Sugar-carrying trade	0.23
Higher sugar prices for British consumers	0.24
Total	1.78

Source: Kaufmann and Pape 1999.

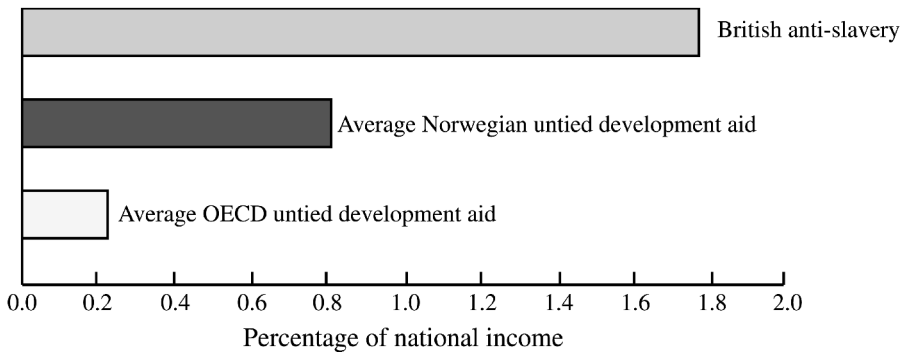


FIGURE 1. *Costs of persistent international moral efforts*

number of countries have given every year for nearly fifty years. Untied development aid by Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development countries averaged 0.23 percent of GNP from 1975 to 1996 (0.33 percent including tied aid); the most generous donor country, Norway, gave an average of 1.00 percent of GNP, roughly 0.81 percent untied.¹³ Figure 1 illustrates the relative magnitudes of these efforts.

International Relations Theory and British Anti-slavery

Realism

From a realist viewpoint the most obvious reaction to justification of any foreign policy action on moral grounds is to see the moral claim as a deceptive cover for a

13. See Lumsdaine 1993, 48, 106–107, 255, 263; and OECD 1990–98.

policy actually driven by self-interest.¹⁴ In fact, American, French, and other observers did at times suspect British anti-slave trade efforts, especially pressure for rights to search suspected slave ships, as actually aimed at increasing British control of the seas.

The outer constraint on realist theories' toleration for moral action is that they must not incur any risk to the state's security. Specifically, states should always be deterred from pursuing a moral goal to the point of offending any state that has significant military power and whose alliance choice in a future war might conceivably be affected. States should also not accept any adverse shift in relative wealth, because economic power is the basis of military power. Together these imperatives impose almost impossibly difficult requirements for costly international moral action: first, all important military powers must participate; second, the costs must be shared equally among them.¹⁵

Absence of countervailing benefits. Anti-slave trade efforts did not yield Britain any noticeable material benefits, either in wealth or power. Although some advocates of suppression argued that the policy would help expand British trade with Africa in other goods, this did not occur.¹⁶ Although Britain did acquire a series of naval bases in West Africa, these had virtually no utility beyond their use against slavery, being thousands of miles away from the sea routes between Europe and the valuable colonies and markets in the Caribbean, North America, Brazil, and India. The stations yielded little or no net commercial benefit; the first spot to be gained that held significant future economic potential was Lagos in 1861.¹⁷ Arguably, the West African stations acquired some usefulness later, during the "scramble for Africa" in the 1880s, as potential coaling stations and entry points into the interior, but this benefit could not have been foreseen in 1807 or even 1860.

Exporting the costs of domestic moral action? A possible realist explanation for British efforts to suppress the slave trade of others (although not for its own withdrawal from the trade or for emancipation) is that Britain sought to reduce the costs of its own moral action by denying slaves to its competitors in production of tropical produce.

In fact by the time Britain began exerting heavy pressure on the rest of the slave trade in the late 1830s, the main economic effect of further reductions in the availability of slave labor would have been higher prices for tropical produce that would not have been in the interest of most segments of British society. Almost the only group

14. Traditional realists argued that although moral arguments could be tactically useful, morally driven foreign policy would be fundamentally misguided. Morgenthau 1948.

15. If even one power did not participate, it would gain relative to the members of the moral coalition; realist approaches thus should prohibit even a joint Anglo-French-American effort to suppress the slave trade because of the relative gains to uninvolved powers such as Prussia, Russia, and Austria.

16. Mitchell and Deane 1962, 311, 366.

17. Lloyd 1968, 149–62. In the days of sail, the sea route to India followed a wide arc across the Atlantic to the Brazilian coast and then back toward the southern tip of Africa.

that would have benefited significantly was the West Indian planters, who by this time had no political influence.¹⁸

As for international relative gains, by the late 1830s the only remaining significant slave importers were Cuba and Brazil. Cutting off slave imports to these countries sooner would probably have damaged their economies relative to Britain's, but there is little evidence that British policymakers were concerned about gains relative to such weak states.

Did Britons realize the costs of anti-slavery? British anti-slavery could be consistent with realism if it were simply a mistake—that is, if British elites and the public were unaware that their choices harmed their material interests. Although abolitionist leaders did usually minimize the prospective costs of each new step, opponents of anti-slavery were always energetic in publicizing them, and cost estimates by disinterested elites were usually on the pessimistic side.¹⁹ Further, abolitionist overoptimism was repeatedly exposed by events: abolition of the trade did not improve slave conditions, nor did apprenticeship; other countries did not cooperate in suppressing the trade or even respect Britain's efforts; and free-grown sugar was not as cheap as slave-grown.

There is strong evidence that Britons understood that the anti-slavery effort was expensive. First, at least some supporters of abolition explicitly recognized that they would pay for it. One 1789 petition from 769 Sheffield cutlers said that even though they expected to lose exports to Africa, they were so convinced of the inhumanity of the slave trade that they wanted it eliminated. Numerous of the urban artisan and manufacturing interests who petitioned must have seen themselves in the same position. Even Liverpool, the center of the slave and West India trades, in 1806 replaced its long-time MP General Banastre Tarleton, a famous voice for the West India interest, with a pro-abolition candidate.²⁰

Second, the £20,000,000 indemnity appropriated in 1833 to compensate planters for emancipation was considered a shocking sum for a British Parliament preoccupied with economy. In an environment where taxes were already high because of Britain's £800,000,000 national debt (about 225 percent of GNP, compared to roughly 65 percent for the United States today) and both MPs and popular agitators were calling for tax relief, paying off this indemnity was projected to require a 4 percent across-the-board tax rise for ten years.²¹

Third, the extensive debates over sugar duties in the early 1840s showed the British public that free labor was less efficient than slave labor. Protecting free-grown (British) sugar cost British consumers an average of between £5 million and £5.5 million per year from 1835 to 1846—a cost that Britons accepted for eleven years

18. The West India interest did support aggressive efforts to suppress the foreign slave trades for this reason. Williams 1944, 175.

19. Anstey 1975, 368–69.

20. Rose 1911, 459.

21. See Hyam 1993, 79; Butler 1995, 35; and Green 1976, 119.

before the duties were equalized.²² Britons also paid more for tropical goods both before and after these years than if the British West Indies had been allowed to continue to import slaves.

Finally, on several occasions British elites were made aware that slave trade suppression offended important naval powers such as the United States and France. From 1840 to 1845 French newspapers were routinely full of accusations against Britain's motives in attacking the slave trade; in 1845 several warned that in case of war Britain would stir up slave revolts in French colonies. William Hutt asked Commons in 1845 how Britons would feel if "British vessels, engaged in smuggling, had been chased, burnt, sunk, or run ashore by American or Russian ships of war?"²³

Liberal Institutionalism

Liberal institutionalism, like realism, concentrates on explaining materially based behavior and so cannot explain the sources of motivations toward international moral action. Institutional approaches are, however, somewhat more optimistic about the possibility of such motives being translated into state action because they hold out more hope of solving the necessary international cooperation problems. An international institution that embodied the moral norm could raise the probability of action in two ways. First, it could reduce suspicions that states' moral actions were actually covers for self-interest. Second, it could monitor burden sharing to reduce free-rider problems.

Institutionalist approaches, however, cannot help us understand the suppression of the slave trade, since Britain's effort was not supported by existing international norms and institutions but instead was carried out in opposition to them. Norms of state sovereignty, and especially of freedom of the seas, prevented Britain from simply applying its overwhelmingly superior naval power to stamp out the slave trade. The international law of the day so favored rights of free passage for merchant ships that most slave traders could escape British interference simply by changing flags, until and unless Britain could obtain bilateral mutual search agreements with every other maritime nation—which never happened.

Further, the British experience suggests that the conventional wisdom that international cooperation should enhance the willingness of individual states to pay costs for moral action may not be right. Multilateral actions necessarily entail concerns about burden sharing that exert downward pressure on willingness to contribute, as the issue for each state becomes framed as "Are we paying more than our share?" Paradoxically, the absence of cooperation from others, or even active opposition, may actually help to strengthen the determination of a state engaged in international moral action if the issue becomes framed nationalistically, as it eventually did in the British case, as "We must show the world."

22. See Hyam 1993, 85; Porter 1843; and Temperley 1972, 78.

23. Jennings 1988, 145–67, 200–201; quoted in Temperley 1972, 177.

Constructivist Theories

Constructivist approaches, since they treat conceptions of interest as variable and changeable, are far better suited than realism or liberalism to explaining moral action. Indeed, international moral action is the subject of an important stream of constructivist theorizing.²⁴ Although there is some variation in hypothesized causal processes, two elements are shared by most of this literature: transnationalism and cosmopolitanism.²⁵

Transnationalism. Most constructivist accounts of international moral action focus on diffusion of principled ideas, especially transnationally: “Preferences may not be inherent in states and may not be wedded to material conditions. . . . Other actors are setting agendas, defining tasks, and shaping interests of states.”²⁶ The greatest emphasis has been on the role of nongovernmental “transnational advocacy networks” that assist each other in influencing target states both by helping domestic groups to transform public and elite opinion and policy agendas as well as by activating international governmental organizations and other states to exert external pressure.²⁷

A related feature of constructivist explanations of international moral action is relatively low attention to the domestic politics of the target state. Most focus on one of two pathways by which principled ideas could be converted into state policies. One of these is simply that the principled idea may diffuse through society so widely that it becomes a generally accepted norm, which then influences policy.²⁸ Another concerns “boomerang effects” in which moral policy advocates who find their own states or societies unresponsive use “end runs” involving transnational linkages to advocates in other states, who then pressure their own states and international institutions to coerce the original target state into compliance.²⁹ In contrast, pathways that depend on coalitions between a morally committed minority and other, more powerful domestic political factions who see their interests in other terms have received relatively little attention.

24. See Nadelmann 1990; Jackson 1993; Lumsdaine 1993; Klotz 1995a; D’Anjou 1996; Finnemore 1996a, 69–88; Finnemore 1996b; and Keck and Sikkink 1998.

25. Some constructivist work in other issue areas, such as national security, emphasizes internal sources of ideational change more than transnational influence. See Katzenstein 1996; Berger 1993; and Checkel 1997.

26. Finnemore 1996a, 11–12.

27. See Nadelmann 1990; Keck and Sikkink 1998, 12–26, 206–209; Finnemore 1996a, 73–82; and Thomas 1993, 83.

28. Lumsdaine argues that “broad worldwide sympathies” play a larger role in aid decisions than do particularistic interests. Lumsdaine 1993, 179. Klotz argues that even a “well-specified domestic politics explanation remains insufficient for explaining U.S. sanctions against South Africa.” Rather, the key is that “the legitimation of certain goals and means constrains choices.” When a new domestic consensus on norms emerges, governments become constrained to act in ways consistent with those norms. Klotz 1995b, 458, 462.

29. See Keck and Sikkink 1998, 12–13; and Klotz 1995a, 165.

Cosmopolitanism. A second common feature of constructivist theories of moral action is that the principled ideas influencing policy are usually consistent with a cosmopolitan moral ethic—the idea that human beings are of equal inherent worth and that the moral obligations of individuals to each other stem from their common membership in the community of humankind, which overrides obligations to narrower communities such as a church, class, race, or state. Further, moral activists cannot operate on the principle that their own parochial view of the good is superior to the values of the others whom they seek to help or impose “benefits” that the recipients may not recognize as such.³⁰

Whereas in political philosophy cosmopolitanism serves primarily as a normative theory, many constructivist accounts of international moral action employ it as positive theory: moral projects based on principled ideas that are cosmopolitan in content are predicted to be easier to implement as policy than projects based on more parochial ideals. Cosmopolitan ideals are claimed to have competitive advantages in moral and political discourse. Appealing to universal norms may reduce the capacity of recalcitrant regimes to erect barriers to transnational influence based on appeals to narrower values such as nationalism or state interests. As Ethan Nadelmann writes, “In virtually every case [of transnational moral entrepreneurship], the relevant moral views are “cosmopolitan” in nature. . . . Therein lies their power, for whereas the “state” both politicizes and dehumanizes the outsider, . . . “cosmopolitan” moral views transcend the state, thereby depoliticizing the individual and emphasizing the existence of an international society of human beings sharing common moral bonds.”³¹ David Lumsdaine argues that international development aid “both reflected and furthered the recognition of human solidarity, of international community, and worldwide moral responsibilities.”³² Martha Finnemore argues similarly: “Once people begin to believe, at least in principle, in human equality, there is no logical limit to the expansion of human rights and self-determination.”³³

In principle, none of the elements of transnationalism, cosmopolitanism, and the neglect of (material interest-based) domestic politics may be essential to constructivist theorizing about international moral action; in practice, however, these elements dominate the existing literature. In the conclusion we suggest an alternative model of costly international moral action that assigns major roles both to ideas and to domestic politics but does not rely on transnational links or cosmopolitan ethics.

Given that the universe of costly international moral action contains only one clearly qualified case, we must ask whether existing constructivist theories of international moral action can be fairly evaluated based on an even highly detailed investigation of that one case. The answer in this instance is yes, for two reasons. First, the British case contains most of the antecedent conditions that are central in the causal logic of the constructivist theories—the concept of universal human dignity had been

30. On cosmopolitanism, see Beitz 1979; Goodin 1988; and Nussbaum 1996.

31. Nadelmann 1990, 483–84.

32. Lumsdaine 1993, 290.

33. Finnemore 1996b, 174. See also Donnelly 1993, 30–32; Jackson 1993, 123–25; and Keck and Sikkink 1998, 26–28, 204–205.

gaining ground in Western moral discourse, transnational advocacy networks were quite active, and they did use cosmopolitan moral reasoning to promote anti-slavery efforts; this case should therefore be an easy test for constructivist theories of international moral action. Second, although there is no detailed study of British anti-slavery from a constructivist point of view, several authors in this literature do claim that the case supports their theory.³⁴

British anti-slavery efforts pose a substantial challenge for constructivist theories of international moral action, because these models should expect the case to exhibit two features that it does not. First, British anti-slavery policy should have been determined by the spread within British society of cosmopolitan ideals regarding the fundamental dignity and equality of people, until a new moral consensus emerged that was strong enough to drive state policy. Second, the success of anti-slavery mobilization should not have been overwhelmingly home-grown and self-contained, but rather part of an international normative discourse in which transnational advocacy networks linking all Western societies should have influenced, and likely accelerated, the progress of anti-slavery efforts in all of them.

In fact, British abolitionists were driven more by parochial religious and political imperatives than by cosmopolitan or universalist concerns, and they succeeded in getting their policy agenda executed less by creating a national moral consensus than because of luck in coalition-formation opportunities. Efforts by transnational advocates to accelerate the pace of British anti-slavery did, on balance, less than no good.

What Happened?

There are three questions that must be answered to explain British anti-slavery policy or any other instance of costly international moral action: First, how did the moral impulse originate, and, especially, why were the moral activists prepared to pay high costs to carry out their program? Second, how were the actual decisions to pursue the international moral project made; especially, how did the faction committed to the moral project gain enough support from less idealistic factions to prevail? Some of the main decision points are listed in Table 2. There are three key decisions that must be explained to understand British moral action in this case: the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, emancipation in 1833, and Britain's persistence in the slave-trade suppression effort through the 1840s and beyond. Third, to what extent were policy decisions influenced by transnational interactions?

Our investigation finds that British anti-slavery was primarily the product of a parochial religious movement that held particular beliefs and identified slavery as one of a set of interconnected evils for which England would face divine punishment if left uncorrected. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, domestic

34. See Finnemore 1996b, 170–72; Nadelmann 1990, 491–98; and Keck and Sikkink 1998, 41–51. Ray says that British abolition was a result of “moral progress.” Ray 1989, 411–13. D’Anjou argues that its success was due to elite manipulation of mass beliefs, but he does not assign weightings to transnational versus domestic efforts. D’Anjou 1996.

TABLE 2. *Main parliamentary initiatives regarding slavery*

<i>Initiatives in pursuit of anti-slavery</i>	
1791–1805	Several motions to abolish slave trade (<i>all unsuccessful</i>)
1806	Abolition of slave trade to recently captured colonies
1807	Complete abolition of slave trade
1811–28	Various enforcement measures
1833	Eventual emancipation
1838	Immediate emancipation
1839	Unilateral search of Portuguese ships
1845	Unilateral search of Brazilian ships
<i>Initiatives against anti-slavery</i>	
1841	Motion to equalize sugar duties (<i>defeated</i>)
1846	Equalization of sugar duties
1850	Motion to withdraw African squadron (<i>defeated</i>)

social, economic, and religious changes within Britain led to the rise of a number of Protestant Dissenter sects committed to a wide-ranging program to reform English society, one part of which was anti-slavery. At the same time, the same societal changes led to a fine, even precarious balance of power in British domestic politics, so that at several points Dissenters held the balance of power between the two main parties and could insist on enactment of much of their program.

Our findings can be summarized in four main points. First, British anti-slavery was an inside-out, not an outside-in phenomenon. Transnational advocacy networks had almost no effect on the trajectory of anti-slavery in British politics. American activists had only the most minor influence on British abolitionist ideas at the very beginning of the anti-slavery mobilization and none at all on its subsequent political successes, whereas the British anti-slavery movement was actually harmed by its French connections.

Second, cosmopolitan values played a much smaller role in British anti-slavery than many constructivist theorists of moral action might expect. Once Britons recognized Africans as fellow human beings, their dignity could not be completely denied. However, the actual content of the anti-slavery program of the British “Saints”³⁵ is better described as an instance of cultural imperialism than of other-regarding cosmopolitanism. Similarly, although British abolitionists hoped to persuade other nations to cooperate in anti-slavery efforts, they were in no way deterred by the realization that many Western “peer societies” did not share their views.

Third, the reasons why so many British abolitionists were willing to accept very high costs to correct injustices thousands of miles away were not based on their acceptance of obligations to a universal moral community, but rather on their parochial identities as Protestant Dissenters, members of the middle class, and their national identity as Englishmen. They saw slavery, together with the overlapping com-

35. Originally a derisive term for the small anti-slave trade contingent in the House of Commons in the 1790s, later applied to abolitionists generally.

plex of the planters, the aristocracy that controlled British political life, and the hierarchy of the established Church as a single body of corruption, immorality, and arbitrary power that threatened the souls of all Englishmen and had to be defeated in order to redeem the nation. Anti-slavery overseas was one component of a program for redemption at home. The spiritual and political stakes in this “struggle for the soul of England” were so great that any material losses seemed unimportant by comparison.

Fourth, although the Saints were never a majority in British politics, favorable coalition dynamics at several points enabled them to enact their program. In 1807 the aristocratic Tory ruling elite saw that satisfying the Saints’ demand for abolition of Britain’s slave trade would enhance their somewhat tarnished political legitimacy. In 1832 Dissenters and Saints provided the decisive margin for Whig victory and parliamentary reform, allowing them to demand emancipation of Britain’s remaining colonial slaves. Throughout the 1830s and 1840s, the combination of the usually close balance of British politics and the number and mobilization skills of the Dissenters made it safer for British governments to energetically pursue suppression abroad than not to do so. By the 1840s the policy may also have been sustained by institutionalization, simple inertia, and the identification internationally of the prestige of the British state with anti-slavery.

Our assessment is that, overall, the configuration of domestic political power played the most important role in determining British behavior. The Dissenters’ commitment to anti-slavery had both religious and political sources, but without favorable domestic political circumstances the British state almost certainly could not have been brought to pay high costs to execute the anti-slavery program. Finally, international political constraints had only a very slight impact at the margins of British behavior.

The Sources of British Anti-slavery

By the middle of the eighteenth century, slavery had long been seen as immoral by most Britons on the essentially cosmopolitan grounds that it violated the basic right of all men to liberty. A 1772 court case established that any slave who touched British soil automatically became free, and attempts at principled defense of slavery died out.³⁶ However, although universalist logic was sufficient to persuade Englishmen to regard slavery as immoral, this did not translate into a willingness to take action. Prior to the early 1780s there was no significant constituency for action against either the slave trade or overseas slavery.

Religion and anti-slavery. The abolitionists’ core support was drawn from a number of Protestant Dissenter movements that grew in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to satisfy the needs of the rising urban middle classes who felt alienated from the Established Church. These included older nonconformist sects such as

36. Anstey 1975, 92–125.

Quakers, Baptists, Congregationalists, and Rational Dissenters (Unitarians), as well as the newer Methodist Connection and other Methodist sects. The reformist “evangelical” faction within the established Church also supported anti-slavery.³⁷

Although the Dissenter sects never approached a majority in England, by 1807 the three largest (Methodists, Congregationalists, and Baptists) totaled about 3.5 percent of the adult population and about 6 percent by the mid-1830s. Prior to 1832, Dissenters had little access to political power. However, because nonconformists were especially concentrated among the urban middle classes, artisans, and yeoman farmers, many of whom gained the vote by the Great Reform Bill, after 1832 they comprised an estimated 21 percent of the electorate and often held the balance of political power between the major parties.³⁸

The Protestant Dissenter movements all believed that God’s plan for a divine order on earth is revealed through the human faculty of reason. Individuals must rely on their own reason, not on fallible authorities (such as Church hierarchy) and pursue their own moral betterment. Slavery was condemned because it kept Africans, who as God’s children also possess reason and therefore the potential for grace, from achieving salvation. As John Wesley—the leader of the largest evangelical religious movement in England, the Methodist Connection—argued in his *Thoughts on Slavery* in 1774, slave-holding was “inconsistent [with] natural justice” and that if the tropics could not be worked otherwise “it were better that all those islands should remain uncultivated forever.”³⁹

Although Dissenter abolitionists’ recognition of Africans as children of God can be described as cosmopolitan, their program for liberated slaves was not. Rather, they sought to impose on the world a particular vision whose authority derived from a parochial belief in their own superior understanding of God’s will. Dissenter abolitionists had little knowledge of, or respect for, African cultures; instead, they sought to elevate ignorant savages to meet their own models of pious Christians and responsible citizens, as well as docile, productive workers.⁴⁰

Why pay high costs for anti-slavery? The Dissenters’ zeal to see slavery stamped out at almost any cost rested on their perception of English society as beset by a multitude of interconnected evils, including corruption, religious oppression and autocratic rule at home, and slavery in the colonies, together with their particular religious belief in an activist God who would punish not only them as individuals but also England as a nation for failing to combat these evils.⁴¹

37. See Drescher 1987, esp. 115; Semmel 1973, 124–36; and Watts 1995, 2:441.

38. The class makeup of early nineteenth century nonconformism was 0.0 percent aristocratic, 75.1 percent middle class and artisan, and 24.9 percent farmers, laborers, and “others.” The corresponding figures for society as a whole were 1.4 percent, 34.4 percent, and 64.2 percent, respectively. See Anstey 1981, 51; and Gilbert 1976, 31–39, 63–67.

39. See Brinton 1973, 26–32; Turley 1991, 18–25; and Anstey 1975, 159, 193–95. Wesley quoted in Semmel 1973, 95.

40. Temperley 1980, 335–50.

41. On the connection between Protestant religiosity and English nationalism, see Colley 1992.

Many nonconformists believed that sins were interconnected, so that the existence of slavery would progressively corrupt all English institutions. Unitarians argued that growing corruption in the plantation colonies, and the luxuries that Britons enjoyed because of them, were beginning to stain the social and political fabric of Britain. Conversely, elimination of slavery was expected to make it easier to reform institutions at home. Baptist minister Robert Robinson argued in 1789 that Christians should wage a general offensive against encroachments on natural rights such as slavery whose end result will be civil and religious liberty.⁴²

In addition to anti-slavery, most Dissenters also supported other causes that aimed to limit arbitrary power, including parliamentary reform and Catholic emancipation. Later, many Dissenters supported the Anti-Corn Law League, not only because they believed in free trade *per se* but also because they saw the corn laws as enriching both landlords and the Church at the expense of the rest of society, including themselves.⁴³

Dissenters' greatest domestic fears were reserved for the Anglican establishment, which oppressed them through Test and Corporation Acts that required them to pay Anglican tithes, marry in Anglican chapels, and be buried in Anglican churchyards; and barred them from universities, military commissions, and various other offices. They saw the Anglican clergy as part of the network of ruling-class patronage, with many devoting their main energy to social and financial advancement and not even residing in their assigned parishes.⁴⁴

The most telling evidence of the decay of the Church was its interference with missionary work among slaves. After 1790 many nonconformist sects became increasingly involved in missionary activity, especially in the West Indies. The colonial governments, however, persecuted nonconformist missions because their teachings tended to subvert slaves' willingness to bear slavery. Dissenters therefore saw the planters who harassed and even killed missionaries and the colonial Anglican ministers, whose benefices were supported by the same planters and who condoned their behavior, as epitomizing the corruption endangering English society. The Church even owned two slave plantations on Barbados. Nonconformists saw the aristocratic authorities and the Established Church as keeping them in a kind of bondage at home and so saw a parallel between their own situation and that of the slaves in the colonies; the lawless use of power abroad was seen as evidence that their religious rights at home might be further endangered.⁴⁵

Thus for Dissenters opposition to slavery was a way of combating the planters, the oppressive Anglican Establishment, and aristocratically based autocratic rule at home—all of whom supported and were supported by slavery. Tories saw it the same way; in 1833 the Duke of Wellington predicted that the Dissenters would not stop

42. Similarly, Unitarian philosopher Joseph Priestley. Both quoted in Turley 1991, 25–26. See also Drescher 1987, 112; and Turley 1991, 136

43. See Hurwitz 1973, 83; and Turley 1991, 116.

44. See Blackburn 1988, 135–36; Hurwitz 1973, 85–88; and Harvey 1968, 66–72.

45. See Caldecott 1970, 19; Cowherd 1956, 58–59; Semmel 1973, 163, 181; Walvin 1981, 70; Drescher 1987, 115–22; and Midgely 1992, 55, 75, 104–107.

“until they have accomplished their ends, which are the destruction of the Church, and Negro emancipation.”⁴⁶

The strongest of all the abolitionists’ concerns, however, was fear for the fate of their country. Most Dissenters believed in an activist God who rewarded and punished people and nations according to their merit. Thus the 1783 Quaker pamphlet that initiated mass anti-slavery agitation in England argued that it was the government’s duty to bring “terror to evil doers”; otherwise not just individuals but the nation itself could be punished for its sins: “can it be expected that this great iniquity will go unpunished?”⁴⁷

Granville Sharp argued in 1774 that the immoral practices of Britain’s autocratic ruling class, including lewdness, adultery, slavery, and other immoralities associated with slave trading, would destroy the entire empire: “The impending evils which threaten the colonies abroad and the general misunderstanding of the British constitution which at present prevails at home (circumstances which presage the mutual destruction of both) may . . . be looked upon as a just punishment from God.”⁴⁸

Conservatives who supported abolition, mainly Anglican evangelicals, were also motivated by fear of divine punishment. In a famous sermon in 1787, evangelical minister Thomas Clarkson argued that Britain faced a choice between reform and perdition. In 1807 James Stephen asked why England, despite what he saw as its essentially just domestic institutions, still faced the calamities of war and possible revolution, and answered: “If God has entered into judgment with us, we must, I repeat, look to Africa and to the West Indies for the sources of his wrath.” Further, the loss of the American colonies in 1783 was seen by many as evidence of God’s wrath, which helps to explain why the anti-slavery movement became prominent in the 1780s and not before.⁴⁹

Abolitionists maintained this theme of retribution throughout all their campaigns. In 1832 Thomas Buxton told the House of Commons that if slavery were not abolished there would be civil war in the colonies, in which both the people of England and Heaven itself would favor the slaves. Buxton and other abolitionists often quoted Thomas Jefferson: “I do, indeed, tremble for my country when I remember that God is just and that His justice may not sleep forever. A revolution is among possible events; the Almighty has no attribute which would side with us in such a struggle.”⁵⁰ The danger to England was sometimes offered even as an explanation for why anti-slavery had to be spread to other countries. In 1851 Unitarian abolitionist Russell Lant Carpenter argued that “either we must endeavor to reform America, or America will corrupt us.”⁵¹

46. Quoted in Hurwitz 1973, 87.

47. Quoted in Turley 1991, 21–22.

48. Quoted in Davis 1975, 395.

49. See Clarkson [1808] 1968, 1:424–25, 2:583–84; Stephen 1807, 115–16; Colley 1992, 354; and Drescher 1987, 64–65.

50. See Hurwitz 1973, 38–41; and Klingberg 1926, 267–68.

51. Quoted in Strange 1984, 134.

These arguments enabled abolitionists to explain why not only Dissenters but all Englishmen should be willing to pay the costs of anti-slavery, and why the claims by defenders of the slave trade that its abolition would cost money or harm this or that national interest were beside the point. The nation's moral survival was more important than any merely material loss.

Mobilization. After a few false starts in the early 1780s, in 1787 the London Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade was founded to coordinate among abolitionist groups nationwide. Abolitionist committees launched a nationwide propaganda offensive of pamphlets, tracts, and correspondence reporting the horrors of the slave trade and calling for its abolition. Although nonconformists supplied virtually all of the organizational energy and funding behind abolition, for many years they avoided public leadership roles, in part because most nonconformist sects practiced "quietism," that is, avoidance of direct involvement in politics. In addition, because of the known affinity of many Dissenters for a range of reform causes, it seemed prudent to present as the public leaders of the movement relatively conservative Anglicans such as Thomas Clarkson, whose known lack of sympathy for democratic demands helped make anti-slavery appear less threatening to the defenders of privilege; William Wilberforce, an Anglican minister and Tory, became the Saints' leader in Parliament. Only in 1830 did Dissenter organizations take over the administration of the movement.⁵²

The movement's initial target was specifically the abolition of the slave trade, which was expected to doom the institution of slavery as well. In 1788 abolitionist committees from around the country generated 102 petitions to Parliament demanding an end to the trade, with probably more than 60,000 signatures, and in 1791–92 they presented 519 petitions with about 390,000 signatures (or slightly less than 20 percent of the adult male population).⁵³ These were the first major instances of mass petitioning as a form of popular political pressure in Britain and placed abolition firmly on Parliament's legislative agenda, from which it could not thereafter be dislodged.

Why Britain Abolished the Slave Trade in 1807

In 1807 Great Britain banned all slave imports into its West Indian colonies, prohibited its citizens from engaging in the slave trade, and banned foreign slave traders from using British ports. This outcome was the result of a sixteen-year campaign of popular pressure on Parliament, combined with the needs of the conservatives who dominated Parliament to enhance the legitimacy of their rule by demonstrating a degree of responsiveness to public concerns.

52. See Turley, 94, 119–21. Quakers in particular provided a large percentage of the funds raised for abolitionist campaigns. Temperley 1972, 39–40.

53. See Anstey 1975, 266, 274–75; and Drescher 1987, 82.

Political power in nineteenth-century Britain. Political power in Britain at the turn of the nineteenth century was tightly balanced between oligarchic conservatives, who controlled the formal institutions of government, and mainly middle-class reformers and radicals, who were increasingly mobilized to demand change. Before the expansion of the franchise by the Great Reform Bill of 1832 nearly all members of Parliament were gentlemen, and even after the 1832 election 32 percent of Commons MPs were baronets or sons of peers, while only 1 in 7 adult males could vote. Since the majority of the British public had no direct access to political power, reform causes such as anti-slavery had no hope of legislative success without the support of the party controlling the government.⁵⁴

During the 1790s and early 1800s, five issues of political and constitutional reform dominated British politics: (1) parliamentary reform to expand the franchise and to eliminate “rotten boroughs” that allowed family patronage to control hundreds of seats in the House of Commons, (2) reduction of the Royal Prerogative to choose and dismiss governments at will, (3) repeal of the disabilities on Catholics and on Dissenters (the Test and Corporation Acts), (4) anti-slavery, and (5) regulation of industrial working conditions and other measures for relief of the working classes and the poor.

Positions on these issues defined four main political groupings. The strongest group in Parliament was a conservative aristocratic faction (Tories), also supported by the Anglican Church hierarchy and usually by the Crown, who controlled the government for all but a year and a half of forty-six years from 1784 to 1830, as illustrated in Figure 2. Tories also had an overwhelming majority in the House of Lords. Tory opinion ranged broadly from “Ultras” such as Lord Sidmouth (prime minister 1801–1804), Lord Liverpool (1812–27), and the Duke of Wellington (1828–30), who opposed all reform as “the thin end of Jacobinism,” to a Tory “pragmatist” viewpoint that was willing to entertain some concessions to deflect demands for more extensive reform. Leaders of this group included William Pitt (prime minister 1783–1801, 1805), the Duke of Portland (1807–1809), Spencer Perceval (1809–1812), and George Canning (1827).⁵⁵

The only other significant force in Parliament, the Whigs, was also aristocratically based but more receptive to Enlightenment ideas and more optimistic than the Conservatives about the prospects for managing social and political change from above. The essence of Whig strategy was to conciliate middle-class demands in order to isolate the more extreme radicals. Accordingly, they favored somewhat more extensive, judiciously chosen, constitutional reforms but were not sympathetic to working-class demands. The main leaders of the party in Parliament were Charles James Fox until his death in 1806, Lord Grenville (prime minister 1806–1807), and, beginning in the 1820s, Earl Grey.⁵⁶

Two additional broad strands of opinion had considerable support in the country but not in Parliament. The first was composed mainly of middle-class reform societ-

54. See Harvey 1978, 6–20; and Beales 1969, 86, 117.

55. See Anstey 1975, 305–18; Turberville 1958, 157, 238–335; and Derry 1963, 97–99.

56. Ditchfield 1980, 101–18.

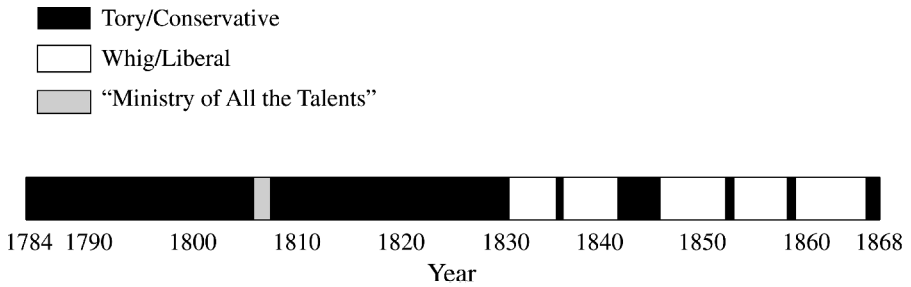


FIGURE 2. *British governments, 1784–1868*

ies in the major towns interested in still more extensive reforms than the Whigs, and mainly for their substance than for political stabilization. Those who had the franchise, however, typically voted for Whig candidates. The second was composed of numerous more radical societies based on middle-class and working-class constituencies, who demanded still further-reaching constitutional change (for example, universal suffrage) as well as workplace regulation and other measures for relief of the urban and rural poor.⁵⁷ Nonconformists were heavily represented among both reformers and radicals. Table 3 summarizes the policy preferences of the main groupings in British politics at this time.

Prior to 1806–1807 very few in Parliament were firmly committed to either side of the slavery issue. On average Wilberforce could count on about thirty “saints” in Commons (both Conservatives and Whigs) who were committed to anti-slavery out of religious conviction, plus a handful of bishops in the Lords.⁵⁸ Similarly, the West India interest, despite its economic importance, was never strong politically. It comprised the planters (mostly absentee landlords residing in England), merchants and shippers involved in the slave trade or other West Indian trade, and sometimes a few of the industrialists and workers also involved in these trades. Estimates of the West India interest’s hard-core support in Commons vary from about twenty to thirty-six in 1796–1807, from thirty-five to fifty-six in the mid-1820s, and from twelve to nineteen in 1833. Accordingly, the political fortunes of the slave interest depended on the willingness of broader numbers of conservatives to back them based on class affinities, the private property principle, and perceptions of imperial interest.⁵⁹

Coalition politics. In an environment where the Tories usually had a working majority in Commons and an overwhelming majority in the Lords, abolition could never pass unless a large fraction of conservatives could be persuaded to consent to it. However, as Pitt pointed out in 1795, this ascendancy did not allow the defenders of

57. See Royle and Walvin 1982, 48–56; and Harvey 1968, 79–96.

58. See Davis 1975, 375–78; Anstey 1975, 277–78, 282–83; and Hurwitz 1973, 93.

59. See Anstey 1975, 296–98; Higman 1967, 3, 18; Butler 1995, 8–10; Mathieson 1926, 118; and Hurwitz 1973, 58.

TABLE 3. *Issue positions of main political groupings, 1790s to early 1800s*

	<i>“Ultra” Tories</i>	<i>“Pragmatic” Tories</i>	<i>Whigs</i>	<i>Reform societies</i>	<i>Radicals</i>
Parliamentary strength	Strongest	Second	Weakest	—	—
Reduction of royal prerogative	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Reform of Parliament	No	Minor	Moderate	Extensive	Universal suffrage
Religious emancipation	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Abolition of slave trade	No	Varied	Yes	Yes	Yes
Working-class relief	No	No	No	Varied	Yes

privilege to block all reform indefinitely without risking an eventual buildup of revolutionary frustration.⁶⁰

For the conservatives, it was easier to concede on abolition than on other reform issues such as Catholic Emancipation (which was opposed by the Crown) or on parliamentary reform, which was expected to lead only to yet further demands.⁶¹ Abolition came close to passing in 1788–92 but did not succeed because Tory and aristocratic legitimacy was then only moderately vulnerable. Bills to abolish the slave trade were defeated in Commons in 1791 but passed in 1792 and 1793, only to be tabled in the Lords.⁶² At this point all sides believed that abolition was so popular that it could not be delayed for long. It was noted, for instance, that Parliament had been elected by fewer people than had signed the petitions of 1792.⁶³

In principle the more liberal Tories and the Whigs could have made a logrolled compromise at the expense of middle- and working-class reformers, radicals, and republicans (as happened to some degree in the 1830s and later). In the environment of the French Revolutionary Wars, however, neither side could trust the other’s good faith. Fox and the Whigs saw the Tories as aiming to destroy traditional English liberties, while conservatives could not forgive the pacifism of the Foxites, which they saw as Francophilia.⁶⁴

Both sides sought instead to strengthen themselves, and abolition, in different ways, seemed to offer this to both sides. For conservatives, anti-slavery offered a way to appear responsive to public opinion, thus dividing “respectable” reformers from radicals.⁶⁵ For the Whigs, anti-slavery was consonant with their general reform pro-

60. Klingberg 1926, 111. Davis argues that abolition in 1807 can thus be seen as a form of top-down social control. Davis 1975, 377–402.

61. Royal and Anglo-Irish opposition to Catholic emancipation had brought down the last Whig government in 1783 and also sank Pitt in 1801 and Grenville in 1807—the last just weeks after passing abolition.

62. See Pollock 1977, 105–108; Rose 1911, 431–53; Clarkson [1808] 1968, 466–68; and Davis 1975, 427–32.

63. On elite expectations of the eventual passage of abolition, see Parliament 1788–1789, 17: 495, 501; Davis 1975, 433; and Walvin 1985, 49.

64. Rose 1911, 86–89; Jupp 1985, 352; and Derry 1972, 349.

65. Although many Whigs and middle-class moderates had supported conservative-sponsored repression in the early years of the war, over time they turned increasingly against it as dangerous to their own

gram and the element that provoked least resistance; abolition was simply the most the Whigs could get. For reformers and radicals in the country as a whole, it promised access to the organizational strengths of the anti-slavery committees at a time when they themselves lacked comparable structures not subject to repression.⁶⁶

Both sides unilaterally assisted the abolitionists. Precisely because they were religiously motivated, the Saints could not concede anything on slavery, and they lacked unity on any other issue and so had nothing to trade. Thus both conservatives and reformers had to settle for “saintly logrolls,” settling for what enhanced legitimacy they could glean from association with the popular cause of abolition.⁶⁷

The French Revolution. From 1793 to 1805 further progress was blocked because the French Revolution, the execution of Louis XVI, and the war with France frightened the Court, and conservatives generally, into opposing all reform as risking revolution at home. This included abolition, since although few abolitionists were republicans, all republicans supported abolition. In addition, the new French regime abolished slavery in 1793, making abolition seem consistent with revolutionary ideas.⁶⁸

As the international and domestic crises deepened (including unrest in Ireland in the late 1790s), the government turned to repressive measures. Most reform groups were suppressed and their leaders arrested, meetings of more than fifty persons were banned, mail was opened, and the legal definitions of offenses such as treason, seditious libel, and riot were expanded. The extent of repression was somewhat constrained by Whig resistance as well as Pitt’s reluctance to push traditional legal processes too far.⁶⁹

Even in this repressive environment, the cause of abolition was less damaged than electoral or religious reform, even though it would directly injure the economic interests of some conservatives. This occurred partially because a few conservatives were Saints themselves and partially because the impact of abolishing the slave trade would be felt mainly overseas and so would not directly challenge the domestic political order. The religious organizations on which abolitionism depended, unlike secular reform groups, were not repressed. Pitt permitted Wilberforce to introduce abolition bills numerous times and even voted for them, although he never made it a government measure. Abolition bills were narrowly defeated in Commons in 1795, 1796, 1798, 1799, 1804, and 1805.⁷⁰

Success. By 1806 revolutionary threats had declined, while wartime government repression had increased the urgency of public legitimacy. First, the revolutionary threat had receded after the French Empire was established in 1804, and Napoleon’s

liberties. See Smith 1990, 212–15, 221; Royle and Walvin 1982, 119; and McCord 1991, 19–20.

66. Fladeland 1984, xii, 10, 13.

67. Drescher 1994, 142.

68. See Walvin 1985, 45–46; Turley 1991, 118–119; and Anstey 1975, 323.

69. See Derry 1963, 9–11, 71; and Harvey 1978, 79–83.

70. See Walvin 1981, 65; Klingberg 1926, 122–25; Blackburn 1988, 310; and Clarkson [1808] 1968, 2:472–88.

reintroduction of slavery in 1802 helped to reframe abolition as a demonstration of British moral superiority rather than as a dangerous French experiment. Second, even though the war on the Continent was not going well—Napoleon had just defeated the Austrians and Russians at Austerlitz in December 1805—the security of Britain and its empire had actually improved with Britain’s gradual conquest of most of France’s overseas possessions and the destruction of Franco-Spanish naval power at Trafalgar in November 1805. Third, the government changed. Pitt’s death in January 1806 resulted in “The Ministry of All the Talents,” a broad coalition dominated by Charles Fox’s Whigs, but also including Lord Grenville (previously considered a moderate Tory) as prime minister as well as the ultra-Tory Lord Sidmouth.

In May 1806 Parliament abolished the slave trade to the French possessions seized earlier in the war. After the Whigs were further strengthened by the November 1806 elections, the slave trade was abolished totally in February 1807. The West India interest stood no chance, since they had been discredited by decades of exposure of the slave trade’s abuses, were abandoned by the Court and the bishops, and, for the first time, faced a government determined to pass abolition. Although the 1806 partial abolition bill was initially presented as a simple matter of national interest—to avoid strengthening French West Indian possessions that would likely be returned at the end of the war—this was a thin pretense that fooled no one. When Grenville was accused in the Lords of disguising abolition under specious national interest arguments, he replied: “Were this true, I should be glad indeed, not of the disguise, but of the abolition.”⁷¹

Why Britain Emancipated Its Slaves in 1833

In 1833 Parliament passed a bill providing that all slaves in its West Indian colonies would be freed by 1840, and then in 1838 accelerated the timetable, freeing the slaves immediately. These outcomes were the result of two main factors: (1) the dramatic rise in popular demand for parliamentary reform from about 1829 to 1832, sparked in large part by the economic depression of 1829–31; and (2) the growth of the Protestant Dissenter sects in the decades prior to 1832 and their highly effective political organization not only for slave emancipation but also for parliamentary reform and other popular causes. This combination led to the installation of a Whig government in 1830, enactment of the Great Reform Bill in 1832, and then a new government in 1833 with a huge Whig and anti-slavery majority.

The decline of Tory rule. Until 1828 or 1829, Tory rule was relatively secure. However, in 1828 Wellington felt compelled by popular pressure to allow through Parliament a motion to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts; and in 1829, faced with the possibility of serious uprisings in Ireland, he personally promoted Catholic emancipation. Part of the cost of these actions, however, was alienation of many of his

71. See Jupp 1985, 383, 386–87; Anstey 1975, 367–402; Drescher 1977, 149–52, 214–23; and Drescher 1994, 144–48.

Ultra-Tory supporters. Then in 1829 the economy fell into depression, and the harvests of 1829 and 1830 were poor. In this environment, enthusiasm for parliamentary reform spread among almost all classes. Commercial interests wanted more urban representation, as did workers, and agricultural interests expected to gain more seats for the larger counties. In 1830 there were twenty-two county meetings, and middle-class and working-class radical organizations mobilized across the country on an unprecedented scale. By summer 1830 there were industrial disturbances, and the rural violence known as the “Captain Swing” riots spread across most of the south of the country.⁷²

The next two years were consumed with the struggle over parliamentary reform. Before the Great Reform became law in June 1832 there were two general elections (August 1830 and May 1831), three changes of government, three reform bills, large-scale rioting when the second bill was blocked by the Lords in October 1831, and, when it appeared in April 1832 that the third bill might fail, popular societies organized on such a scale that many feared revolution. The dispute also established that neither the king nor the Lords could long deny the will of the majority in Commons. The reformed Parliament elected in December 1832 had a Whig government majority of nearly five hundred, including Radical and Irish allies.⁷³

Construction of the anti-slavery coalition. Abolitionists’ expectations that the example of British abolition in 1807 would lead the other Atlantic powers to abandon the slave trade were quickly disappointed. In June 1814 abolitionists organized a petition campaign that gathered a record 750,000 signatures, successfully compelling the government to energetically pursue universal abolition of the slave trade during the peace negotiations in Vienna, but Britain obtained few useful concessions from the others. Even British subjects continued to trade under other flags and British ports to fit out slavers.⁷⁴ Most important, abolitionists found that neither stopping further slave imports nor ameliorative regulations caused British West Indian planters to treat their slaves any better, thus leaving the stain on the nation’s moral record as dirty as before.

Abolitionist leaders therefore began a second crusade in 1823, this time to emancipate all slaves under British rule. Although the government defeated an emancipation bill in 1823, its alternatives—more ameliorative regulation and vague procedures for ultimate emancipation with “due consideration” for private property—were seen as delaying tactics,⁷⁵ and emancipation continued to gain support for four reasons. First, the abolitionist movement itself was better organized. By 1831 the national Anti-

72. See McCord 1991, 130–31; Mitchell 1967, 180–223; Royle and Walvin 1982, 144–46; and Wells 1985, 124–65.

73. See Wells 1985, 138; Smith 1990, 256–69; McCord 1991, 131–39; Thomis and Holt 1977, 86–88; and Gash 1979, 366.

74. Abolitionists pushed for stronger enforcement and got it. In 1811 importation of slaves was made punishable by fourteen years’ transportation, and in 1824 the slave trade was made piracy. After 1812 slave registration laws were progressively instituted in the West Indian colonies, and in 1828 intercolonial transport of slaves was prohibited. See Higman 1984, 7–8, 79–80; and Klingberg 1926, 145–48.

75. See Hurwitz 1973, 31–32; and Butler, 1995, 7.

Slavery Society was connected to 1,300 local societies that raised money, organized public lectures, distributed literature, and organized the mass petition drives of 1823, 1824, 1826, 1830–31, and 1833. Abolitionists also took advantage of the organizational and propaganda opportunities offered by heightened public interest in politics because of the reform controversy.⁷⁶ Abolitionism also became a middle-class and Dissenter movement to an even greater degree than in 1792 or 1807.⁷⁷ Many abolitionists also fought for parliamentary reform and Catholic emancipation, helping to create a broad alliance of reform constituencies. The weakest link in the anti-slavery coalition was working-class radicals, whose leaders accused middle-class abolitionists of caring more for black slaves in the Caribbean than for even more exploited white “slaves” at home. This class divide was mitigated by the growth of the several Methodist movements that attracted greater working-followings than did “Old Dissent” sects while being equally committed to anti-slavery.⁷⁸ Second, West Indian planters continued to discredit themselves by their mistreatment of missionaries and their harsh responses to real and imagined slave plots, disgusting wide sections of the public. After a slave revolt in Jamaica in 1831, planter-led militias killed hundreds of blacks, burned Methodist and Baptist churches, and made an abortive attempt to try two missionaries by court martial.⁷⁹ Third, anti-slavery societies intervened in election campaigns to support pro-emancipation candidates by extracting pledges to vote for slave emancipation and by publicizing candidates’ positions. Abolitionists succeeded in making emancipation a major issue in the elections of 1830, 1831, and 1832. During the 1832 election, the anti-slavery journal *The Tourist* published a national list of “pledged” and “irredeemable” candidates, and between 140 and 200 pledged candidates were returned.⁸⁰

Finally, Dissenter votes exerted direct control over the composition of Parliament. After the Great Reform, Dissenters composed about 21 percent of the electorate, and predominately nonconformist towns were among the greatest gainers in seats. In 1830 and 1832 election returns where Dissenter votes can be identified, they favored Whigs over Tories by margins ranging from 70 to 30 percent up to 97 to 3 percent. S. F. Woolley estimates that “in every borough election of 1832 the nonconformists formed the backbone of the majority.” Perhaps most decisive was the swing in the vote of Wesleyan Methodists, the largest Dissenter sect and somewhat more than 8 percent of the electorate. Although most Wesleyans tended to support relatively con-

76. See Green 1976, 111–12; Anstey 1981, 48; Drescher 1987, 127; and Midgely 1992, 52.

77. Prior to 1826, less than 5 percent of anti-slavery petitions were openly sponsored by nonconformist congregations, but in 1830–31, 70 percent were. Meanwhile the Anglican share declined from 13 percent of the 1788 petitions to 3 percent in 1830–31. See Drescher 1987, 127; and Midgely 1992, 65. Thomas Buxton, who succeeded Wilberforce as the abolitionist leader in Parliament, never renounced the Church, but his mother and his wife were Quakers and he attended Quaker meetings. Watts 1995, 2:444.

78. Irish leaders and MPs later repaid the debt by supporting emancipation. Klingberg 1926, 248–49. On working class anti-slavery, see Hollis 1980, 296, 304; and Hempton 1984, 210–16.

79. See Klingberg 1926, 194–203, 232–62; and Hurwitz 1973, 53–54.

80. See Hurwitz 1973, 49–51, 56–58; and Anstey 1981, 50.

servative causes and candidates, they were always solid supporters of anti-slavery, and in the elections in the early 1830s they voted mainly based on this issue.⁸¹

Apprenticeship, 1833. Even with the government pledged to emancipation, the new Parliament proved slow to act. In April 1833 Buxton had to threaten to bring in his own motion to get Viscount Althorp, the Whig leader in Commons, to agree to fix a date for introduction of a bill. In May 1833 abolitionists submitted to Parliament 5,020 petitions for emancipation with nearly 1.5 million signatures, almost twice the number of voters in Britain. Over three hundred delegates appointed by anti-slavery societies all over the British Isles assembled in London and marched to 10 Downing Street. Parliament then abolished slavery, although fears that immediate emancipation would leave slaves unprepared to enter civil society led to a provision for a period of “apprenticeship” of five to seven years.⁸²

The apprenticeship bill provided £20,000,000 for compensation to slave owners. Most abolitionist leaders as well as the rank-and-file opposed compensation on the grounds that there could be no legitimate property in people in the first place, while working-class radicals opposed paying wealthy planters out of their own taxes. The compensation bill nevertheless passed, largely because Parliament (including its Whig majority) was still dominated by members of the upper classes who were loath to set any precedent detrimental to private property, regardless of the reason.⁸³

Immediate emancipation, 1838. By 1836–37 apprenticeship was failing. Slave owners did not improve their treatment of apprentices, and the slaves no longer wanted to work under coercion. In 1837 abolitionists began yet another mobilization campaign to seek an immediate end to apprenticeship. As in 1832–33, public meetings were held and petitions were generated nationwide. A key argument was that the country had been cheated; the £20,000,000 was paid, but slavery continued. In March 1838 a motion in Commons to end apprenticeship immediately received 215 votes out of 484 even though the leaders of both parties opposed it; this was followed by a new, yet more intense round of petitions and public meetings, whereupon the government gave in and ended apprenticeship in August 1838.⁸⁴

Why Britain Persisted for Sixty Years

Why did Britain persist in its effort to suppress the Atlantic slave trade for sixty years despite escalating costs and, for most of the period, meager success? For the years 1808–14, no explanation is required. Britain was at war with virtually all the slave-

81. See Gross 1980, 66, 84; Woolley 1938, 244; Jenkins 1994, 14–20; Phillips 1992, 287–89; and Anstey 1981, 214–21. In the enormous 1833 petition drive, 95 percent of all Methodists, men and women, signed one.

82. See Buxton 1849, 249–65; Drescher 1987, 94; Klingberg 1926, 286–92; Temperley 1972, 17–18; and Gross 1980, 69–71.

83. See Butler 1995, 11; and Buxton 1849, 267–283.

84. See Temperley 1972, 30–41; and Hurwitz 1973, 74–76.

trading nations and would have attacked their shipping anyway. From the end of the war in 1814 until the early 1830s, British efforts concentrated more on amelioration, and then emancipation, of Britain's own colonial slaves than on suppressing the slave trading of others.

Once Britain's slaves had been emancipated, however, the anti-slavery movement increasingly turned its attention to suppressing the two largest remaining Atlantic slave trades, those to Cuba and Brazil, as well as expanding its goals to seek the elimination of slavery worldwide. From 1835 onward, the abolitionists succeeded in causing a succession of British governments to progressively escalate the effort to compel the Atlantic maritime nations to cooperate with Britain's anti-slavery crusade. They were able to do this primarily because by this time the political power of the middle class, mainly Dissenter constituencies who formed the core of the abolitionist movement, had become more or less permanently entrenched. Subsequent British governments, whether Whig or Conservative, could not resist abolitionist demands absent countervailing mass mobilization—which occurred just once, over sugar duties in 1846.

Failure and persistence. The skeptics of abolitionists' early predictions of international cooperation were soon proved right. Although in 1814 the British government began an extended effort to negotiate a series of bilateral slave trade abolition treaties, and nearly all of the other Atlantic slave-trading states agreed in principle to end the trade, including the United States (1808), France (1815), Spain (1817), Portugal (1817), and Brazil (1826), none would agree to treaty provisions that could be genuinely effective in preventing the use of their flags in slaving. The most important provision that the British sought was a "right of mutual search" allowing warships of either country to search ships flying the other flag; otherwise Royal Navy patrols would be helpless to stop slavers of foreign registration. Since none of the other countries would, or could, put forth serious anti-slaving naval efforts of their own, they all resisted mutual search as an infringement on their sovereignty. Other key requirements included Courts of Mixed Commission, consisting of both British and the other countries' officials, to try seized ships and crews, and the ability to condemn ships obviously equipped for slave trading even if not actually caught with slaves on board. Such concessions as were obtained had little effect, since slavers simply changed to those flags that were still usable, often that of the United States.⁸⁵

The lone lasting success during the first thirty-five years of the suppression effort had little to do with British pressure. Although France under the liberal July Monarchy agreed to mutual search in 1831, British seizures of French ships generated so much resentment that the agreement was suspended in 1845. However, after the February Revolution in 1848, France unilaterally emancipated all its colonial slaves. Despite France's final withdrawal from the trade, by the late 1840s slave exports from West Africa actually increased to more than 78,000 annually—only slightly

85. See Fladeland 1966; Klingberg 1926, 142–63; Bethell 1970, 61; and Mathieson 1929. Sweden abandoned the slave trade unilaterally in 1814, and Holland in 1815.

fewer than the all-time peak in the 1780s—largely because in 1846 Britain repealed its system of discriminatory duties against non-British sugar, leading to dramatic increases in sugar production and slave demand in Brazil and Cuba.⁸⁶

Faced with such a Sisyphean task, Britain could have reversed course, as France had when it abolished both the slave trade and slavery itself in 1793 only to restore both in 1802. Or Britain could have taken the American path of simply enforcing (with more, or less, energy) the ban on imports into its own colonies while ignoring the rest of the problem. Instead, Britain responded to successive setbacks by progressively escalating its anti-slavery effort, including slave emancipation, aggressive naval efforts against slave ships, and a decades-long effort to bribe, cajole, and coerce all the other slave-trading nations. Although costs in money, lives, and international resentment continually escalated, Britain never wavered.

Escalation, 1835 onward. Escalation of British anti-slavery efforts took three forms. First, Britain greatly increased its anti-slavery patrols off West Africa, from an average of less than ten ships on station before 1835 to about fifteen in 1835–43 and about thirty from 1844 to the early 1850s. Second, the government underwrote independent initiatives of the abolition societies. In 1840 the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society persuaded the government to name David Turnbull, a strong abolitionist, as consul-general in Havana to pressure the Cuban authorities to register existing slaves and to widen the jurisdiction of the Court of Mixed Commission so that new slaves could be identified and freed even after landing. The effort was a disaster; a bloody slave revolt in 1844 led to harsh suppression of free blacks and an 1845 law forbidding searches of plantations for illegal slaves. Similarly, Buxton's African Civilization Society obtained government support for an armed expedition up the Niger River in 1841–42 that aimed to civilize a region and trade route heavily used by slave traders. The expedition failed, with heavy loss of life mainly from disease.⁸⁷

Third, after about 1835 British diplomacy became more aggressive. Spain agreed to a model treaty in that year. In 1839 Parliament authorized the Royal Navy to search Portuguese ships unilaterally, which led in 1842 to a satisfactory treaty. In 1841 Britain asserted a “right of visit” to check whether slavers flying the U.S. flag were legally entitled to it but backed down in the face of fierce opposition. When in 1845 Brazil served notice that it intended to withdraw from its 1826 treaty, Parliament passed a law authorizing search of Brazilian vessels. In June 1850 Britain went further than ever before, waging a short undeclared war against Brazil, sending warships into Brazilian territorial waters and harbors, burning slave ships and slave entrepôts on shore, and even mounting pursuits inland. In September 1850 Brazil finally ratified the 1826 treaty. In 1858 Britain began to apply slave warrants in Cuban waters but withdrew after the harsh American reaction raised fears that the

86. See Jennings 1988, 9, 144–96; Eltis 1987, 251; and Temperley 1972, 161–64.

87. See Porter 1843; Lloyd 1968, 48; Murray 1980, 134–55; and Eltis 1987, 92–93.

United States might seize Cuba.⁸⁸ Finally, in 1862 the United States agreed to mutual search, and in 1867 Cuba banned further slave imports.

Abolition's political staying power. Abolitionists were able to keep British anti-slavery moving forward for two main reasons. The first is simple inertia. After the Slave Trade Department of the Foreign Office was established in 1821, anti-slavery gradually became increasingly routinized and institutionalized in British foreign and colonial policy.⁸⁹ Abolitionist societies gained skill at lobbying the government, and a few committed abolitionists served directly in the corridors of power, most important, James Stephen, who held a series of high posts in the Colonial Office from 1821 to 1847. Lord Palmerston, foreign secretary from 1830 to 1841 and prime minister from 1855 to 1858 and 1859 to 1866, also generally supported anti-slavery. Some leaders may also have come to feel that Britain had been identified internationally with anti-slavery so firmly and for so long that national prestige would be harmed by failure to continue as well as to achieve ultimate success. Arguments of this form helped defeat an attempt in Parliament in 1850 to withdraw the African Squadron.⁹⁰

The second and more important reason for the persistence and expansion of abolition, however, involved Dissenter power in domestic politics. From 1835 through the rest of the anti-slavery period, the balance of political power between the Conservatives and the Whigs/Liberals was consistently narrow and fragile; in the national elections held from 1835 to 1857 the gap between the two major parties' share of the national vote ranged from 4 to 16 percent, much smaller than the Dissenter share of the electorate. Indeed, between 1832 and 1865 the number of voters declined slightly whereas the Dissenter share likely increased, because both the number of Dissenters in society and the percentage of them in middle- and upper-class occupations rose substantially during the period.⁹¹

Thus any substantial change in how Dissenters voted was likely to be decisive in determining which party would hold power, and British politicians were well aware of this fact.⁹² Most Dissenters favored free trade and many of the other reform causes associated with the Whigs–Liberals, but this alliance was always fragile because of the Dissenters' overriding commitment to anti-slavery. Although British elites were quite aware of the costs of anti-slavery, facing the mismatch of Dissenters' constant insistence and the absence most of the time of mobilized opposition, they generally found acquiescence the safest policy.⁹³

Some analysts argue that British abolitionism essentially collapsed after 1840 because of leadership infighting, public fatigue with the issue, and the conflict between

88. See Mathieson 1929, 128–35; Soulsby 1933, 51–77; Bethell 1970, 94–95, 327–41; and Lloyd 1968, 170.

89. Although not in the navy. As late as 1849–50, senior admirals continued to complain that the African Squadron drained needed resources from more critical missions.

90. See Turley 1991, 68; Green 1976, 81; and Temperley 1972, 177–82.

91. See Anstey 1981, 51; Craig 1989, 1–10; Gilbert 1976, 31, 37; and Watts 1995, 2:595.

92. Jenkins emphasizes that anti-slavery and church–state issues made relations between nonconformists and other parts of the liberal coalition frequently volatile. Jenkins 1994, 60.

93. See Craig 1989, 1–10.

liberal values of anti-slavery and free trade, brought on by the 1841–46 dispute over the discriminatory duties favoring British colonial sugar.⁹⁴ This argument is exaggerated. Most abolitionist leaders and nearly all of the rank and file chose anti-slavery over free trade and in 1841 brought down the Whig government of Viscount Melbourne over the question. The government proposed to eliminate discriminatory duties on grain, timber, and sugar. However, since by this time it had become clear that free-labor production in the British West Indies was not as efficient as slave production elsewhere, repeal would mean importing slave-grown foreign sugar. To most committed abolitionists, this would not only be immoral in itself but would also increase the demand for slaves in Cuba and Brazil, delay emancipation in those countries, harm Britain's own free colonies, and undermine the credibility of Britain's opposition to slavery abroad.⁹⁵ As a result, the government proved unable to keep the parliamentary debate focused on the free trade or budgetary merits of the bill; instead the debate became almost wholly about the impact on the slave trade. When Robert Peel, the Conservative leader, chose to support the abolitionist position, thirty-three Whig MPs abandoned the government and it fell.⁹⁶ Although a popular pocket-book issue, repeal of the sugar duties was delayed for another five years. The 1850 attempt to withdraw the African Squadron, the last serious initiative against aggressive pursuit of anti-slavery, was defeated.

Unimportance of Transnational Influences

The British case provides a partial test of the proposition, common in constructivist theories of international moral action, that transitional elite networks play an important role. There were extensive contacts and efforts at mutual assistance among American, British, and French anti-slavery movements. However, transnational efforts were in no case significantly helpful and in two cases were actually damaging to the anti-slavery cause in the target country.

The strongest case that can be made is for American, particularly Quaker, influence on the earliest stages of the British movement. American Quakers distributed controversial literature in England, especially Anthony Benezet's *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain* (1767). Although this book did not reach a large number of people, Wesley borrowed from it for his *Thoughts on Slavery*. Two American Quakers were also the first to petition the British Parliament in 1783.⁹⁷ From this point, however, British anti-slavery was a national, not international enterprise. The moral logic and perception of emergency in English society that animated British nonconformists and evangelicals to action, their organizational capabilities, and their accomplishments in British politics were their own.

There was also extensive transatlantic correspondence, exchange of literature, and sometimes of personnel from the 1800s onward aimed at assisting American aboli-

94. Temperley 1972, 153–67. For opposing views, see Turley 1991, 129–30; and Rice 1981, 412–17.

95. See Temperley 1985, 96–97; Temperley 1972, 142–60; and Gash 1965, 185.

96. See Watts 1995, 2:529; Cowherd 1956, 157; Gash 1965, 215; and Temperley 1972, 150.

97. See Fladeland 1972, 20; Drescher 1987, 62–64; and Anstey 1975, 239–40.

tionism, including the first world anti-slavery convention, held in London in 1840.⁹⁸ No outside aid, however, could change the structural problems facing the American movement. Ending slavery in the United States would have required a Constitutional amendment and therefore the agreement of three-fourths plus one of the states, which was plainly impossible. Most important, the slave interest in the United States commanded vastly greater wealth and political power than in Britain (as well as the backing of southern churches) and thus could only be subdued by war.⁹⁹

If Anglo-American abolitionist cooperation was unimportant, Anglo-French cooperation efforts were counterproductive. Although early British abolitionists were eager to follow the example of the French *Les Amis des Noirs* (founded 1788) and Clarkson visited France in 1789, as the French Revolution escalated in 1791–93 the association of anti-slavery with republicanism became a serious liability. Transnational radical intellectuals such as Thomas Paine and British radical organizations such as the London Corresponding Society so discredited anti-slavery among British conservatives that a late 1792 pamphlet accused Wilberforce and Clarkson themselves of being Jacobins.¹⁰⁰ It took the British anti-slavery movement more than ten years to recover from the consequences of its initial association with France.

In the other direction, although the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society contributed money and organizational assistance to French abolitionists, a large part of French opinion remained always resentful of British government pressure on the issue and suspicious of British motives. Especially after the decline of Anglo-French relations in 1840–41, French abolitionists came under extreme pressure to dissociate themselves from British organizations or ideas, nor could they admit that France was in any way “behind” England. In the mid-1840s, one of the arguments they finally resorted to was that France had better emancipate its slaves preemptively lest Britain stir up insurrections in a future war. French emancipation came in 1848 as part of that year’s surge of revolutionary and republican idealism, not because of mobilization by anti-slavery organizations.¹⁰¹

Theoretical Implications

The main implication of the British case for theories of costly moral action is that we must explain how ideational and domestic political dimensions interact. Transnational influence does not appear to be critical for costly international moral action. None of the four transnational influence efforts observed here exerted meaningful influence on target state behavior, either because the internal political challenges were too difficult, or because foreignness itself delegitimated attempts at transnational persuasion.

98. See Fladeland 1972; and Strange 1984.

99. McKivigan 1984, 18–35.

100. See Klingberg 1926, 97–99; and Anstey 1975, 276–78.

101. Jennings 1988, 195–208.

Similarly, although cosmopolitan ideals may help explain inexpensive moral actions, they appear insufficient to motivate genuinely costly international moral action. For individuals to sacrifice a noticeable fraction of their wealth or security purely to advance the condition of a distant other would require a degree of commitment closer to the models of a perfect cosmopolitan ideal discussed by some moral philosophers than to the behavior we observe in the British case, and the paucity of other expensive international moral actions is itself evidence that this level of commitment must be rare.

A “Saintry Logroll” Model

Obtaining costly international moral action requires solving two problems. First, why would even a morally committed “saint” be willing to pay genuinely high costs? As long as international relations are anarchic, any costly international moral action must reduce the material strength of the acting state relative to other states. Therefore even saints cannot pay high costs for foreign moral action unless they believe that their own society is corrupt and in need of reform. If the home society is already just, and since it will undoubtedly confront external forces that are both morally imperfect and strong enough to threaten the achievements of the morally advanced state, then the state may not dissipate the strength that may be needed both to protect its own achievements and that could be used to promote good in the future after the opponents are defeated or converted to better norms. Some British conservatives agreed that slavery was immoral, but opposed abolition based on reasoning of this form. If, however, saints see their own society as corrupt, then protecting its material well-being in the short run cannot be as important as remaking it into a more virtuous society that would actually deserve happiness and that could serve as a beacon to others.

Second, although a majority of saints is imaginable, the British anti-slavery movement never came close to an electoral majority. The central problem is one of coalition formation: under what circumstances will ruling elites, who are not themselves primarily motivated by the moral cause, nevertheless ally with a faction of morally committed saints?

Formation of such “saintry logrolls” is further complicated by the fact that they must operate differently from typical logrolled coalitions, in which the sides trade support for each other’s favorite issues. In contrast, a group that allies with a faction of saints must accept the costs of the saints’ program but, because groups mobilized around a moral cause are normally not cohesive on other issues, they cannot count on the saints to vote with them on anything else.¹⁰²

Thus the formation of saintry logrolls is likely to be a function of three factors. First, the political needs of the ruling elite. The more precarious their hold on power and the more intense their fear of losing power, the greater their incentive to bargain. Second, the enhanced political legitimacy that the rulers can gain from association

102. Stratmann 1997.

with the saints and their program. This, in turn, is partially a function of the general popularity of the saints' moral arguments and especially of whether the specific content of the saints' program would help shield the elite against particular charges against their legitimacy. Programs of costly moral action are thus more likely to be adopted if they do not threaten to upset the existing domestic balance of political or economic power.¹⁰³ Third, the extent to which the saintly faction can ally with more than one main political faction. Moral movements whose supporters' positions on other issues lie near the middle of the political spectrum will have greater leverage than those whose loyalties are confined to one end. Thus, although the anti-abortion movement is perhaps the group in American society that most nearly approaches the combination of unwavering commitment and substantial numbers of British abolitionists, our theory suggests that it would have to occupy a different place in the American political spectrum than it does for a "saintly logroll" to form. Just as early nineteenth century British Whigs and Tories both preferred to make concessions to abolitionists than to each other, Democrats would have to prefer to cooperate with the anti-abortion movement rather than with moderate Republicans.

Generalizability

Since our theory is developed from a single case, evidence from the same case cannot be used to estimate its generalizability to other past cases or future opportunities.¹⁰⁴ The next step is to identify any comparable or nearly comparable costly moral actions. Although all but the first of the following were almost certainly less costly than Britain's anti-slavery effort, reasonable candidates include American and French decisions to end slavery, British and Dutch efforts to end suttee, certain instances of decolonization, and the development aid policies of the world's most generous donor, Norway. We should also study cases where costly moral action was considered but not pursued, such as the Allies' failure to bomb Auschwitz.

If our theory stands up, it implies that some future costly moral actions may be pursued unilaterally by a single powerful state, rather than by multilateral agreement, and may be driven primarily internally rather than reflecting the spread of an international moral consensus. They may also be more likely to emerge from a state that is undergoing domestic upheaval of which the international moral project is partly a side effect. These possibilities should caution us that some future international moral actions may not be ones that cosmopolitan sensibilities or Western societies will welcome.

103. For British Tories, anti-slavery had the advantage that the main effects would not be felt in England itself (planters and some merchants would suffer, but these were very small constituencies). Of course, if the moral program has side effects that could actually enhance the power of the ruling party, as for the Whigs in 1833, its adoption becomes more likely.

104. On the use of single case studies to generate new theories, see Van Evera 1997, esp. 88.

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