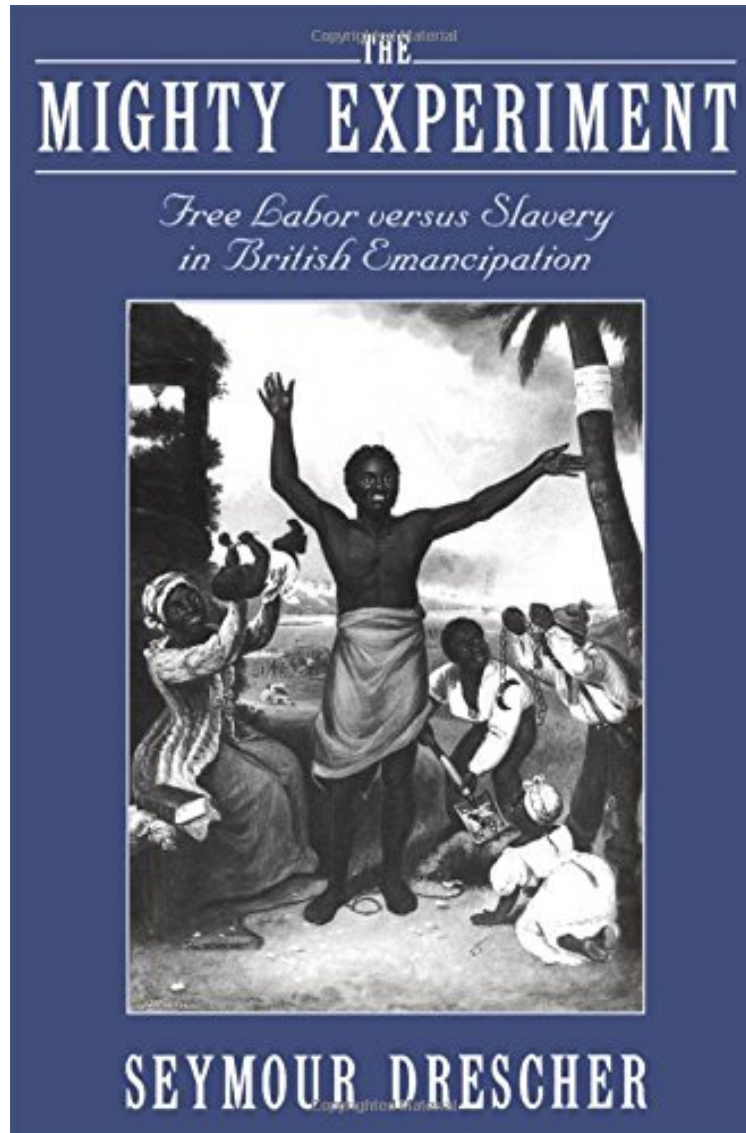


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The Mighty Experiment: Free Labor versus Slavery in British Emancipation

Seymour Drescher

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Seymour Drescher : The Mighty Experiment: Free Labor versus Slavery in British Emancipation before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Mighty Experiment: Free Labor versus Slavery in British Emancipation:

5 of 6 people found the following review helpful. British Political Arguments on Emancipation and Ending the Slave Trade By WAL This book has a narrow focus, basically summarizing the political debate in Britain dealing with the economic and demographic aspects of British emancipation in the West Indies and the Royal Navy's interdiction of the transatlantic slave trade. The author convincingly, and at length, shows that one of the abolitionist's foundational arguments, derived from Adam Smith, that free labor was more cost effective than slave labor, with the implication that economic benefits would accrue to both the West Indies and Britain as a consequence of emancipation, was not supported by the actual outcome. It becomes clear that the economic superiority of slave-based enterprise derived from managing and using the slaves no differently than other tools and equipment of industrial production, i.e., as inanimate objects. The book, then, makes a significant addition to the understanding of the slavery in the Western Hemisphere. I have several reservations about it, however. First, while the arguments used by the political economists in this debate are covered in detail, the author does not present any data that would allow the reader to evaluate them. For example, it was apparently economically advantageous for a planter to work a slave to death (equivalent to a "run to failure" equipment strategy) and replace him/her with a new one, than to care for, or maintain, them. How was this possible? The author provides no data that addresses this question. Also, while Adam Smith's argument on the superiority of free labor over slave is covered at length, his more fundamental position, that "the property of every man in his own labor was "the most sacred and inviolable foundation of all property"(p. 21) is not explored at all. Why did it not factor in the economic debate? Other issues that potential readers should be aware of deal with approach and tone. The book is written for the specialist and assumes the reader is knowledgeable about British political parties, ideologies, and issues during the 1750-1860 period. Finally, I found the tone adopted by the author wearing by the end of the book. The repetitive, almost gleeful, presentation of arguments that appeared to demonstrate the economic superiority of plantation slave labor, as if the price and source of sugar in Britain was the supreme criteria by which to judge emancipation, eventually becomes disproportionate and seems out of place.

By the mid-eighteenth century, the transatlantic slave trade was considered to be a necessary and stabilizing factor in the capitalist economies of Europe and the expanding Americas. Britain was the most influential power in this system which seemed to have the potential for unbounded growth. In 1833, the British empire became the first to liberate its slaves and then to become a driving force toward global emancipation. There has been endless debate over the reasons behind this decision. This has been portrayed on the one hand as a rational disinvestment in a foundering overseas system, and on the other as the most expensive per capita expenditure for colonial reform in modern history. In this work, Seymour Drescher argues that the plan to end British slavery, rather than being a timely escape from a failing system, was, on the contrary, the crucial element in the greatest humanitarian achievement of all time. *The Mighty Experiment* explores how politicians, colonial bureaucrats, pamphleteers, and scholars taking anti-slavery positions validated their claims through rational scientific arguments going beyond moral and polemical rhetoric, and how the infiltration of the social sciences into this political debate was designed to minimize agitation on both sides and provide common ground. Those at the inception of the social sciences, such as Adam Smith and Thomas Malthus, helped to develop these tools to create an argument that touched on issues of demography, racism, and political economy. By the time British emancipation became legislation, it was being treated as a massive social experiment, whose designs, many thought, had the potential to change the world. This study outlines the relationship of economic growth to moral issues in regard to slavery, and will appeal to scholars of British history, nineteenth century imperial history, the history of slavery, and those interested in the history of human rights. *The Mighty Experiment* was the winner of First Prize, Frederick Douglass Book Prize, Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition.

"Drescher should be commended for providing us with a study that future historians will mone for precious detail on the relationship between abolitionism and nineteenth-century social sciences, and one that affords us valuable insight into the mentality of British abolitionists."-- *The Journal of Modern History* *Mighty Experiment* can be seen as the culmination of decades of painstaking research and mature reflection on the complicated process that in the British empire forwarded the global project of human emancipation."--*The Journal of Social History* "Seymour Drescher's magnificent book on the British Act of Emancipation of 1833, and many other things besides, explains the role of the eighteenth-century science of political economy in the anti-slavery movement."--EH-NET About the Author Seymour Drescher is University Professor of History and Professor of Sociology at the University of Pittsburgh. He is the author of *Econocide: British Slavery in the Age of Abolition* (1977), *Capitalism and Antislavery* (OUP, 1987), and *From Slavery to Freedom* (1999) and the co-editor of *Slavery* (OUP, 2001).