To Remake the World: Slavery, Racial Capitalism, and Justice

What Slavery Tells Us about Marx

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Following W. E. B. Du Bois and Cedric Robinson, Walter Johnson suggests that "the history of (racial) capitalism began with the slave trade rather than the factory system." When Johnson presented an earlier version of his essay at the "Future of the African American Past" conference at the Smithsonian Institution, he asked, "Of what ethical or analytical use is the term 'capitalism' if it cannot describe the world-making commodification and transportation of twelve million Africans to the New World?" Putting the slave trade (as distinct from antebellum slavery) at the center of our historical work can help, in particular, to clarify the ways Marx failed to adequately account for the origins of capitalism, and also illuminates the interpretive consequences of that failure.

It is worth noting that Marx fully recognized the Atlantic slave trade for what it was: a system of commercial trafficking in humans. In his discussion of "The Genesis of the Industrial Capitalist" in *Capital*, Marx wrote:

> The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins, are all things which characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief moments of primitive accumulation.

But Marx's placement of the slave trade in capitalism's prehistory of "primitive accumulation," even while acknowledging its commercial nature, sits at odds with another key instance where he addressed the subject of slave-trading. In his discussion of "The Working Day" in *Capital*, Marx observes, "Capital asks no questions about the length of life of labour-power," and turns to Irish liberal political economist J. E. Cairnes's study, *The Slave Power* (1863), for assistance in illustrating the point. In Cairnes's book, he precedes the passage Marx quotes by explaining that his purpose is "to direct attention, not so much to the barbarous inhumanity of the slave-trade, whether foreign or domestic, as to what has not been so often noticed—the mode in which it operates in giving increased coherence and stability to the system of which it is a part." He then continues with the sentences reproduced by Marx:

> The rice-grounds of Georgia, or the swamps of the Mississippi, may be fatally injurious to the human constitution; but the waste of human life which the cultivation of these districts necessitates, is not so great that it cannot be repaired from the teeming preserves of Virginia and Kentucky. Considerations of economy, moreover, which, under a natural system, afford some security for humane treatment by identifying the master's interest with the slave's preservation, when once trading in slaves is practised, become reasons for racking to the uttermost the toil of the slave; for, when his place can at once be supplied from foreign preserves,

> the duration of his life becomes a matter of less moment than its productiveness while it lasts. It is accordingly a maxim of slave management, in slave-importing countries, that the most effective economy is that which takes out of the human chattel in the shortest space of time the utmost amount of exertion it is capable of putting forth. It is in the tropical culture, where annual profits often equal the whole capital of plantations, that negro life is most recklessly sacrificed. It is the agriculture of the West Indies, which has been for centuries prolific of fabulous wealth, that has engulfed millions of the African race.

Marx concludes his analysis, "*Mutato nomine de te fabula narratur* (The name is changed, but the tale is told of you)! For slave trade, read labour-market, for Kentucky and Virginia, Ireland and the agricultural districts of England, Scotland and Wales, for Africa, Germany." With this maneuver, Marx presents slave-trading in the Americas as *analogous* to the capitalist labor market in industrializing Europe that "produces the pre-mature exhaustion and death of this labour-power itself." It stands out as a moment of analytical slippage that makes his tendency to hold New World slavery apart from capitalism all the more glaring—not just for its gross imprecision, but also for the inevitable interpretive blunders to which it leads.

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Throughout most of Marx's work, slavery's chief function is heuristic: it is an ahistorical foil against which to set capitalism's unique and singular excesses and inhumanity. Elsewhere in his discussion of "The Working

Day," Marx depicts slavery in the South as having "preserved a moderately patriarchal character" for most of its history, as "production was chiefly directed to the satisfaction of immediate local requirements." Southern slavery is thus understood as having only recently become oriented toward "a world market dominated by the capitalist mode of production" and "sale of [slave-grown] products for export." In other words, it was the capitalist regime centered on cotton, and not slavery itself, that produced "the over-working of the Negro, and sometimes the consumption of his life in seven years of labour." Even Marx's often-cited figuring of New World slavery as the pedestal that grounds the veiled slavery of European capitalism retains the anachronistic framing of American slavery as having a benign past that was lost to the corroding influence of capital. For Marx, the overriding theme in the relationship between slavery and capitalism is that it was the latter that corrupted the former.

We have long since dismissed Marx's misunderstanding of slavery, but we have not reckoned sufficiently with the consequences of his error. Marx's failure to subject slavery to historical analysis led him away from an obvious interpretive conclusion: that slave-trading was analogous to the capitalist labor market because it gave birth to the capitalist mode of production. Oliver Cox pointed to this interpretive misstep when he observed, in *Capitalism as a System* (1964), that Marx "begins his analysis of the nature of capitalism almost where he might have ended it; and as is commonly the case in classical economics, he relegates as subsidiary the very things which should have been the center of his study. . . . His 'primitive accumulation' is none other than fundamentally capitalist accumulation."

We must put the enslaved human herself at the center of our analysis of the commodity form.

Asking what the slave trade says about Marx requires that we start where Marx did, with analysis of the commodity form. But we need to replace the bolt of linen Marx used as the iconic object of that analysis—not with the slave-cultivated cotton that was more central to nineteenth-century industrial manufacturing; or even the slave-grown sugar that fueled the colonial wealth Marx erroneously identified as part of capitalism's prehistory. To heed Johnson's call to "use the history of slavery as the source rather than the subject of knowledge," we will have to instead put the enslaved human herself at the center of our analysis of the commodity form.

Putting the slave trade at the center of our analysis of racial capitalism leads also to an alternative understanding of what Marx described as the "historical movement which changes the producers into wage-labourers." If, as Lisa Lowe has argued in *The Intimacy of Four Continents* (2015), the promises of nineteenth-century discourses of liberalism were a ruse, we might need to more skeptically interrogate the received narrative of the transition from slavery to freedom. The "movement" to which Marx refers may not have been toward "emancipation," as he assumes throughout *Capital*, but rather a further refinement of capitalism's commodification of the human—which is to say, a reworking of slavery.
