

Plantation Slavery—Industrial Revolution

Historical Foundations of Progress, Modernity, and Liberalism

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Industry, development, progress, individuality, opportunity, freedom: such is the catalogue of notions which comprise the liberal ideology and which are supposed to represent the characteristic attributes of modern society, insofar as the latter is founded upon private property and the unrestricted exchange of ideas, goods, and services.¹ There are many, no doubt, whose confidence in this once comfortable worldview has been badly rattled by the recurrent traumas and disappointments of life in the twentieth century; but there are possibly still more for whom its charms remain undiminished. Even while elements of the literary intelligentsia blithely inform us that the modern condition has become passé, political and economic developments in regions as diverse as Eastern Europe and Latin America serve as a reminder of the continued, indeed the renewed, vitality of liberalism: the stubborn fact that for millions the world over the bloom has still not faded from the capitalist rose.

From the beginning, of course, there has been no lack of doubters and skeptics, those who noticed that progress always seemed to come at a price, that industrial development had its victims as well as its beneficiaries. Karl Marx, writing in 1853, found progress under capitalism “to resemble that hideous pagan idol, who would not drink the nectar but from the skulls of the slain,”² while Henry George, three decades later, regarded the “association of poverty with progress” as “the great enigma of our times.”³ The butt of Marx’s reproof was British imperialism in India, which had resulted in the disintegration of the traditional village

¹ Originally written as an undergraduate paper in 1993, this essay is published here with only a few minor stylistic revisions. In 2005, Domenico Losurdo published *Controstoria del liberalismo*, wherein he develops an argument similar to the one I had advanced, but in far greater detail. The book has since appeared in English as *Liberalism: A Counter-History*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London and New York: Verso, 2011).

² “The Future Results of the British Rule in India,” in Karl Marx, *Surveys from Exile*, ed. David Fernbach (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 325.

³ Quoted in David Cannadine, “The Present and the Past in the English Industrial Revolution, 1880-1980,” in *The Industrial Revolution and Work in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, ed. Lenard R. Berlanstein (London: Routledge, 1992): 3-25, p. 5.

community without putting anything viable in its place. George, for his part, had in mind the dismal slums which had grown up alongside the technical wonders of the Industrial Revolution in England.

A still more telling, though less obvious, embarrassment for liberalism, however, may be seen in capitalism's trans-Atlantic connections, stretching from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century: the association, not so much of poverty with progress, as of slavery with freedom. More telling, because this connection touches directly on the ideology's qualitative core—individual liberty—rather than on quantitative assessments of economic performance, which are more easily contested. Less obvious, because the “free” and unfree labour systems, although economically interrelated, were geographically dispersed, and because the reified form of commodity exchange obscures the underlying relations of production, perhaps even more effectively in the case of colonial or international trade than within domestic markets. Socialists have often argued (hence the quotation marks around the word “free” in the previous sentence) that bourgeois liberty has meant one thing to the bourgeois and another, less glorious thing to the worker, namely the freedom to choose between renting oneself out by the hour (assuming this option is available, which all too frequently it is not) or facing destitution in the best of cases, outright starvation in the worst. But to point out the hidden compulsion involved in “wage-slavery” is to argue an ideological case, and one of perhaps dubious merit. With exceptions so infrequent as to be negligible, no one has ever been presented with a choice between wage-labour and chattel slavery and opted for the latter: the distinction remains categorical, palpable, and undeniable. But if, consequently, it were demonstrable that not only “wage-slavery” but slavery pure and simple had been part and parcel of the rise, development, and geographical extension of the capitalist system, if free and unfree labour could be shown to have emerged together, as the inseparable, complementary, and ineluctable results of a single historical process, then the case for liberalism would be radically undermined. At the very least, its universalist pretensions would have to be abandoned; and it must be admitted that “Liberty for us, servitude for them!” is neither an inspiring nor an edifying slogan.

Such is the thesis I propose to defend in herein. For want of space, I shall focus primarily upon chattel slavery, touching briefly on indentured servitude and ignoring debt-peonage and other forms of unfree labour altogether. I shall further narrow the scope of the discussion, temporally, to the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries; and, geographically, to the Anglophone zone of the Americas. These choices are by no means arbitrary, however. Just as chattel slavery is the most extreme, and hence the least debatable, form of human bondage, so is the period leading up to and including the Industrial Revolution in England critical to the argument developed here, for it was then that the set of conditions we now describe under the rubric of modernity were decisively established, it was then that liberalism in its classic form celebrated its greatest triumphs, and it was then that wage labour on one side of the Atlantic and slave labour on the other made unprecedented strides, marching, as I shall attempt to demonstrate, quite plainly and vigorously to the beat of the same drum.



It is perhaps already evident that the historiographic perspective employed herein derives ultimately from Marx. Furthermore, the problem we are addressing can hardly be said to have escaped his attention. Yet it would be rash, as well as pointless, to cite his authority in support of the current argument. Rash, because others might equally produce quotations that would mitigate against it; pointless, because the defense of orthodoxy has little to do with the pursuit of truth—unless, of course, one defines orthodoxy as Georg Lukács did in 1919, exclusively in methodological terms.⁴ There is nothing inconsistent, that is to say, in affirming that Marx's approach to the investigation of social reality is capable of providing a depth of insight otherwise unattainable, while at the same time declining to issue a blanket endorsement of the results of his own research.

⁴ *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971 [1922]).

As it happens, Marx did not provide a sustained analysis of slavery as a mode of production, nor of the connection between free and unfree labour systems in the world market, nor of the place—permanent or temporary, necessary or contingent—occupied by this connection in the historical development of the capitalist system. Nonetheless, numerous passages reflecting upon these problems can be found in his writings, and we shall begin by examining a few of these, since, if nothing else, they serve to clarify the issues at stake.

As to raw materials, there can be no doubt that the rapid advance of cotton spinning not only promoted, as if in a hothouse, the growing of cotton in the United States, and with it the African slave trade, but also made slave-breeding the chief business of the so-called border slave states.⁵

Negro slavery—a purely industrial slavery—which is, besides, incompatible with the development of bourgeois society and disappears with it, *presupposes* wage labour, and if other, free states with wage labour did not exist alongside it, if, instead, the Negro states were isolated, then all social conditions there would immediately turn into pre-civilized forms.

Slavery is possible at individual points within the bourgeois system of production. . . . However, slavery is then possible there only because it does not exist at other points; and appears as an anomaly opposite the bourgeois system itself.

The fact that we now not only call the plantation owners in America capitalists, but that they *are* capitalists, is based on their existence as anomalies within a world market based on free labour.⁶

⁵ *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976 [1867]) p. 571.

⁶ *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Vintage Books, 1973 [1857–58]), pp. 224, 464, and 513, emphases in original.

The import of these sentences is clear enough. New World slavery, an “industrial” slavery (Marx often uses the term industrial in a sense that includes agricultural as well as manufacturing enterprises) specializing in production for export, presupposes the capitalist world market. This world market is, however “based on free labour,” which is to say, on the capitalist mode of production. Modern slavery therefore differs from the slave systems of antiquity in that it is no longer a dominant, self-sustaining mode of production, but a subordinate, dependent, and anomalous element within a global system which as a whole is essentially capitalist. But there is the additional, somewhat paradoxical twist: although slavery in its modern form has arisen within “the bourgeois system” and on the basis of that system, it is ultimately incompatible with this basis, and as bourgeois society develops further, slavery “disappears.”⁷

Elsewhere, however, Marx insists no less plainly on the crucial role of slavery and the slave trade in “the genesis of the industrial capitalist,” referring to “the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of black-skins” as one of “the chief moments of primitive accumulation”:

It is trumpeted forth as a triumph of English statesmanship that, at the Peace of Utrecht, England extorted from the Spaniards, by the Asiento Treaty, the privilege of being allowed to ply the slave trade, not only between Africa and the English West Indies, which it had done until then, but also between Africa and Spanish America. England thereby acquired the right to supply Spanish America until 1743 with

⁷ This is essentially the interpretation of North American slavery developed by Eugene D. Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); see esp. chap. 1. These authors take exception, however, to Marx’s designation of slave-owners as capitalists: “an essentially hybrid system in the Old South . . . raised a regionally powerful ruling class of a new type, at once based on slave relations of production and yet deeply embedded in the world market and hostage to its internationally developed bourgeois social relations of production. In this essential respect, the Old South emerged as a bastard child of merchant capital and developed as a noncapitalist society increasingly antagonistic to, but inseparable from, the bourgeois world that sired it,” p. 5.

4,800 Negroes a year. . . . Liverpool grew fat on the basis of the slave trade. This was its method of primitive accumulation. . . . In 1730, Liverpool employed 15 ships in the slave trade; in 1751, 53; in 1760, 74; in 1770, 96; and in 1792, 132.

While the cotton industry introduced child-slavery into England, in the United States it gave the impulse for the transformation of the earlier, more or less patriarchal slavery into a system of commercial exploitation. In fact the veiled slavery of the wage-labourers in Europe needed the unqualified slavery of the New World as its pedestal.⁸

The contrast between these passages and those cited above needs little elaboration. Previously we were told that slave labour in the Americas was predicated upon the existence of wage labour in Europe. Now we are told precisely the converse: that wage labourers and industrial capitalists could not have existed in Europe but for the existence of slavery across the Atlantic. Of course, the two propositions are not necessarily contradictory. In a relation of organic interdependence, each component system presupposes the other and it is their interaction which determines the larger system to which both belong. It is not entirely clear, however, that Marx's formulations can be reconciled along such lines. For in that case, what are we to make of the description of slavery as an "anomaly," as "incompatible" with the capitalist system of production, as "disappearing" with the development of that system?

The term *anomaly* suggests, in the first place, something accidental, a historical contingency; and, furthermore, something irregular, an exception to the rule. Did it just happen, then, that slavery was the form of labour control used to produce the quintessential raw material (cotton) of the Industrial Revolution? Did it just happen that Manchester became the textile-manufacturing "workshop of the world" at the very moment that Liverpool, its port, had become the world capital of the slave trade? To say that these developments were coincidental implies that things *might* have been otherwise; to say they were anomalous means, additionally, that things *ought* to have been otherwise and *would* have been otherwise if

⁸ *Capital*, vol. 1, pp. 915 and 924–925).

history had only followed its presumably usual or natural course. Such a judgement must either rest on some supra-historical theory or other, necessarily idealist in nature, or else must be demonstrable in empirical terms. But, to the contrary, the evidence we shall now examine suggests that New World slavery was no accident, no freak of history, but was rather a necessary and indispensable precondition for the development of liberal society in its characteristically modern form. Its location may have been peripheral, but its function was central, and no other system of labour control could conceivably have taken its place.



“Whoever says Industrial Revolution says cotton.”⁹ There were, of course, other industries, notably iron and coal, that played, as it were, a vital supporting role, but it was above all the dramatic expansion of the cotton textile trade and the unprecedented profit margins this expansion allowed which proved the key incentive for industrialization. Despite what two centuries of ideological claptrap would have us believe, capitalist entrepreneurs are not attracted to innovation for its own sake. As in the case of earlier ruling classes, so in theirs, wealth conduces more to conservatism than to adventure. It was a certain Rothschild who once observed: “There are three ways of losing your money: women, gambling, and engineers. The first two are pleasanter, but the last is much the most certain.”¹⁰ One must presume that this worthy gentleman knew whereof he spoke. To overcome such well founded reticence a powerful stimulus was required, and this stimulus—a temptation more alluring even than that of the brothel or the casino—made its appearance in the cotton boom.

The investment prospects that so bedazzled the bourgeoisie cannot be explained, however, without reference to a geographical context that extends far beyond the British Isles. One must recall that Britain’s

⁹ E. J. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire—From 1750 to the Present Day* (London: Penguin, 1969), p. 56).

¹⁰ Quoted in Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire*, p. 41.

victories over France, her main imperial rival, in the Seven Years' War (1756–1763) and the Napoleonic Wars (1793–1815), had cleared the field for an unparalleled epoch of colonial expansion—for the consolidation of an empire richer and vaster than any history had witnessed theretofore. The economic conjuncture resulting from this awesome triumph has been portrayed most vividly by E. J. Hobsbawm, whom I shall take the liberty of quoting at some length since no paraphrase could improve upon his own words:

The cotton industry was thus launched, like a glider, by the pull of the colonial trade to which it was attached. . . . Between 1750 and 1769 the export of British cottons increased more than ten times over. . . . The overseas market, and especially within it the poor and backward “under-developed areas,” . . . expanded constantly without apparent limit. . . . By 1840 Europe took 200 million yards, while the “under-developed” areas took 529 millions.

For within these areas British industry had established a monopoly by means of war, other people's revolutions, and her own imperial rule. . . . *Latin America* came to depend virtually entirely on British imports during the Napoleonic Wars, and after it broke with Spain and Portugal it became an almost total economic dependency of Britain. . . .

Cotton therefore provided prospects sufficiently astronomical to tempt private entrepreneurs into the adventure of industrial revolution, and an expansion sufficiently sudden to require it. . . . “It was not five per cent or ten per cent,” a later English politician was to say, with justice, “but hundreds per cent and thousands per cent that made the fortunes of Lancashire.” In 1789 an ex-draper's assistant like Robert Owen could start with a borrowed £100 in Manchester; by 1809 he bought out his partners in the New Lanark Mills for £84,000 *in cash*. And his was a relatively modest story of business success. . . .

But the cotton manufacture had other advantages. All its raw material came from abroad, and its supply could therefore be expanded by the drastic procedures open to white men in the colonies—slavery and the opening of new areas of cultivation—rather than by the slower procedures of European agriculture. . . . From the 1790s on British

cotton found its supply, to which its fortunes remained linked until the 1860s, in the newly-opened Southern States of the USA.¹¹

The development of the industrial wage-labour system in England was thus indissolubly linked to the parallel development of slave-labour systems overseas, and this in two ways: as a vital source of cheap and abundant raw materials, and as an equally vital market for the finished goods. It is incumbent upon those who would argue that slave labour was, nevertheless, an aberration within a generally “bourgeois system”—who describe the antebellum South, for instance, as being “in but not of the capitalist world,” and who frown on “the assumption that without slavery in the colonies, capitalism could not have developed in England”¹²—to demonstrate that while things did in fact transpire in this way, they need not have done so. Would it, then, have been equally possible to mount and sustain an Industrial Revolution if labour on the cotton plantations had been free?

The evidence suggests that most contemporaries, insofar as they gave the matter any thought, would have answered in the negative. Political economists from Adam Smith to E. G. Wakefield regarded the cost of attracting free labour from Europe to the colonies as prohibitive. Quite apart from the danger and expense associated with the trans-Atlantic passage, and disregarding as well the migrants’ need to adapt to an unfamiliar environment lacking the traditional amenities of the homeland, there was the little problem inherent in the very nature of the colonial frontier: the too ready availability of land. The very thing that drew capital to the colonies, in other words, made it impossible to draw labour there

¹¹ The Age of Revolution, 1789-1848 (New York: New American Library, 1964), pp. 50–52, emphases in original; cf. *Industry and Empire*: “Behind our Industrial Revolution there lies this concentration on the colonial and ‘underdeveloped’ markets overseas, the successful battle to deny them to anyone else. We defeated them in the East: in 1766 we already outsold even the Dutch in the China trade. We defeated them in the West: by the early 1780s more than half of all slaves exported from Africa . . . made profits for British slavers. And we did so for the benefit of *British* goods” (p. 54, emphasis in original).

¹² Genovese and Fox-Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital*, p. 16.

without resorting to force. As Wakefield observed in 1833, “Where land is very cheap and all men are free, where every one who so pleases can easily obtain a piece of land for himself, not only is labour very dear, as respects the labourer’s share of the produce, but the difficulty is to obtain combined labour at any price.”¹³

There were, to be sure, intermediate options between wage labour and chattel slavery. Until the late seventeenth century, in fact, most of the labour force in England’s Caribbean and North American colonies consisted of British indentured servants. As long as the supply of servants was adequate, the preference for them is very understandable: “At the time, an indentured servant had to be advanced from 5 to 10 pounds for passage, whereas an African slave cost 20 to 25. Even if . . . the outlay for the indentured labourer were amortized over a period of only three or four years, there was still the issue of initial capital liquidity.”¹⁴ The decision to sign a contract of indenture was, theoretically, a voluntary one. Such liberty probably meant little, however, to the marginal rural folk who had been deprived of their traditional livelihoods by the enclosure of commons, wastelands, and open fields (or, to put it in more general terms, through the consolidation of large-scale capitalist agriculture), and who faced harsh penalties if apprehended on charges of vagabondage—to say nothing of those who were abducted by the well organized press gangs which operated in British ports during the latter half of the seventeenth century. Nevertheless, positive incentives could not be entirely avoided, the most common and effective being a small grant of land at the end of the indenture period; in Barbados, for example, ten acres was the rule.¹⁵ A ready supply of land was thus a necessary condition of such a system, and as the islands became better settled, or on the mainland as the frontier of settlement moved west, the costs associated

¹³ *England and America*, quoted in Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, pp. 934–935.

¹⁴ Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System II: Mercantilism and the Consolidation of the European World-Economy, 1600-1750* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1980), p. 172.

¹⁵ Robert Miles, *Capitalism and Unfree Labour: Anomaly or Necessity?* (London and New York: Tavistock, 1987), pp. 76–77.

with indentures inevitably rose. Another significant problem was the fact that population growth in England leveled off around 1650 and remained virtually nil for the following half century. As the economy nonetheless continued to expand, this most likely resulted in an upward pressure on wages; in the building trades, at least, wages are known to have risen precipitously during the later seventeenth century.¹⁶ For some such reasons, then, the predominantly British labour force that had originally manned the plantations had by 1700 largely been replaced by African slaves. Whether or not this was, in Ralph Davis's words, "necessarily the cheapest or most efficient mode of operating sugar plantations . . . , it was the only one available when white servants could no longer be attracted."¹⁷ By the time the appropriate conjuncture had arrived and political and economic conditions on a global scale had set the stage for the cotton boom, slavery was firmly established as the basis of large-scale commercial agriculture in the New World, and was itself among the most necessary of those conditions.

In short, slavery was in no sense an irrelevant or dispensable aberration, but played a central role in the creation of the modern world: a drama in which the "freeing" of labour in some locations went hand-in-hand with its enslavement in others. Peasant labour could not have provided cotton in sufficient quantity, nor wage labour at a sufficiently low price, to fuel Britain's, and hence the world's, take-off into an Age of Industry, Progress, and Liberalism.

¹⁶ David Eltis, "Labour and Coercion in the English Atlantic World from the Seventeenth to the Early Twentieth Century," *Slavery and Abolition*, vol. 14, no. 1: 205-226, p. 216.

¹⁷ Quoted in Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System II*, p. 173.