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Citation

Johnson, Walter. 2004. The pedestal and the veil: Rethinking the capitalism/slavery question. *Journal of the Early Republic* 24(2): 299-308.

Published Version

<http://jer.pennpress.org/strands/jer/home.htm;jsessionid=6B9EFBDD9A7A872C133E053442479093>

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The Pedestal and the Veil

Rethinking the Capitalism/Slavery Question

WALTER JOHNSON

What does it mean to speak of the “commodification of people” as a domain of historical inquiry? Why put it that way? What does it mean to say that a person has been commodified? Is this about slavery? Prostitution? Wage labor? The sale of donated organs, fetal tissue samples, and sections of the human genome? Is it about the way that my personal data is sold without me knowing anything about it? Is it about the Coke machine in my kid’s school cafeteria—the sale of her unwitting little field of vision, her tiny stomach, and her enormous desire to be grown-up? At first glance, the phrase seems impossibly baggy: inviting all sorts of comparisons of the incommensurable, and posing questions that sit at odd angles to the standard categories of historical inquiry. But perhaps that’s the point: by inviting comparisons, the editors have framed a question that draws attention to the connections and similarities between historical processes that are usually analyzed as if they were distinct—slavery, wage labor, and prostitution, say—and calls attention to the historically embedded distinctions that separate them from one another as ethical, legal, and analytical subjects.

In reflecting on these wonderful essays, I want first to review the older version of the question out of which this one seems to have been conjured: the question of the relation of “capitalism” to “slavery.” And I

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Journal of the Early Republic, 24 (Summer 2004)

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want to do so with particular attention to the work of Karl Marx and the most influential of those who have written about slavery in the United States in orthodox Marxian terms; for it is, after all, this intellectual tradition that has most actively kept alive the idea that when you talk about “capitalism” and “slavery” you are talking about two things, rather than one. Finally, I want to propose a heterodox reading of a short section of *Capital* that foregrounds the question, which Marx so insistently repressed throughout the rest of the text: the question of slavery.

If it is hard to think about slavery as capitalism, that is because it is supposed to be: slavery is, in some sense, “unthinkable” in the historical terms that frame western political economy.¹ In both Smithian and Marxian economics, slavery serves as an un-theorized historical backdrop to the history of capitalism, an un-thought (even when present) past to the inevitable emergence of the present. This foundational exclusion of the fact of slavery from the framing of political economy, I would argue, has had consequences that bedevil us down to the present moment.

James Oakes recently has argued that Adam Smith and the “bourgeois” political economists who followed him spent a great deal of time and energy trying to reconcile what everybody knew—that slavery would inevitably give way to “free” labor because of the superior capacity of self-interest as a tool of labor discipline—with what seemed nevertheless to be everywhere the stubborn fact: slaveholders were making a great deal of money. Smith resolved this problem, according to Oakes, by passing it off to other regions of intellectual inquiry. Perhaps it was the “pride” of man that made “him love to domineer,” combined with the excessive fertility of the tropics, that accounted for the persistence of slavery in the face of its inherent inefficiency and inevitable decline.² Perhaps, that is, the persistence of slavery was a question to be answered by psychology or geography (by moral philosophy or natural history, to use terms Smith would recognize) but certainly not political economy.

1. See, especially, Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London, 1983). For the idea of histories “unthinkable” in the terms of western political thought, see Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, 1995); and Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, 2000).

2. James Oakes, “The Peculiar Fate of the Bourgeois Critique of Slavery,” in Winthrop D. Jordan and Annette Gordon-Reed, eds., *Slavery and the American South* (Jackson, MS, 2003), 29–33.

If Smith displaced the question of slavery, it might be said that Marx simply evaded it. The magnificent critique of the commodity form with which Marx began *Capital*, for instance, unfolds from a detailed consideration of the nature of a bolt of linen. Out of the dual character of that linen as an object and a commodity—having a use value and an exchange value—Marx develops the notion of “the fetishism of commodities,” the habit of mind by which things are made to seem as if they exist in relation to one another (compared according to their prices) rather than to their uses and the circumstances of their production (which reflected the larger matrix of social relations).³ But wait: *a bolt of linen?* At a moment when English mill hands expended the (few) calories they gained from American sugar on the work of processing American cotton?⁴ Describing an economy that shipped sterling debt to the new world to pay for slave-grown products and then received it back again in exchange for the finished textiles produced in British factories?⁵ In the shadow of a bloody Civil War in which the Confederate foreign policy had been premised on the (almost true) idea that the disruption of the cotton trade would cause such suffering in England that the British would be forced to support secession?⁶ A bolt of linen?⁷

Marx’s substitution of (British) flax for (American) cotton as the emblematic raw material of English capitalism enabled him to tell what in essence was a story of the commodity form artificially hedged in by Brit-

3. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production* (3 vols., New York, 1967), 1: 43–87. For a reading of *Capital* that outlines a helpful (if doxological) set of interpretations, see David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital* (1982; rep., London, 1999).

4. See Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York, 1985).

5. See Edwin J. Perkins, *Financing Anglo-American Trade: The House of Brown, 1800–1880* (Cambridge, MA, 1975).

6. See Frank Lawrence Owsley, *King Cotton Diplomacy: Foreign Relations of the Confederate States of America* (Chicago, 1959), 134–53; Thomas Hietala, *Manifest Design: Anxious Aggrandizement in Late Jacksonian America* (Ithaca, 1985), 55–94.

7. The substitution of linen for cotton seems even more remarkable in light of the facts that Marx was subsisting during the period he wrote *Capital* largely on loans from Engels, who was working as the manager of a cotton mill partly owned by his family. See Peter Stallybrass, “Marx’s Coat,” in Patricia Spyer, ed., *Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Spaces* (London, 1998), 190–94.

ish national boundaries. This unacknowledged spatial specificity surfaces again in the chapter on “primitive accumulation,” which provides the ground in which most of those seeking to apply Marxian historical categories to the story of American slavery have rooted their ideas. The bloody story that Marx told in this chapter is of the expropriation of the commons through the process of enclosure (the forcible imposition of private property on the landscape through the planting of hedges and violent enforcement of exclusive rights), which prevented the landless from providing for themselves in any way other than working for wages they would then use to pay for things they once had made (here specified as yarn, linen, and woolens). “The expropriation and eviction of a part of the agricultural population,” Marx explained, “not only set free for industrial capital, the laborers, their means of subsistence, and material for labor; it also created the home market.”⁸ With its emphasis on laws from the reign of the Tudor monarchs, domestic products, and the “home” market, this is an unabashedly provincial story. It is the story of feudalism succeeded by capitalism in England, Anglo-centric in its spatial parameters and teleological in its temporal framing.

And yet this is the section of *Capital* upon which historians of slavery have relied when they have attempted to situate their histories in that of capital. For among the very few remarks that Marx made about slavery he did include in the historical account of capitalism at the back of the book the following amazing sentence: “The veiled slavery of the wage-workers in Europe needed, for its pedestal, slavery pure and simple in the new world.”⁹

Those claiming the mantel of Marx have generally read this sentence according to the framing of the material on European history that surrounds it, as if it makes a claim about historical development. “Veiled slavery,” of course, refers to the commodification of labor power (the sectioning of the human body’s capacities into time-scaled units of labor that can be “freely” sold on the open market) as opposed to “slavery pure and simple,” the commodification of the laborer (the sale of a human being at a price that made that person comparable to all manner of things). In the standard reading, this is the passage where Marx refers to the inevitable succession of the latter by the former. Thus, in answer

8. Marx, *Capital*, 1: 667–712 (quotation at 699).

9. *Ibid.*, 711.

to the question as it is commonly put—what does Marx say about capitalism and slavery?—there can only be one answer: slavery in Marx is not, properly speaking, “capitalist.” As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and others have argued, in American slavery there was no separation of labor from the land; it was labor rather than labor power that was being commodified; capital and labor did not stand in relation to one another counterpoised by contract but cohabited in the same exploited body; the domination of labor was not abstract but concrete, etc. According to the indicia of orthodox Marxism (at least as it is represented by those who have invoked it to study slavery in the United States), slavery was, like feudalism, “pre-capitalist,” “archaic,” a “conservative” residuum; its super-cession by “capitalism” (here defined as an industrial mode of production characterized by wage labor) was inevitable and its theorization beyond that fact (for Marx at least) unnecessary.¹⁰ So, that’s what (they say) Marx says about slavery. But what does slavery say about Marx?

By attempting to frame the history of slavery within categories derived from writings that self-consciously treated slavery as a historical and conceptual backdrop for the main event—the history of industrial capitalism in Europe—historians writing as orthodox Marxists have, understandably, ended up in a bit of a mess. If slavery was not capitalist how do we explain its commercial character: the excrescence of money changers and cotton factors in southern cities who yearly handled millions and millions of pounds of foreign exchange; the mercantile ambitions of southern slaveholders who wanted to take over Cuba and Mexico and Nicaragua so as to insure their commercial dominance and greatness; the thriving slave markets at the centers of their cities where prices tracked those that were being paid for cotton thousands of miles away? The standard answer has been to say that slavery was “in but not of” the capitalist economy, a beguilingly otiose formulation, which implies some sort of spatial

10. See Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South* (New York, 1965); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *The Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism* (New York, 1983); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill, 1988). The temporal unevenness of the succession story is generally smoothed by the invocation of the category of “contradiction”: see Mark V. Tushnet, *The American Law of Slavery: Considerations of Humanity and Interest* (Princeton, 1981).

unity of process (“in”) which it defines only negatively in relation to an orthodox definition of “capitalism.”¹¹

The existing discussion, that is to say, has devolved into a set of more-or-less tautological propositions about how you define the categories of historical analysis (if “capitalism” is defined as that-mode-of-production-characterized-by-wage-labor then slavery was, by definition, not “capitalist”). But doesn’t it make more sense to think about the political economy of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Atlantic as a single space, its dimensions defined by flows of people, money, and goods, its nested temporalities set by interlocking (though clearly distinct) labor regimes, cyclical rhythms of cultivation and foreign exchange, and shared standards of calculability and measurement?¹² Try for just a minute to imagine the history of that bolt of cotton that Marx left out of *Capital*. It had been bought before it even existed by a British buyer who extended credit in sterling to an American factor. It had been put in the ground, tended, picked, bagged, baled, and shipped by an American slave. It had graded out well and brought a premium price because it was free of “trash” (leaves, stems, sticks, rocks, etc.) and “stains” (which resulted from cotton being left in the field too long after it bloomed); its condition, that is, reflected the palpable presence of standards of the exchange in Liverpool in the labor regime that governed Louisiana. It had been shipped in the name of a planter who was thus liable for any difference between the price he had received in advance and the price for which it was eventually sold—a planter, that is, who was legally present at the exchange on which his cotton was sold. It had been summed out in the accounts between planters and factors in dollars that the factors had bought with the sterling they had received from English buyers and sold to northern merchant bankers who would pass it on to those seeking to

11. Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 53–58.

12. For a reading of Marx that dovetails with my reading of the political economy of the Atlantic world, see David Kazanjian, *The Colonizing Trick: National Culture and Imperial Citizenship in Early America* (Minneapolis, 2003), 14–24. See also Stuart Hall, “Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance,” in Philomena Essed and David Theo Goldberg, eds., *Race Critical Theories: Text and Context* (Oxford, UK, 2002), 38–68. For the emphasis on time, space, and “calculation,” see David Harvey, “Money, Space, Time, and the City,” in his *The Urban Experience* (Baltimore, 1989), 165–99.

buy English manufactures. And had been finished in an English mill, made into a coat, and ended up on the back of an English millhand who paid for it with his wages.¹³

In trying to reframe the capitalism/slavery discussion as a set of questions about eighteenth and nineteenth-century Atlantic political economy, it might be worth just for a second (because that is all it will take) to see what Marx did say about the history of slavery in *Capital*. Right before the business about the veil and the pedestal he wrote this: “Whilst the cotton industry introduced child-slavery in England, it gave in the United States a stimulus to the transformation of the earlier, more or less patriarchal slavery, into a system of commercial exploitation.”¹⁴ What is striking about this sentence is the first word: “whilst.” It frames the relation of what we have been calling “capitalism” and what we have been calling “slavery” in terms of dynamic simultaneity rather than simple super-cession, though it does so with careful attention to the historically different relations of production—slavery and wage labor—which characterized the two poles of this single Atlantic economy. In so doing, it frames the pedestal metaphor that directly follows it as a structural (or spatial) metaphor rather than a temporal one. Rather than focusing on the specifics of capitalist development in Europe, this sentence treats the Atlantic economy as its ground of analysis, a spatial unit over which economic practice had differential but nevertheless related forms and effects.

And the name that Marx gives this trans-Atlantic political economy at this moment very close to the end of *Capital* is not “capitalism” but “slavery”—“child-slavery,” “veiled slavery,” “slavery pure and simple.”

13. For money and credit, see Harold Woodman, *King Cotton and His Retainers: Financing and Marketing the Cotton Crop of the South, 1800–1925* (Lexington, KY, 1968), 3–198; and Perkins, *Financing Anglo-American*. For slaves, labor, discipline, and cotton, see Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery, Capitalism, and Imperialism in the Mississippi River Valley* (forthcoming). For the increasing identification of the English working class with cotton clothing, see Stallybrass, “Marx’s Coat,” 193–94.

14. Marx, *Capital*, 1: 711. Marx also used the idea of “commercial slavery” when he compared the interstate slave trade in the United States to the importation of Irish workers to England: “*Mutato nomine de te fabula narratur*,” he wrote: “with the name changed, the story applies to you” (254).

It would strain credibility to argue that the hundreds upon hundreds of pages of *Capital* in which Marx ignored the question of slavery should be re-read in the light of the several moments at the end where he seemed to suggest that “slavery” was *the* essential form of exploitation in the nineteenth-century economy and that the forms it took in Manchester or in Mississippi were simply variant manifestations of a shared essence. Safer to understand the invocation of “slavery” as a rhetorical effect, designed to pierce the illusion that wage-workers were in any sense “free.” “Slavery” was, after all, an often-invoked metaphor in the nineteenth-century. The term served as a sort of universal comparison for disparate injustices, and in the process it lost some of its meaning and most of its historical specificity. But the very metaphorical promiscuity of the term “slavery” as Marx used it, calls us to pay close attention to both the pattern of its deployment and the maneuvers by which its seemingly universal applicability was contested and controlled. To pay attention, that is, to historical process by which the boundaries between slavery and “freedom” were drawn, and to the character of the “veil” that separated them.

The “veil” to which Marx refers is most simply imagined as “contract freedom”: the idea that wage-labor contracts (by which “free” workers sold control over the capacities of their bodies by the hour) reflected freely given “consent” to the bargain (and thus elided the deeper histories of expropriation and coercion that, according to Marx, actually structured the bargain).¹⁵ It refers, that is, to the historical process by which the commodification of laborers and the commodification of labor power came to be understood as two entirely separate and, indeed, opposite things—slavery and freedom, black and white, household and market, here and there—rather than as two concretely intertwined and ideologically symbiotic elements of a larger unified though internally diversified structure of exploitation.

This formulation of functional unity veiled by ideological separation

15. See David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (Ithaca, 1975); David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London, 1991); and Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (Cambridge, UK, 1998).

entails several interesting avenues of inquiry taken up by these essays. They commend us, first, to try to think about the economies of Europe, America, Africa—so long divided by historiographies framed around national boundaries and hard-and-fast distinctions between modes of production—in all of their concrete interconnection.¹⁶ This emphasis on the concrete and practical seems to me to have the virtue of allowing for the use of some of the most powerful categories produced by western political economy—the idea of commodification, the labor theory of value, the notion of variability (across space and race) of the socially necessary cost of the reproduction of the laboring class, and the calculation of surplus value—without having first to engage a long doctrinal dispute about the capitalism question. Once the teleology of the “slavery-to-capitalism” question has been set aside, that is, we still have an enormous amount to learn from what Marx had to tell us about the work of capitalists as we try to diagram the historical interconnections and daily practices of the global economy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

These essays likewise suggest a second set of topics as we try to think of the enormous work involved in categorizing and containing all of those interconnections in notions of process and history structured by the oppositions of slavery and freedom, black and white, and coercion and consent. As they argued about where to draw the line between proper and improper forms of political economy—about whether wage work was wage slavery, whether slaveholding was slave trading, and whether marriage was prostitution—capitalists and anti-capitalists, employers and employees, masters and slaves, husbands and wives argued over the character of freedom, right, and personhood, over where they began and where they ended, where these things could be said to be salable and where they must be held to be sacred. These violent arguments were eventually settled on a frontier where we live today: “slavery” was defined by the condition of blacks in the South before 1865 and “freedom” was defined as the ability to choose to work for a wage or a share of the crop (though not to choose not to work for a wage or a share of the crop

16. See Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill, 1944); Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*; and Joseph Miller, *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730–1830* (Madison, 1988).

or, indeed, to choose not to be “free”), and “the household” was defined as “in but not of the market.”¹⁷ “So massive was the effort” wrote Marx, “to establish ‘the eternal laws of Nature’ of the capitalist mode of production.”¹⁸ And so began the history of “freedom,” which is apparently hurtling toward such a fearful conclusion all over the world today.

17. See Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850–1920* (Chicago, 1978); Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832–1938* (Baltimore, 1992); Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract*; Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1997); Kazanjian, *The Colonizing Trick*, 35–138.

18. Marx, *Capital*, 1:711. In the original: “*Tantae molis erat. . .*”