

Enslaved African Labour in the Americas: from primitive accumulation to manufacture with racial violence

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I. Introduction

Even though not based on wage labour, in what sense did slavery and other forms of coerced labour in the colonies nonetheless constitute an early form of capitalist production?

This paper is a broad interpretive essay that looks at African enslavement in the Americas as an instance of the general condition of labour in the colonised world, and reflects on what this means for the closely related debates on the birth of capitalism and the nature of the capital –labour relation in categorical -theoretical terms. The paper is part of an extended dialogue with Marx's *Capital*, the aim of which is to rescue the soul of Marxism from the claims of Eurocentric (white nation) privilege that have grown more insistent in recent decades of ideological retreat.

The literature reports that the violent working to death of enslaved Africans on the sugar plantation was a matter of calculation by the slave owner, weighing value produced against the costs of purchase and maintenance. Moreover the low cost of slave purchase relied on the supply of Africans seized from their home continent. The paper reconceptualises Marx's value theory in an analysis of the enslavement of Africans in the Americas as a part of the capitalist mode of production with its own special characteristics. I address the gap between conventional Marxist readings of the relation between capitalism and slavery. The first reading sees slavery as part of the process of primitive accumulation of capital, the 'original sin' of dispossession. The second reading sees capitalism as such as exclusively based on the exploitation of 'free' wage labour as its general condition. A third reading

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My current research project is a dialogue with Marx's 'Capital' concerning the theorisation of US cotton slavery and British industrial capitalism. The next project flowing on from that is an exploration of Marini's concept of labour super-exploitation and Marx's theory of surplus-value.

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combines these two interpretations to conceptualise slavery as the production of absolute surplus-value under special conditions.

I provide another interpretation that sees capitalism's slavery as a racialised mode of exploitation, a parallel form to manufacture which was the prevalent form of the labour process of emergent capitalism in Europe. I argue that sugar plantation slavery from the sixteenth into the nineteenth century had a dual relation concerning the debate over primitive accumulation or capitalism from the start. The plantation was an early form of specifically capitalist enterprise, in that the enslaved African's labour power was purchased in order to create new surplus value in the production of commodities, in a process that relied on the continual European looting of other continents to provide that labour power. This interpretation provides the basis for changes as well as continuities occurred in the transition from sugar plantation slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean on to cotton slavery in the US South.

II. Finding the Right entry Point to the Problematic

The study of the capitalist mode of production has many entry points, and they need not coincide with a genealogy of its historical origins. On my reading, Marx in *Capital* Volume 1 gives us at least four entry points to the capitalist mode of production as a concept. The first is to begin at the beginning that Marx provides, the analysis of the simplest value-form as the commodity and then money in Chapters 1 to 3. There is a well rehearsed debate over the role of the logical and the historical in this difficult opening, especially on the issue of simple commodity production. Did simple commodity production exist as a historical stage or is it simply a layer of abstraction, the simple commodity form, within the developed capitalist mode of production that is already present? The weight of argument has tilted against Engels' historical stage view. Yet Marx's unfolding of the concepts through a series of determinations leaves a major problem at the end of the beginning, Part 2 on the transformation of money into capital. The movement from the simple commodity form of exchange that starts with one commodity that is sold and ends with another that is purchased, with money as the intermediary, as expressed by the notation C-M-C ; to the capitalist form of exchange that starts with money and ends up with more money through the purchase and sale of a commodity as the intermediary, as expressed by the notation M-C-M' where M' is greater than M. So the derivation of value that starts from the commodity ends with a flip, from commodity value to money capital value, a flip that appears to be just formal but in historical terms is immense. The significance of this opening is that it proves the necessity of

surplus value, as a general category independent of any particular form, as the means by which money capital expands itself.

Contrast this with the second approach, the beginning which Marx puts at the end. In Part 8, Marx picks out the main elements of a broad historical narrative from the fourteenth to the eighteenth century and beyond under the heading the ‘so-called Primitive accumulation’. So-called because Marx disagrees with the legend of Adam Smith that this was in any way a benign process, and emphasises the violence involved in the birth of the capitalist mode of production. Magdoff (2013) rightly suggests that Marx’s meaning in the original German is better translated as ‘primary accumulation’ or, suggesting a theoretical content that is distinct again, ‘original accumulation’, to emphasise this was the original accumulation *of capital*. The end chapters of Volume 1 are a synthesis of the genesis of capitalism written in the historical narrative mode. Moreover in Part 8 Marx confronts the ahistoric paradigm assumption of classical political economy by insisting on the historical and hence transitory nature of capitalism as a mode of production that came into being and will be superseded, whose fetters must and will be cast asunder. including the inevitable ending of capitalism as well as its birth. Marx provides here a clarion call and a suggestive outline, but not yet a full history.

Sandwiched between the above two well-known starting points there is a third approach, which takes shape in the historical sequence that emerges from the middle parts of *Capital* Volume 1 on the production of surplus value. Parts 3 and 5 are led by first absolute surplus value, then relative surplus value, and then by both in their interaction with labour intensity.

“The production of absolute surplus-value turns exclusively on the length of the working day, whereas the production of relative surplus-value completely revolutionizes the technical processes of labour and the groupings into which society is divided” (Marx 1976, 645).

While Marx’s focus is on conceptual development, these three parts relay a narrative of transitions *within* the capitalist mode of production. This has led many Marxists to believe that absolute surplus value came before relative surplus value in a linear fashion, with the latter following on historically as well as logically in the line of Marx’s presentation, and there are indeed textual grounds from Marx himself for this reading. I counter argue that there are as strong grounds for considering a common starting point of both absolute and relative surplus value in their necessary combination that is manifest in the historical form of the labour process that Marx terms manufacture. The notion of sequence from absolute surplus

value to relative surplus value has a counterpoint that punctuates the linear narrative interpretation at three points. First are chapters 7, 8 and 9 which despite falling under the heading ‘The Production of Absolute Surplus Value’ are not specifically about that, but rather they introduce the production of surplus value as such. The second interruption to the linear sequence that implies first absolute surplus value then relative surplus value is Chapter 13 on Cooperation. The third punctuation point is Chapter 16 on the interaction of absolute and relative surplus value. Marx of course presents a complex argument that through the power of abstraction begins to approximate to the multi-faceted complexity of his subject, which does indeed change over time. One possible reason for Marx’s apparently linear mode presentation is that it brings to the fore the turn that took place in England around 1850 from manufacture to Modern Industry, an important point of inflection in its own right and certainly the dominant economic change in Marx’s social environment during his adult lifetime. What I am highlighting here is the aspect of totality that is also present as an undercurrent, even as Marx isolates one element of surplus value then another. All labour processes in whatever mode of production entail both a duration of labour effort and a degree of labour productivity. As Marx points out there cannot be one without the other. All specifically capitalist labour processes must operate in the corresponding dimensions of absolute surplus value and relative surplus value, for them to be a valorisation process that produce values and surplus value as such. Labour exploited by capital must be sufficiently productive to create more commodities than the equivalents required for the labourers own consumption, and at the same time the surplus labour, and from that surplus value, can be increased by extending the working day. Capital can increase its surplus value by applying the lever on absolute surplus value or relative surplus value, but these categories should not be reified, both must be present as dimensions of surplus value¹.

In order to elaborate the concept of plantation slavery as coercive manufacture, my further thesis is that Marx does not complete the theoretical articulation of burgeoning capitalism in its full social geography. This leaves an incompleteness, a gap in Marx’s theory of surplus value. The violent phenomena Marx highlights in Part 8, and which he recognises in several places, e.g. to slavery being the second pillar on which the capitalist mode of production stands, are nonetheless not brought together in his work. There are many scattered

¹ There is a fourth approach, Marx also tackled the issue of transition from a different angle in the proposed additional chapter *Results*, where he looks at the last forms before capitalist production and the first transitional forms of capitalist production through the conceptual lens of distinguishing between the formal subsumption and real subsumption of labour to capital. Marx relates these subsumption categories to absolute and relative surplus value. Because the *Results* is a draft, and was not in the editions of *Capital* published in Marx’s lifetime, there is some question as to its status and positioning in the flow of the argument. I will return to this approach and its limitations in a subsequent paper.

insights into plantation slavery but not a substantive analysis of it. Marx's ontology allows this but the epistemology of Volume 1 is insufficient. The slave plantation needs to receive a parallel theoretical treatment in terms of its specific social relations of commodity production as did domestic manufacturing production in Parts 3,4 and 5. If we are to reach a more inclusive theoretical account of the capitalist mode of production in Marx's own time, this analysis is required, as are plantation slavery's colonial trade and finance relations with the parallel development of manufacture into machinofacture and modern industry.

Let us now begin to consider how far the colonial dimension comes into Marx's theory of capitalist exploitation.

III. Wakefield and the Theory of Colonisation

To unravel the tangle of knots that awaits, let us pick up a thread that begins at the end, or at least at an apparent ending, which is the final chapter of *Capital* Volume 1. In this chapter Marx discusses 'the modern theory of colonisation' put forward in his day by E G Wakefield. The subject of Wakefield's concern is not colonised labour, the aboriginal first nations of Australia, indeed for him the colonised people are invisible, but the procurement of white settler labour. The subject is colonies settled by Europeans, as Marx makes clear 'we treat here of real Colonies, virgins soils, colonised by free immigrants.' (1970, 716).

Wakefield's preoccupation is how to draw surplus labour from the influx of white colonisers in a capitalist fashion. His policy is that for capitalism to flourish in Australia the mass of white colonisers must be prevented by the state from settling on the newly taken land, for if they are allowed to do so they would prefer working on their 'own' plot rather than labouring for a capitalist (also assumed by him to be another class of white settler). Here the reproduction of capitalist social relations appears as a policy choice, that the English colonial state in Australia should create one type of regime rather than another if it is to oversee the continuing accumulation of capital. Wakefield recommends a prohibitive land policy to ensure the reproduction in a colonial setting of capitalist social relations; that the state set an artificial high price on land because if immigrants were to have free access to that land they would set up a small farm and not volunteer as workers, they would produce for themselves and not for capital, so the question for Wakefield becomes free land or free labour? His answer is that white immigrants must be prevented from settling on the land.

Marx turns this discussion of colonial policy into a matter of essence, he says that in Wakefield the truth of the capital labour relation is revealed. More pertinently, Marx says the

essence of the capital labour relation at home *in England* is revealed by Wakefield's discussion:

“It is the great merit of E.G. Wakefield to have discovered, not anything new about the Colonies, but to have discovered in the Colonies the truth as to the conditions of capitalist production in the mother country” (1976, 932).

For Marx that truth is the separation of the immediate producer from the means of production as the presupposition of the capitalist mode of production. Marx leaves this as the capstone on the analysis already presented in the previous six chapters. But something new did need to be said about the colonies.

As we have noted, the historical mode of Part 8 contrasts to the dialectic of system-logic unfolding from the commodity which is the presentation form Marx takes in the opening parts of Volume 1. The end chapter of *Capital* Volume 1 is not then a neat and symmetrical response to the book's opening, rather than a closing conclusion it is more an alternative opening that poses as many questions as it answers. Some of these questions are partially answered in the draft materials assembled as Volume 3 of *Capital*, that Marx had already worked on but were destined not to be published until 1894, under Engel's editorship, more than a decade after Marx's death and nearly thirty years after the first edition of *Capital* Volume 1. The way Marx poses the problem of white immigrant labour in the colony in chapter 33, shows he anticipates the answers already prepared for presentation in Volume 3. Of these the most elaborated but difficult is his surplus profit theory of rent, that is of how capitalism works in agriculture and associated sectors of operation such as mining and logging; a theory that in turn depends on the modification of the law of value to take account of its specifically capitalist character, whereby simple value is converted into prices of production. Wakefield's policy is that the colonial state should impose a land tax that would operate like an absolute rent (in Marx's Volume 3 terminology) to prevent the movement onto the land of poorer whites.

Returning to the closing chapter of Volume 1 itself, and Marx's concluding paragraph:

“However, we are not concerned here with the conditions of the colonies. The only thing that interests us is the secret discovered in the new world by the Political Economy of the old world, and proclaimed on the housetops: that the capitalist mode of production and accumulation, and therefore capitalist private property, have for their fundamental condition the annihilation of self-earned private property; in other words, the expropriation of the labourer” (1970, 724).

In this turning of the argument to the ‘fundamental condition’ of the capitalist mode of production in ‘the old world’ Marx deliberately switches the argument away from the specific character of the colonial capitalist relation. But are we not just as concerned with the ‘new world’, the colonies where the expropriation of the labourer also takes place?

In a recent commentary, David Harvey (2016) seeks to pick up the journey again from this fork in the trail. According to Harvey, from this point Marx returns in Volume 2 to the internal contradictions of the capitalist mode of production rather than giving systematic treatment to capitalism in its external relations. Harvey rightly notes that Marx writes elsewhere on Britain’s unfolding colonial relations with India, Ireland and so on, but not in a systematic and theoretical way²; and Harvey also rightly notes that occasionally in *Capital* Marx refers to national differences, but does not make this the focus of sustained analysis. In short, Harvey poses anew the problem we seek to address. Harvey suggests a turn towards systematic theorisation of capitalism’s colonial policy. But it is still for many reasons unsatisfactory to our purpose, for Harvey persists in framing colonisation as an *external* relation of capitalism, stressing that the frontier is an outer transformation resulting from an inner dialectic, a ‘spatial fix’ in Harvey’s terms. But this manner of spatial framing is itself one sided, insofar as it shifts attention away from the inner transformation to the social relations of the capitalist mode of production that is inherent in this very drive to colonial expansion. Colonialism is not an external bolt-on to capitalism, it is part of it; and the theory of colonial capitalism must therefore affect the central social categories of what we understand capitalism to be, specifically the concept of surplus value. Moreover, capitalism’s colonial ‘spatial fix’ does not resolve its inner contradictions, but reproduces them differently and at a higher level.

To argue, as Brenner does, that not only the origins but also the *essence* of the capitalist mode of production is uniquely found in the social relations and class struggles of its emergence and early stages in England (and by extension in western Europe and the global North), reduces the epistemological role of the colony to no more than an illumination or reflection back on this essence, to assist in its revelation. But are not colonial conquest, the modes of labour exploitation and the oppressed nation and class struggles of resistance that it involves also essentially constitutive of the capitalist mode of production? We argue that colonialism is not external to the capitalist mode of production but part of its conditions of

² Although Marx begins to do this in his analysis of social relations in Ireland: a distinct illustration of the general law of accumulation that was different to England. Despite the famine and mass emigration, in Ireland the immediate producers had not yet been forced off the land entirely, they were exploited *in situ* through colonial land rents. These conditions of colonial occupation gave rise to the Fenian national independence movement. (Marx, 1976: 854-870). See Higginbottom (2014).

existence. Accordingly critical political economy has to put colonised labour at the centre of its theoretical project. What is considered as the totality of the capitalist mode of production has to be reconceived to take colonialism into account, not only as an external relation or limit but as an expanding *internal* relation that includes the occupation of colonised territories and *the coercive expropriation of the colonised labourer*.

In an excellent introduction to the topic, Barbara Solow posits the central question for the colonial powers was ‘by what methods did Europeans solve the problem of exploiting overseas conquests in regions with abundant land?’ (1991, 38). She argues that colonial occupation was necessarily a different setting for the origins capitalism, as the state had to set up the conditions of private ownership of the means of production on which capitalist accumulation depended. She suggests two routes that the colonial power could take in ensuring a labour supply, free labour or coerced labour. From the colonial capitalist perspective, slavery offered another solution to Wakefield’s problem, but Marx does not follow up this line of thought. It is another direction again to the turn taken by Marx from Wakefield, and by Harvey: capitalism’s colonisation should be seen as an expanding frontier of expropriation; what constitutes the capitalist mode of production mutates to exploit labour in different ways as it expands geographically, as it occupies new territories, and the land and peoples it ‘discovers’ there, subordinating them for its own purposes.

IV. Free Labour and Subjugated Labour at the Multiple Birth of Capitalism

The ‘original sin’ of capitalism was not one immaculate conception, it was multiple rape. The dispossession of the producer from their means of subsistence was not just one transition, at one place at one time in one way, but a series of struggles in many places, at many times and in many ways. It was a contradictory accumulation of transitions over a historical epoch. This is the argument sketched out by Immanuel Wallerstein who wrote not of one unique transition from feudalism to capitalism but many transitions by which the expanding capitalist world-economy both incorporated and rendered internal processes such as the ‘proletarianization of labour and commercialization of land’ (1976, 278). Wallerstein’s work founded the world system approach, which was largely coincident with many Latin American authors of the dependency school that crystallised independently in the late 1960s and 1970s.

In direct critical contrast, Robert Brenner insists that the birth of capitalist production took place specifically in the English agriculture around the sixteenth century (Brenner 1985). Basing his argument on a selective reading of Marx’s primitive accumulation chapters,

Brenner emphasises class structure, power relations and class struggle as the explanation over the alternative demographic model (population changes) and the commercialisation model (increased trade). He sees ‘surplus-extraction relations’ as conflictive property relations in a declining serfdom. Peasant resistance to feudal landowners resulted in some being expelled from ties to the landed estates, they became free labourers. Thus there arose an agrarian capitalism, involving a tripartite relation between landlord, capitalist tenant and wage labour that succeeded to replace serfdom in England, Brenner argues, because of its greater productivity. These conditions both freed up labour and created a home market,

“English economic development thus depended upon a nearly unique symbiotic relationship between agriculture and industry. It was indeed, in the last analysis, an agricultural revolution, based on the emergence of capitalist class relations in the countryside, which made it possible for England to become the first nation to experience industrialization” (1985, 54).

The issue to be addressed here is not the concrete analysis of how agrarian capitalism emerged in England, so much as the ontological inferences that Brenner and his school built from it, especially their downgrading of colonialism’s systemic role in a *further* centuries as a long running relationship that accelerated the movement from pre-industrial capitalism to manufacturing and then on to industrial capitalism (Brenner 1977)³.

Historical sequence does not confer logical priority of one phase over others in the final outcome. Yet Brenner selects one originating element in Marx’s synthetic account of the primitive accumulation of capital and magnifies its importance. Here Brenner is contrary to the internationalism of Marx. In Marx’s own account the combined effects of internal transitions and European colonialism are treated in a much more holistic manner. Notably in contrast to the developed capitalist mode of production itself, Marx does not specify any ‘laws of motion’ of the primitive accumulation of capital, but he nonetheless does, using Hegel’s idea here, point to the different elements of a systemic totality in movement:

“The different momenta of primitive accumulation distribute themselves now, more or less in chronological order, particularly over Spain, Portugal, Holland, France, and England. In England at the end of the 17th century, they arrive at a systematical combination, embracing the colonies, the national debt, the modern mode of taxation, and the protectionist system. These methods depend in part on brute force, *e.g.*, the colonial system. But, they all employ the power of the State, the concentrated and organised force of society, to hasten, hot-house fashion, the process of transformation of

³ The Brenner school sharpened its approach in opposition to world systems theory, the classic confrontation being between Brenner and Wallerstein. This is a debate that jumps around from one point of focus to another. The literature is expertly reviewed in Spanish by Astarita (2009 [1992]); (2010) who is sympathetic to Brenner, and in English by Tomich (2003), who is more sympathetic to Wallerstein. Banaji has made subtle contributions, critiquing both Wallerstein and Brenner (1983; 2013). Seabra (2015) provides a collection in Portuguese of contributions from the dependency perspective.

the feudal mode of production into the capitalist mode, and to shorten the transition” (1970, 703).

It hardly needs adding that by the end of the seventeenth century the Americas had already suffered two centuries of violent colonial wealth extraction, and that large parts of Africa and Asia as well as the Americas had by then been attacked by European expansionism. Thus for Marx the predatory colonial dimension was a part of the processes of primitive accumulation of capital taken as a whole. One does not need to argue that Spanish and Portuguese societies were already capitalist at the time of the conquest, rather that they had contradictions that gave birth to a capitalistic impulse, an expansionist project seeking to profit from conquest overseas. The external expression of these societies was that they most frankly and greedily sought precious metals as the universal bearer of value. The plundering egoism of the merchant class was freest of any constraints, obligations to the crown and the church only fuelled the conquest and the mercantile profiteering that proceeded to dominate the colonial economies.

We can now reflect on the distinction between the Brenner school and the dependency school, which articulates a different historical experience of the birth of capitalism that connects capitalism inseparably with colonial and neo-colonial extraction. One of the school’s most celebrated authors, Eduardo Galeano, identified in the *Open Veins* two different categories of labour, *free* labour and *subjugated* labour (1973, 147). This distinction is of course a broad generalisation, but it is one of cardinal importance. If the test of capitalist social relations is restricted narrowly to the emergence of ‘free labour’, then capitalism did not emerge in most parts of Latin America until well into the twentieth century, most typically around transport workers and other wage labourers involved in commodity export chains. If the test is subjugated labour, then we go right back to the years following the conquest onwards as early capitalist enterprises, as argued by dependency authors (Bagú 1949; Frank 1971).

The Brenner thesis is one of the more unrepentant expressions of euro-centric Marxism. Blaut critiques Brenner by looking at colonial relations in the seventeenth century, before the generalisation of manufacturing and clearly before the industrial revolution and factory production. Blaut argues ‘the key question is this: How central was the role played by colonial and semi-colonial enterprise in seventeenth century rise of Europe and the rise of capitalism within Europe?’ (1993,199; see also 1992, 1999). This question refers to a central tenet of the dependency thesis, that Europe became rich by extracting wealth from the Latin American colonies, thus at the same time actively impoverishing Latin America, and

furthermore that the colonial enterprises were a key mechanism of value transfer. We need then to analyse the mechanisms of production behind the value transfer, how colonised labour produced the value that ended up being transferred.

Could the hundreds of thousands of indigenous labourers put to task digging out Potosí, as evoked by Galeano and still part of the collective memory, be described as free labour? Of course not. The answer from the Brenner school is that because the silver miners were not free labour then by definition it could not have been capital that exploited them. They must have been exploited in a pre-capitalist relation. There is thus a tautology based on the simple identity that capitalism = wage labour. This concerns the form of employment of labour power, which is important in its own right, but stops there and does not enquire into the content of the exploitation relations even though not expressed in the form of wage labour. Wage labour is the simplest and most general form of the purchase of labour power in the capitalist mode of production, but it is not the only and exclusive form (Wallerstein 1976, 280).

The question resolves to this, how does subjugated labour fit into the theory of Marx? Neither Brenner nor Wallerstein answer this question satisfactorily, largely in my view because they do not engage critically with the theoretical problematic of labour's production of surplus value elaborated in the central chapters of *Capital* Volume 1. The primary candidate to take the analysis deeper must be the theory of surplus value. Brenner (1977, 30-31) takes from Marx's argument in *Capital* Volume 1 a sharp contrast between relative surplus value and absolute surplus value, and that capitalist production based on relative surplus value presupposes and follows on after production based on absolute surplus value. The Brenner school privileges 'free labour', because it is considered as more productive labour, producing relative surplus value through the employment of machinery. The upshot is that for Brenner capitalism is defined theoretically and politically based on the prevalence of relative surplus value, without including colonial exploitation as a necessary component. This fits in the Eurocentric tradition of identifying the essential characteristics of the system as a whole as only those features which were first or most prominently manifest in Europe. This false universalisation from the European experience leaves the manifestations of the birth of capitalism in the colonised world as particulars, and the nexus of colonial relations of exploitation as inessential to specifying the core relations of the mode of production. In this way the colonial manifestations of capital accumulation are relegated to the periphery of theory, and so there is an epistemological reproduction of the core-periphery, but in this case in a system of knowledge claiming Marxist heritage.

Just because a region produces commodities for the world market, argues Brenner, does not make it capitalist. Brenner characterises colonised Latin America as a pre-capitalist region. Compare this to the statement by Wallerstein of a capitalist system, not a mode of production, a definition in which the production of surplus value and the role of labour are left in the background. Brenner characterises world system theory as ignoring the social relations of production and hence being too ‘circulationist’ in its approach, that is overly concerned with the world market and commodity circulation, as opposed to the relations pertaining in commodity production. Wallerstein does however emphasise the international in the definition of capitalism, for he argues that capitalism starts with the formation of the world market. At least Wallerstein’s perspective allows for, although he does not provide, more substantive analysis of subjugated labour being surplus value producing. We therefore have two incomplete sides, both miss capitalism as a colonial international social relation of production in which different forms of exploited labour-power produce surplus value as an essential of the capitalist mode of production.

Another version of the question is re-posed in a classic debate concerning the next century, the eighteenth: was there a significant reinvestment of profits gained from slavery into early forms of industrial capitalism in England? The pioneering work of Eric Williams (1994 [1944]) responds to this question by point out various mechanisms of profit transfer, for which he gives extensive evidence, but he does not analyse the conditions of creation of these same profits. Williams’ innovation is that he treated slavery in international relation terms, but his limit is that the analysis is still not in value production terms, and this “conceptual fragmentation makes Williams vulnerable to his critics” as Dale Tomich notes (2011, 308). It is a fair criticism of Williams at least that he only makes a circulationist case.

In contrast to Williams, whilst also writing from the dependency perspective, Ruy Mauro Marini stands out as the author who does look at the social relations of production of subjugated labour in Latin America. Marini’s original contribution occupied the huge gap between the Brenner and the Wallerstein camps, the one giving priority to labour conditions in Europe and the other to the market relations of colonial extraction. The gap is evidently the political economy of colonised labour and its role in international value production. Marini’s grounding of unequal trade relations in labour super-exploitation in the colonies and former colonies remains the foundational breakthrough that opens up an entire field of conceptual development and critical analysis (Marini 1973)⁴.

⁴ For a summary in English see (Higginbottom, 2010).

As we proceed we will find Marini's concept of labour super-exploitation provides a vital means to analysing 'new world' slavery in historical materialist terms, in their relation to Marx's theory. Before reaching that point there are other aspects of the origins of capitalism under colonial conditions of exploitation that we need to draw into the picture.

V. What Class Turned Capitalist?

Each theoretical generation comes back to this argument between the internal and external origins of capitalism in terms set by its particular current challenges. The Brenner-Wallerstein debate was itself a reprise of an earlier exchange between Dobb and Sweezy concerning the emergence of capitalism. We explore this briefly to bring out another important aspect of the overall picture, which is through what class did capitalism emerge? What class turned to capitalist production? Here again we find a multiplicity of answers rather than one single defining experience.

In his study of the break-up of feudalism and the origins of capitalism in western Europe Maurice Dobb (1963) builds his theoretical structure around the distinction of two ways that capitalist production relations came into being drawn from Marx. The specific quote from Volume III of *Capital* reads:

“The transition from the feudal mode of production is two-fold. The producer becomes merchant and capitalist, in contrast to the natural agricultural economy and the guild-bound handicrafts of the mediaeval urban industries. This is the really revolutionary path. Or else, the merchant established direct sway over production. However much this serves historically as a stepping stone - witness the English seventeenth-century clothier, who brings the weavers, independent as they are, under his control by selling their wool to them and buying their cloth - it cannot by itself contribute to the overthrow of the old mode of production, but tends rather to preserve and retain it as its precondition” (Marx 1974, 334).

The first way was from below, the immediate producer such as an artisan or better off peasant becomes a capitalist. Procacci (1976, 137) exemplifies this process with the social base of Cromwell's New Model Army in England in the seventeenth century, demanding a fuller, more democratic political transition than Cromwell produced. The second way of transition into capitalism was decidedly from above. The example given here by Marx was the 'putting out' system whereby merchants controlled scattered wool weavers, who continued to work in their own household even though they were squeezed by capitalist pressure. As Marx points out the merchant's 'sway over production' was still quite limited at this point: domestically produced wool, the seventeenth century, in England.

To build an entire theoretical structure of the transition to capitalism around this one quote from Marx from a chapter concerning the historical facts about merchant's capital, is limiting historically and geographically. The result is an arbitrary narrowing of scope, and a limited understanding the sweep of transitions taking place to form early capitalism through a multiplicity of connected yet different paths. Evidence of Dobb's historical selectivity even as far as England is concerned comes from *Capital* Volume 1 Chapter 13 on Cooperation, where Marx explains that by the eighteenth century, and with variations by sector, the transition 'from above' began to take on different forms of division of labour in production. Colonial monopoly was a hothouse for domestic manufacture. The eighteenth century sees the English state combining mercantile trade and slavery as impulses to *manufacturing* production, which they protected from the competition of better and cheaper cotton goods from India, in an expanding system of colonial exploitation and capital accumulation (Inikori 2002).

Merchants becoming capitalists did so primarily by bringing together the producers into a workshop or similar unit of manufacture, by putting labourers to work in cooperation within labour processes under capital's direct command. The way that capitalism emerged 'from above' had moved from the scattered producers of the putting out system, which continued to persist alongside manufacture according to the sector. Significantly, Marx positions this material on the rise of manufacture not as a moment of primitive accumulation, but within his conceptual determinations of the capitalist mode of production *as such*, and builds its determinations around capital's direct appropriation of surplus value from the labourers employed. To emphasise, according to Chapter 13, an early yet distinctively capitalist mode of production was present and becoming generalised through the spread of manufacturing in England in the eighteenth century. The merchants turned manufacturers were by then clearly capitalist, and found their expression in the political economy of Adam Smith at the last point before industrialisation. The capitalists were not yet building factories, not yet using machines comprehensively, but they were directing labour processes that relied on an increasingly extensive and minute division of labour.

We come to the evident geographical selectivity of Dobb's theoretical construction. Western Europe's centuries long transition from feudalism to capitalism did not only occur on its own territories, colonisation was a major component of this process. In the colonies there was not an emergence of capitalism flowing 'spontaneously on the basis of the formal subsumption of labour under capital' (Marx 1976, 645), cited in (Brenner 1977, 31). To the contrary there was a world shattering rupture, violent conquest and occupation, a forced

march from many types of pre-capitalist society to early forms of capitalist production. That is, there was a *colonial* movement from the merchant to the capitalist which involved the appropriation of subjugated labour rather than free labour. There was a distinct colonial face of the merchant to capitalist transition which involved the exploitation of colonised and forced labour in the mines and on the plantations from the sixteenth century on that was based from the start on imposed forms of labour cooperation.

Furthermore the Latin American colonial experience of the transition into capitalism included a long interregnum in which the Europeans occupied the land and extracted indigenous labour tied to landed estates in semi-feudal manner, and from the white settler *latifundistas* and *hacendados* classes another, now fourth way of transition into capitalism emerged, and from a class not even mentioned in the above quotation from Marx. The fourth way of transition into capitalism was also from above, but through the colonially empowered *landowners* (neither the immediate producers, nor merchants) becoming commodity producers for export. The examples of this are many and become the main current in the period of neo-colonial informal empire of the nineteenth century on. Finally, for the sake of completeness for now, we can readily identify a fifth way also well known to Marx (1981, 808-9), and used as a point of contrast by Galeano, which was the white settlers of North America who were granted cheap land to become proto-capitalists based in the first instance on the labour of their families. This route of the small farmer becoming capitalist echoes the rich peasant way, but in a colonial setting of racial privilege based on the dispossession of the original immediate producers, fundamentally qualifying the claim that this way as democratic as a racially exclusionary ‘democracy’.

Summarising this section, in addition to the two paths that Dobb highlighted in England, we have identified at least three further ways that capitalist labour relations of production were established in the American colonies: from the colonial merchant turned capitalist, from the colonial landowner turned capitalist and from the colonial small farmer turned capitalist. Each of these paths involved different early forms of capitalist relations with colonised labour. From this prolonged prologue we now turn to the instalment of plantation slavery in the colonised ‘new world’.

VI. Plantation Slavery: the ‘genius’ of Columbus?

Among the many things that Columbus brought with him to help colonise was the *intent* to enforce labour in order to make profit. Columbus’ journal comment was ‘The Indians ...need only to be given orders to be made to work, to sow, or to do anything useful.’

16 December 1492. According to Chaunu such remarks ‘bear the mark of genius. After such a trial and amid such anxiety and uncertainty, he could show this lucidity and this unhurried attention’ (Solow 1987, 10).

Unhurried or not, Columbus will to command was *not* ‘genius’ – it was part of the social formation he carried with him across the ocean. He was already well acquainted with slave production for profit and it sat alongside the looting of precious metals as his primary motive. An orthodox text book records that Columbus,

“Married in 1480 with Felipa Moniz de Perestrello, daughter of Bartolomé Perestrello, discoverer of the Madeira ... [and] ... lived some time in the possessions that the Perestrello had in Puerto Santo” (Losada 1990, 20-22).

However, this sanitised version fails to record that Columbus’s father-in-law was in fact a slaveholder. In the years before he set sail, Columbus had been groomed in slaveholding. Indeed behind the individual figure lies an entire inter-generational process of formation, the transmission belt of slave plantations from the eastern Mediterranean to the Atlantic that was controlled by Italian merchants over three centuries. The westward movement dates from the Capture of Tyre from the Fatimids in 1123, ‘Venice proceeded to engage in the sugar industry that it found in its new possessions.’ Islands were preferred locations. From Crete and Cyprus ‘the Italians transferred the sugar-slave complex, which they had developed as a means of colonial exploitation, to Madeira, the Canaries, and the West African islands...to Sao Tome to Brazil and to the Caribbean’ (Solow 1987, 6). It was only once the sugar-slave complex reached Madeira, by the middle of the fifteenth century, that the Genoese began enslaving peoples from West Africa. ‘It was black slavery that was chiefly used in Madeiran sugar production’ writes Solow, who concludes that ‘the spread of the slave-sugar complex played a major role in the discovery and economic exploitation of America’ (1987, 6).

Capitalist slavery had arrived in the Americas with Columbus, it was not until the sugar plantation took hold that it really prospered. Lochardt and Schwartz reveal the sugar *engenho* in Brazil as a profit making engine, based on exploitation more complete and brutal is hard to imagine, these authors describe it as hell on earth. Slaves could replace their purchase price within three years and worked to death within six years, to be replaced by newly bought arrivals (1983, 218). There is no sense here of a mode of labour exploitation that is concerned to generate its own conditions of reproduction, in this sense we are not yet at the developed capitalist mode of production. The *engenho* was a system that had no need for children, to buy a new adult labourer from the slave traders was cheaper than to raise

them. And so the voracious appetite for profit in the Americas continued the depredation of Africa, for three centuries and more.

As Moreno Fraginals (1976) details in the case of Cuba, the sugar plantation went through a series of transitions both in its technical basis, especially concerning the mechanisation of sugar manufacture, and in the supply of labour. The slave plantations were set up in order to accumulate capital, by adapting a 'primitive' form of obtaining their labour supply. European merchant capital did not only steal goods from other societies, it stole live human beings from the African continent and forced them to work to death in the Americas. Merchant capital moved out of circulation and into the realm of production to expand itself. In this respect the slave plantations were an advanced point, an anticipation of how the more developed forms of capitalism would operate as a mode of production, in that labour power was a commodity that had been obtained solely because it was the source of surplus value and hence profit.

VII. Theorising Plantation Slavery: moving beyond the impasse

The primitive accumulation of capital involves different processes, one is direct looting of resources that are then sold as commodities for profit, this is what the *conquistadors* and the Atlantic slave traders did; another is putting the enslaved Africans to work, creating surplus value to be realised and spent as revenue or accumulated as capital. The various processes that Marx summarised as the primitive accumulation of capital were not all pre-capitalist, rather they constituted capitalism in its becoming, the early stages of capitalism as a mode of production. The processes were the original accumulation of *capital*. The slave plantations from the beginning demonstrating major characteristics of capitalist enterprise: the purchase of labour power, setting enslaved labour to work in order to produce commodities for sale, and the realisation of a profit. How then do we conceptualise enslaved African labour in terms of the production of value and surplus value?

What is at issue here is not so much the description of slave plantations as work to death camps, but testing the limits and adequacy of Marx's concepts as applied to those conditions. In her analysis of the Jamaica plantation Abigail Bakan rightly argues that

“The critical feature in defining the capitalist mode of production in the historical sense is not the presence of wage labour as a phenomenon, but the *social relationship* between wage labour and capital. The distinct feature of the wage labour form is not primarily how it is paid for, but that it stands, in Marx's terms, as 'capital-positing, capital-producing labour'”(1987, 77).

Bakan also rightly distinguishes different uses by Marx of the term capitalist ‘mode of production’, which she designates as either the entirety or the particular, in which ‘each historical instance is a distinct "mode"’. From this dual definition of mode of production, a dichotomy between the historical and the technical follows:

“Jamaican slavery can be identified as part of the general historic epoch during which capitalism became predominant as a ‘mode of production’ on a world scale. Yet the specific form of labour exploitation was not marked by the wage labour/capital relationship. In the *technical* sense of the concept, Jamaican plantation slavery therefore cannot be considered to be a capitalist "mode of production”. (1987, 74).

And again, the theoretical framework

“must point out not only the similarities between slave and free labour in the capitalist mode of production in the historical sense, but also the features which differentiate them from one another as modes of production in the technical sense” (1987, 85).

Depending on how one defines the capitalist mode of production, slavery is part of it, or not. It is at this point the analysis peters out, for Bakan has reached an impasse, from which there is no escape within the premises of the argument. Bakan takes seriously the question of slavery’s correspondence with surplus value and searches for a theoretical grounding, “Plantation production was based on absolute surplus value, though it differed from the classic form Marx describes in *Capital*” (1987, 74).

Bakan gives a well articulated version of a standard Marxist view. She recognises the need for an analysis of non-wage labor in the capitalist mode of production, but only modifies Marx’s existing categories marginally rather than moving beyond them in a necessary determination. *The production of surplus value by enslaved labour cannot be fully understood by the two categories of absolute surplus value and primitive accumulation alone*, for two major reasons. In the first place, as Moreno Fraginals (1976) demonstrates, the production of sugar involved increasing labour productivity; that is relative surplus value is also necessarily part of the valorisation process on the slave plantation. Secondly, to resolve the conceptual impasse a further determination is needed.

What is missing between two senses of mode of production presented as the universal and the particular is the intermediate concept of *mode of exploitation*, a concept present embryonically in Marx in his contrast of the slavery of antiquity with modern capitalism (1981, 923). Slavery as a mode of exploitation was qualitatively different to wage labour and cannot be reduced to it without eliding the racial oppression involved. The enslavement of African labour had specific characteristics within the capitalist mode of production (in the broad sense); with its own contradictions. The enslaved labourer did not own their labour-

power, they were owned and sold by another. The commodification of their labour power involved the capture of their body and the commodification of their entire being, including the capacity to labour. The enslaved labourer's entire life, not only their working life, was lived under the racial domination of the exploiting class.

If not a combination of primitive accumulation and absolute surplus value, in what theoretical terms was the plantation system a capitalist labour process? Plantation slavery was a colonial form of cooperation adopted in the period of capitalist manufacture that had many similarities as well as crucial differences with it. Marx sums up the chapter on cooperation as follows:

“In the simple shape, as investigated so far, co-operation is a necessary concomitant of all production on a large scale, but it does not, in itself, represent a fixed form characteristic of a particular epoch in the development of the capitalist mode of production. At the most it appears to do so, and that only approximately, in the handicraft-like beginnings of manufacture, and in that kind of large-scale agriculture, which corresponds to the period of manufacture, and is distinguished from peasant agriculture, mainly by the number of the workers simultaneously employed, and the mass of the means of production concentrated for their use. Simple co-operation has always been, and continues to be the prevailing form, in those branches of production in which capital operates on a large scale, and division of labour and machinery play but a subordinate part” (1976, 453-4).

We have seen that the first appearance of the capitalist mode of production in manufacturing, occurred in sixteenth – eighteenth century. Marx shows that cooperation between labourers in the labour process, the creation of the collective workforce, can have major advantages for capital over leaving the work to be carried out by fragmented individual labourers. In the first place bringing the workforce together in simple cooperation, even when the workers each do the same kind of work, can create advantages in terms of labour productivity.

Beyond that, in industries where critical moments occur, such as at harvest time, cooperation allows for a ‘large mass of labour to be thrown into the field of production’ (Marx 1976, 445). Marx points out that the twofold nature of capitalist direction of social labour – ‘on the one hand, a social process for the creation of a product, and on the other capital’s process of valorization’ (1976, 450) means it must be despotic. Even as wage – labourers the workers cooperation is not voluntary. Marx identifies two forms of division of labour in the manufacturing system, depending on the nature of the article produced. The concept of increasing relative surplus value therefore does not depend exclusively on machine production, but rests initially on reorganisation of the labour process under capitalist direction. Moreover, it is clear that Marx distinguishes two forms of the capitalist mode of

production, and two periods in its history, precisely around this point. This is the transition from manufacture (Chapter 14) to machinery and large scale industry (Chapter 15).

Many of these insights can be applied with appropriate modification to the analysis of plantation slavery in its different forms. Except cooperation in the labour effort took place on the premise of force at every step and in every sinew (Craon, 1974). Marx designates the separation of the mental and the manual as a product of the division of labour in manufacture. The further special product of the division of labour on the plantation was the separation of the overseeing parties who would perpetrate violence and those who received it. The calculated use of force was a constant lever in production.

This argument has already been made in more detail in the work of Sidney Mintz, who writes:

‘The seventeenth century was preindustrial; and the idea that there might have been “industry” on the colonial plantation before it existed in the homeland may seem heretical. First, it has been conceived of as predominantly agricultural because it was a colonial enterprise and manned mostly by coerced, rather than free, labor.... It may seem a topsy-turvy view of the West to find its factories elsewhere at so early a period. But the sugar-cane plantation is gradually winning recognition as an unusual combination of agricultural and industrial forms, and I believe it was probably the closest thing to industry that was typical of the seventeenth century’. (1985, 48)

The one difference I have with this is to lower the claim, to deliberately align it to manufacture in Marx’s terminology rather than the factory.

Labour productivity in an agricultural context involves another aspect, the fertility of the land appropriate to the crop, what this means for capitalist surplus value production. Plantation owners sought to increase productivity by moving to new lands, either on the same island or on new territories.

VIII. Conclusion

The becoming of industrial capitalism from pre-capitalism passes through both the manufacturing workshop and the slave plantation. The availability of colonised, subjugated and enslaved labour was, just as much as free labour, a presupposition of the capitalist mode of production. The original sin of colonial capitalism was two-fold: violent plunder, the plain robbery of accumulated wealth; followed up by ruptures that tore labourers away from their homelands and communities and threw them into labour *for the purpose* of their exploitation. The combination of profit making and force renders colonial slave enterprises open to conflicting interpretations. On the one hand, the systematic use of force by the masters on the

enslaved could disallow the relation to be considered capitalist; on the other hand the formation of the relation was clearly impelled by the profit motive.

The social relation between plantation master and the enslaved Africans in the Americas was forged under conditions of a colonial capital accumulation. The enslaved labourers produced value and surplus value through commodity production. Plantation slavery is best interpreted within a Marxist framework as form of colonial capitalist enforced 'cooperation', with many features similar to manufacture, but with the key distinction of racial violence that has the purpose of even more exploitation through domination. Sugar plantation slavery is here considered akin to the manufacturing workshop in England, an early form of capitalism with a single point of command and a division of labour set in motion to accumulate capital, although still not yet with the generalised use of machines. The plantation was not quite the factory in the field, rather the workshop in the field.

For this reason it is not enough to leave the theoretical definition of plantation slavery outside the internal relations of the capitalist mode of production, as an element of the original accumulation of capital, or as a pre-capitalist form as does Brenner. The form has to be analysed in terms of value production and surplus value expropriation. Although Marx did not make this analysis, he provides us with the tools and methodology to do so. But we also reached the limits of a literal application of Marx to the problem.

We have shown how selective readings of Marx are used to validate a Eurocentric reading. However we have not yet solved the problem beyond that critique. Within the conceptual framework of *Capital I* there remains a problem which is the limitation of the concept of surplus value to absolute surplus value and relative surplus value. I have argued that on the one hand the enslavement of Africans was an early form of the capital labour relation, hence of the production of surplus value, and yet on the other hand the categories of surplus value from Marx are in and of themselves insufficient to explain the relation. If we are to use Marx it must be in a modified way. Based on the work of Marini, I have opened up the argument that as a mode of labour exploitation plantation slavery combined absolute surplus value, relative surplus value and intense labour within an envelope of violent *racial super-exploitation* of the workforce.

For close on four centuries enslaved Africans in the Americas produced value and surplus value for the Europe centred world capitalist system. This essential truth concerning racial capitalism should be beyond denial.

From this analysis I suggest a reversal of Robin Blackburn's view that slavery was an 'extended primitive accumulation' lasting well into the nineteenth century (1997: 572), rather plantation slavery was an early if particular form of capitalist super-exploitation, from the sixteenth century on. The length of extension is not in issue, it is the connotation of primitive accumulation that is misleading. Adapting the more apposite term 'para-industrial', also from Blackburn (1988, 520), the capitalist colonial slavery mode of exploitation corresponded to a form of *para-manufacture* that did indeed persist over centuries as a node of value production within mercantile and then industrial capitalist systems.

We will see further that subjugated or super-exploited labour in the Americas is not only an artefact of the original accumulation of capital that is later converted into free labour under the wage form, rather it is a continuing essential feature of the capitalist mode of production, which is reproduced as capitalism reproduces its class relations on a world scale.

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Enslaved African Labour in the Americas: from primitive accumulation to manufacture with racial violence

Abstract

This paper reconceptualises Marx's value theory in an analysis of the enslavement of African Americans as a part of the capitalist mode of production with its own special characteristics. Synthesising from the literature, I argue that sugar plantation slavery from the sixteenth into the nineteenth century had a dual relation concerning the debate over primitive accumulation vs. capitalism from the start. The plantation did represent an early form of specifically capitalist production, in that the enslaved African's labour power was purchased in order to create new surplus value in the production of commodities, but also relying on continual European looting of Africa to provide that labour power. The paper addresses the gap between two conventional Marxist readings of the relation between capitalism and the enslavement of Africans. The first reading sees slavery as part of the process of primitive accumulation of capital, the 'original sin' of dispossession. The second reading sees capitalism as such as exclusively based on the exploitation of 'free' wage labour as its general condition. The paper provides a third interpretation that sees enslavement as a racialised mode of exploitation with a division of labour similar to manufacture. This approach demonstrates continuities as well as changes from sugar plantation slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean on to cotton slavery in the US South.

Keywords: Primitive Accumulation – Enslaved African Labour – Marx Value Theory – Latin America

Trabalho Escravo Africano nas Américas: a violência racial da acumulação primitiva à manufatura

Resumo

Este artigo re-conceitualiza a teoria do valor de Marx em uma análise da escravização dos afro-americanos como parte do modo de produção capitalista com suas próprias características especiais. Sintetizando a partir da literatura, defendo que a escravidão das plantações de cana dos séculos XVI a XIX tinha uma relação dual a respeito do debate sobre a acumulação primitiva versus o capitalismo desde o início. A *plantation* representou uma forma primitiva de produção especificamente capitalista, na qual a força de trabalho africana escravizada foi comprada para criar nova mais-valia na produção de mercadorias, mas também contando com a contínua pilhagem europeia da África para fornecer essa força de trabalho. O artigo aborda a lacuna entre duas leituras marxistas convencionais sobre a relação entre o capitalismo e a escravização dos africanos. A primeira leitura vê a escravidão como parte do processo de acumulação primitiva do capital, o "pecado original" da expropriação. A segunda leitura vê o capitalismo como tal exclusivamente baseado na exploração do trabalho assalariado "livre" como condição geral. O artigo fornece uma terceira interpretação que vê a escravização como um modo racializado de exploração com uma divisão do trabalho semelhante à manufatura. Essa abordagem demonstra continuidades e mudanças da escravidão na América Latina e no Caribe para a escravidão do algodão no sul dos EUA.

Palavras-chave: Acumulação Primitiva – Trabalho Escravo Africano – Teoria do Valor de Marx – América Latina

Trabajo Esclavo Africano en las Américas: la violencia racial de la acumulación primitiva a la manufactura

Resumen

Este artículo reconceptualiza la teoría del valor de Marx en un análisis de la esclavización de los afroamericanos como parte del modo de producción capitalista con sus propias características especiales. Sintetizando desde la literatura, argumento que la esclavitud en las *plantations* de azúcar desde el siglo dieciséis hasta el siglo diecinueve tuvo una relación de duelo con respecto al debate sobre la acumulación

primitiva frente al capitalismo desde el principio. La *plantation* representó una forma primitiva de producción específicamente capitalista, en la que se compraba la fuerza de trabajo africana esclavizada para crear una nueva plusvalía en la producción de mercancías, pero también se basaba en el saqueo europeo continuo de África para proporcionar esa fuerza de trabajo. El artículo aborda la brecha entre dos lecturas marxistas convencionales de la relación entre el capitalismo y la esclavización de los africanos. La primera lectura ve a la esclavitud como parte del proceso de acumulación primitiva de capital, el "pecado original" de la desposesión. La segunda lectura ve al capitalismo como tal basado exclusivamente en la explotación del trabajo asalariado "libre" como su condición general. El documento proporciona una tercera interpretación que ve a la esclavitud como un modo racializado de explotación con una división del trabajo similar a la fabricación. Este enfoque demuestra las continuidades y los cambios de la esclavitud de las plantaciones de azúcar en América Latina y el Caribe en la esclavitud del algodón en el sur de los Estados Unidos.

Palabras-clave: Acumulación Primitiva – Trabajo Esclavo Africano – Teoría del Valor de Marx – América Latina