

## Applying Critical Rationalism to Liberal Capitalism

Raphael Sassower 

Professor of Philosophy at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs (UCCS). E-mail: [rsassowe@uccs.edu](mailto:rsassowe@uccs.edu)

### Article Info

**Article type:**

Research Article

**Article history:**

Received 30 January 2023

Received in revised form 22

April 2023

Accepted 14 May 2023

Published online 18 June 2023

**Keywords:**

Critical Rationalism, Karl Popper, Karl Marx, Slavery, Capitalism, Critique

### ABSTRACT

Since Critical Rationalism is considered by some more of an attitude or mindset and by others a methodological approach to philosophical thinking and practical problem-solving, its application, or more accurately, its epistemological testing grounds, should be expected to be much more wide-ranging than they have been so far. With the exception of some published anthologies on Critical Rationalism and occasional nods to the legacy of Karl Popper’s falsificationist methodology, relatively few applications of a critical rational approach to contemporary theoretical debates in the social sciences have been published. I wish here to critically challenge the (optimistic) Hegelian and by extension the neoliberal view of the progress of American capitalism by reframing it with the Marxian notion of expropriation as applied to enslavement on plantations. The logic of enslavement as a process by which brutal exploitation has been practiced for centuries offers a falsifying test case of the rationality of capitalism and its promise of individual freedom of choice. This essay is an explicit exercise in the potential power of a version of Popperian critical rationalism being applied to the intersection of modern liberalism and capitalism, exploring the imbrication of a critical and rational analysis.

**Cite this article** Sassower, R. (2023). Applying Critical Rationalism to Liberal Capitalism: *Journal of Philosophical Investigations*, 17(42), 225-241. <http://doi.org/10.22034/jpiut.2023.16585>



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<http://doi.org/10.22034/jpiut.2023.16585>

Publisher: University of Tabriz

## Preamble

Since Critical Rationalism is considered by some more of an attitude or mindset and by others a methodological approach to philosophical thinking and practical problem-solving, its application, or more accurately, its epistemological testing grounds, should be expected to be much more wide-ranging than they have been so far. With the exception of a published anthology here and there on Critical Rationalism<sup>1</sup> and the occasional nod to the legacy of Karl Popper's falsificationist methodology, relatively little energy has been devoted to applying a critical rational approach to contemporary theoretical debates in the social sciences<sup>2</sup>. Recalling Marc Antony's speech, I come neither to bury Popper nor to praise him, for hero-worship is philosophically unbecoming. I therefore eschew a review of the literature that has explicitly embraced this philosophical approach to problem-solving within the Popperian edifice. Instead, I wish to critically challenge the (optimistic) Hegelian and by extension the neoliberal view of the progress of American capitalism by reframing it with the Marxian notion of expropriation as applied to enslaved blacks in Southern plantations. The logic of enslavement as a process by which brutal exploitation has been practiced for centuries offers a falsifying test case of the rationality of capitalism and its promise of individual freedom of choice. Why bring Karl Marx to a Popperian ball? For those who forget, critical engagement must be worthy of the honor bestowed on its object, as Popper exemplifies in his praise for Marx's "sincerity" and "honesty," while still considering him a "false prophet"<sup>3</sup>. One could argue that the critical respect Popper accords Marx is no different from the critical respect Marx accords Adam Smith and other classical political economists. This essay, then, is an explicit exercise in the potential power of a version of Popperian critical rationalism as applied to the intersection of modern liberalism and capitalism, exploring the imbrication of a critical and rational analysis. To be an irrational critic is tantamount to throwing the baby with the bathwater; to be an uncritical rationalist is to remain dogmatically blind.

## I: The False Promises of Liberalism

The liberal tradition in its myriad iterations promised individual freedom from the oppression of others, may they be royals, government functionaries and agencies, or religious institutions. Promoters of the liberal spirit, at least in the United States, saw in the 20<sup>th</sup> century a tripartite constellation of historical phenomena that threatened the rise of liberalism since the 17<sup>th</sup> century: the Bolshevik Revolution and its ensuing Stalinist regime, the rise of fascism during and in between the two World Wars, and the evolution of a welfare state

1 The best one to date is Joseph Agassi and Ian C. Jarvie, eds. *Rationality: The Critical View*. Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987. In their Preface they say: "These two contributions of Popper—to the rational foundations of science and to the foundations of the critical rationalist outlook—have generated two lines of debate." For them, at the very least, "rationality as the dialectic of interrogation" and the choice to be "critical as much as possible" are juxtaposed in a way that admits that the choice "cannot itself be rationally justified without thereby being open to the charge of begging the question," itself a critical rational approach to the critical rational "outlook."

2 See, for example, Charlotte Sleight, "The Abuses of Popper," *Aeon* (2/16/21); available: <https://aeon.co/essays/how-popperian-falsification-enabled-the-rise-of-neoliberalism>; accessed: 10/27/22.

3 See specifically, Popper's wording at the beginning of Ch. 13 of *The Open Society and Its Enemies, Vol. II*: "There can be no doubt of the humanitarian impulse of Marxism ... Marx made an honest attempt to apply *rational methods* to the most urgent problems of social life ... A return to pre-Marxian social science is inconceivable. All modern writers are indebted to Marx, even if they do not know it... One cannot do justice to Marx without recognizing his sincerity... His sincerity in his search for truth and his intellectual honesty distinguish him, I believe, from many of his followers" (1962, 81-2; italics added).

with Social Security, Medicare, and other welfare safety nets. The threat of fascism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was the bedrock on which the vitriolic rhetoric of the Cold War rested on both sides of the Atlantic, a rhetoric that warned of the potential loss of individual rights and power (as obviously was the case in the USSR, China, Cuba, and other so-called Communist States) the legitimacy of which rests for Americans on the *Constitution* and for Europeans on the constitutional monarchy of the United Kingdom and the French *Rights of Man and the Citizen*.

In this first section, I plan to briefly survey four thinkers whose critical appreciation of the subversive danger of liberal demagoguery reminds us of its inevitable slide into the conservative fold and even white supremacy. However different from Popper's war effort in the *Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945), they examine the historical conditions under which individual liberty is promoted and communal solidarity is demoted (as perhaps a morally slippery slope toward collective decision-making processes, planned economy, and the sacrifice of the individual for the sake of the State). I should hasten to add that my reach to sources outside the Popperian enclave is intentional: I hope to extend Popper's critical rational outlook (as explicitly charted in Ch. 24 of the *Open Society*) and apply it to the specific case of liberal capitalism as conceived in the past decade or so without resorting to his own texts. Since some of this ground has been covered elsewhere (Sassower 2006), it seems to me that if the Popperian spirit of critical rationalism is to have a future, it should not be limited to exegesis of his works among disciples, but see its applicability cast more broadly and perhaps more problematically for more orthodox or timid Popperians. Though careful to carve a small but essential role for the State, critical rationalists of the mid and late-20<sup>th</sup> century insisted on the centrality of individual preferences and choices as much in their personal as in their economic and political domains<sup>1</sup>. The political sphere soon became the guardian not against corporate greed (that disregarded exogenous costs to the environment, for example, or product safety) but instead for the expansion of producer, consumer, and citizen rights.

In his lectures in 1978-9, Michel Foucault was using the American turn to neoliberalism as a way of understanding how the political liberal ideal about the freedom of individuals in their personal and communal affairs became a rallying cry for applying the discourse of economic analysis to every facet of human life. Anticipating the seismic shift from and a reaction to the legislation of the New Deal after the Great Depression (a Keynesian framework for government intervention to stimulate the economy) by the Reagan Administration in the 1980s to a less intrusive State and a logic of productivity, efficiency, and unbounded growth, Foucault's prescient lectures not only foresaw the economizing of everything but also the ensuing commodification of humans as "human capital" worthy of investment (in the form of education and certification) and monetized in the workplace in terms of ROIs (return on investment), thinking along the Chicago School about voting with wallets (choosing how to spend one's money and who to support for office)<sup>2</sup> rather than only at the ballot box (and reminiscent of Marx's original insights about what commodities represented<sup>3</sup>). In a sense, the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is so infused with and relies on

1 See both of Austrian School pillars, Friedrich Hayek (1944), *The Road to Serfdom*. London: Routledge; and Ludwig von Mises (1979), *Economic Policy: Thoughts for Today and Tomorrow*. London: Regnery/Gateway.

2 See in this context, Milton Friedman (1980), *Free to Choose*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

3 See, for example, chapter 1 of *Capital*, where Marx says: "But the value of a commodity represents human labour in the abstract, the expenditure of human labour in general" (1867: 32), referring to the abstraction associated with human labor-power. He continues: "A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a *very queer thing*, abounding in *metaphysical subtleties and theological*

the logic of the marketplace that whatever the problem, its solutions are furnished almost exclusively in financial terms<sup>1</sup>.

As far as Foucault is concerned, the neoliberal turn is no historical anachronism reverting nostalgically back to Adam Smith's imagined Scottish village, a place where the State sets aside a sphere of operation large enough for markets to thrive. Instead, the State becomes itself a marketplace, where policy decisions follow the logic of late capitalism and where this logic expunges the political foundations that preserved and protected the dignity and rights of citizens<sup>2</sup>. The focus on the individual turns into a focus on an enterprising individual, and inter alia on enterprising units. In Foucault's words: "An economy made up of enterprise-units, a society made up of enterprise-units, is at once the principle of decipherment linked to liberalism and its programming for the rationalization of a society and an economy" (2008: 225). At stake is a way of thinking about organizing the State and not only its marketplace, thinking about people in what he terms "biopolitics," which is an attempt to "rationalize the problems posed to governmental practice by phenomena characteristic of a set of living beings forming a population, health, hygiene, birthrate, life expectancy, race..." (2008: 317). Without going into further details, it becomes clear from Foucault's analysis that in the name of the promised liberal spirit of individual freedom from the burdens of the State, individuals have been turned into dehumanized units of economic calibration under constant surveillance.

Following critically in Foucault's footsteps, Wendy Brown laments the neoliberal "stealth revolution" and its concomitant danger to the democratic ideals that include liberty, equality, and solidarity. In her words, "neoliberal rationality's ascendance imperils the ideal, imaginary, and political project of democracy" because of its infiltration into all domains of human interactions and undermines any sense of solidarity. More specifically, she continues, there are "concrete policies that dismantle social infrastructure, privatize public goods, deregulate commerce, destroy social solidarities, and responsabilize subjects" (2015: 201). This last phrase, "responsibilize subjects" in the active sense takes on extra meaning in the biopolitical neoliberal order insofar as responsibility is thrust onto the individual level where people should be taking care of their health and wellbeing and ensuring they are productive members of society. Given their free choices, it is up to them to beware of the hazards strewn about by corporate negligence and greed. The deregulated marketplace shifts the responsibility from corporations to individuals, while the State is expected to provide free access to its infrastructure and minimize its oversight responsibility (upending the liberal faith espoused since the Enlightenment). In the name of "neutrality," argues Brown, "liberal democratic ideals of personhood, freedom, and equality appear universal while being saturated with norms of bourgeois white male heterosexual familialism. This is but one reason why the historically excluded, long

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*niceties*. So far as it is a value in use, there is nothing *mysterious* about it, whether we consider it from the point of view that by its properties it is capable of satisfying human wants, or from the point that those properties are the product of human labour" (1867: 47; italics added). Marx's realization that a commodity is never just a commodity illustrates what a century later becomes a standard economic thinking suffused with financial vocabulary that rests on a fetishized logic of exchange (transactional) relationships.

1 See Richard B. Norgaard "Economism and the Econocene: a coevolutionary interpretation," *Real World Economics* Issue no. 87, 2019, pp. 164-183.

2 Here is Foucault's language: "the problem of neo-liberalism was not how to cut out or contrive a free space of the market within an already given political society, as in the liberalism of Adam Smith... The problem of neo-liberalism is rather how the overall exercise of political power can be modeled on the principles of a market economy. So it is not a question of freeing an empty space, but of taking the formal principles of a market economy and referring and relating them to, of projecting them on to a general art of government" (2008, 131).

after political enfranchisement, have yet to achieve substantive equality and belonging” (2015: 205). The kind of bourgeois abstraction in the name of universality claimed by European Enlightenment promoters erased and encased, as Marx already understood: individual laborers were seen through the prism of their labor power while the “individual” was racialized and gendered<sup>1</sup>. This contentious point has been lingering for over a century, recognized only on the intellectual and academic margins when democratic institutions, as has been the case in the United States since the 2016 presidential election, have been undermined.

The economization of the political sphere under the banner of “neoliberal political rationality” runs the risk of “vanquishing of *homo politicus* by *homo oeconomicus*,” that is, “eliminat[ing] the very idea of the *demos*” (2015: 207). The problem is no longer the evisceration of the political sphere and the ideals by which it is meant to be governed, according to Brown, but an insistence on changing the way liberal democracy is conceptualized and administered<sup>2</sup>. What is at stake is the loss of the ideals of democracy once “market values become the only values” to be considered worthy of political protection and promotion or when “liberal democracy is fully transformed into market democracy” (2015: 208). One need only recall the devastating consequences of the US Supreme Court’s ruling in *Citizens United v Federal Election Commission* (2010)<sup>3</sup> which replaced the common understanding of the Greek notion of the *demos* as “ordinary citizens, common people from a district, in a city-state” with a notion of individual freedom of speech rights granted to multi-billion dollar corporate entities whose financial support for candidates and ballot issues easily tips the balance disproportionately in their favor. In its turn, the so-called protection of individual rights in elections as the bellwether of democracy has been subverted so that any sense of equality (one person, one vote) is relinquished. In the name of a principled judicial decision posturing as respect for an expansive individual rights, a travesty of electoral fairness is being perpetrated on an already underrepresented and racially segregated portion of the population that is expected to respect the same constitution.

Though the demise of the liberal spirit in American politics has become more visible in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the concomitant increase of wealth and income inequality, its entanglement with capitalism dates back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. As Domenico Losurdo argues, however much Holland, Britain, and the United States “claimed to be beacons of democracy and the liberal spirit,” they simultaneously had a “tenacious attachment to the institution of slavery” (2014: 16ff). Whether the antecedents of enslavement on both sides of the Atlantic were modeled on the “systematic expropriation and practical genocide first of the Irish and then of the Indians” or on ancient enslavement practices (2014: 20), the colonial-settler feature of modern capitalism drew intellectual support from the European philosophers and thinkers, such as John Locke. More

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1 See, for example, Tyler Stovall (2021), *White Freedom: The Racial History of an Idea*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

2 In Brown’s words: “Economization replaces a political lexicon with a market lexicon. Governance replaces a political lexicon with a management lexicon. The combination transforms the democratic promise of shared rule into the promise of enterprise and portfolio management at the individual and collective level. In place of citizens sharing and contesting power, the resulting order emphasizes, at best, consensus achieved through stakeholder consultation, focus groups, best practices, and teamwork. The unruliness of democracy is stifled by a form of governing that is soft and total” (2015, 208).

3 On January 21, 2010, the Supreme Court issued a ruling in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* overruling an earlier decision, [Austin v. Michigan State Chamber of Commerce](#) that restricted funding by corporations. The Court also overruled the part of [McConnell v. Federal Election Commission](#) that disallowed corporations from making electioneering communications.

specifically, Locke's inspiration for the nascent American democratic experiment is at odds with his "having an interest in the slave trade as shareholder in the Royal African Company" and his concern for "the white colonists' expansionist march as secretary (in 1673-74) of the Council of Trade and Plantations" (2014: 24). In Losurdo's "counter-history," liberalism and racial slavery came into existence and thrived simultaneously. The blatant hypocrisy, if not outright contradiction, between liberalism defined as "every individual's equal enjoyment of a private sphere of liberty guaranteed by law" (2014: 95) with an attendant non-compromising rejection of any central authority (monarchy in Europe and the Empire or Federal government after the revolution) and insistence on self-governance<sup>1</sup> (2014: 141) and racial enslavement as part of capitalist global expansion can only be explained by the fact that the liberal spirit, however universalized, remained applicable to white people only, expanding from property owners to all white citizens and excluding blacks and slaves in the process (2014: 144ff). If liberty can be applied only to mature human beings and if blacks are considered immature or "barbarians," then of course their freedom is not what is at stake for liberalism in either Europe or the Americas (2014: 225).

The universalization of liberalism and democracy was limited to European whites at home and in their colonies and therefore might be more accurately labeled "*Herrenvolk* democracy," a master-race democracy, one that undermines the ideal of liberalism broadly construed (2014: 107, 320-1). The American colonies not only failed to adhere to the spirit of liberalism, but established in its stead what Charles Mills calls "racial liberalism." For Mills, the failure of liberalism in modernity was not its "abstraction as such" or the appeal to idealized universal standards (already seen in Hegel and criticized by Marx), but a very specific "problematic mode of idealizing abstraction" that in its process of abstracting "abstracts away from social oppression, and in that way, both conceals its extent and inhibits the development of the conceptual tools necessary for understanding and dealing with its workings" (2017: xv). This kind of intentional abstracting avoids dealing with the "hard facts of class, gender, and racial oppression" (2017: xviii). It would be one thing to simply avoid or ignore such "hard facts," but when this deliberate ignorance serves as the foundation or "actual architecture" of the so-called "liberal state," it in fact sanctions "the wrongful transfer of wealth and opportunities from people of color to whites" (2017: xix). In short, the credibility of the liberal spirit falls apart when its real-world political manifestations endorse extractive modes of capitalist production. Was the entanglement of liberalism with capitalism and the accompanying entanglement of capitalism with slavery coincidental or much more essential than apologists for liberalism are willing to admit? One neoliberal retort (relying on Adam Smith's comments about slavery in his *An Inquiry into the Nature and Cause of the Wealth of Nations*, 1776, Book I, Ch. 8) suggests that enslavement is more costly than wage-labor because of the costs associated with "the wear and tear of a slave," but this thesis has been falsified by Edward Baptist's research, as seen below.

## II: The Scandalous Necessity of Slavery for Capitalism

Unlike earlier forms of slavery already established in the ancient world, where enslavement's temporality related to debts or conquest, the American variant of hereditary Chattel Slavery decreed that slaves were

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<sup>1</sup> Losurdo also argues in this context that "in both Bismarck and Marx we witness a distinction between a liberalism inclined to consecrate the self-government of a civil society hegemonized by the feudal aristocracy or grand bourgeoisie, and a liberalism ready to intervene in the relations of domination and oppression that manifest themselves within civil society itself" (2014, 281).

owned by their masters as personal property with rights of ownership extending to their progeny<sup>1</sup>. It remains unclear if slavery in general and Chattel Slavery in particular provide the sufficient conditions for the success of capitalism, however irrational this thesis may appear at first. Even if slavery is necessary but not sufficient for the development of capitalism, it is definitely sufficient for the indictment of an economic system that claims as its rational core equality and liberty within the fertile political ground of democracy. One answer to the question about the necessity of slavery for the establishment, development, and success of capitalism appears already in Marx's *Capital* (Vol. I: 1867), another in Eric Williams' *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944), and a third in Edward Baptist's *The Half Has Never Been Told* (2014). Though different in their respective analysis, these authors indict not only the American machination of capitalism since the inception of the American republic, but also falsify the lofty pretensions with which classical 18<sup>th</sup> century market capitalism was promoted as the true expression of the ideals of liberalism. Contemporary attempts by neoliberal ideologists to justify wealth and income inequality, as Thomas Piketty's *Capital and Ideology* (2020) illustrates, fall short of critically questioning whether hereditary chattel slavery was a necessary and/or sufficient condition for the success of the American variant of capitalism. Instead, they debate the extent to which chattel slavery's functional features do or do not resemble a capitalist mode of production (surplus extraction, dominance in social relations, and the commodification of laborers).

In *The Poverty of Philosophy*, the response to Proudhon's *Philosophy of Poverty*, Marx seems to mock how a dialectical treatment of slavery (in the hands of Proudhon) would be treated. It would need, so it seems, to have a "good side" and a "bad side," "advantages" and "drawbacks," "contradictions" which are at the center of any economic category. He continues: "The problem to be solved: to keep the good side, while eliminating the bad." What does this even mean to say that slavery has a "good side": good for whom? And how is it possible to "eliminate" the "bad" if the very elimination would eliminate the category altogether, namely, abolish slavery? Marx pivots to make an "argument" or outlines a way of thinking that would, if one were to take it seriously at all, appear as supporting the "good side" of slavery. In Marx's famous words, slavery in North America "is just as much the pivot of bourgeois industry as machinery, credits, etc. Without slavery you have no cotton; without cotton you have no modern industry. It is slavery that gave the colonies their value; it is the colonies that created world trade, and it is world trade that is the precondition of large-scale industry. Thus slavery is an economic category of the greatest importance" (1955/1847: 49-50).

Does "greatest importance" equate to necessary condition? Maybe not sufficient, but definitely necessary condition as the line of reasoning unfolds: slavery is necessary for cotton production, and cotton is necessary for "modern industry" (unspecified if in America or the UK). From cotton, Marx shifts to the "colonies," whose accumulated wealth ("value") "created" world trade, not simply contributed to it, and it is this world trade that was the "precondition" [*la condition*] of "large scale industry."<sup>2</sup> He pauses from his grand

1 The doctrine of *Partus Sequitur Ventrem*, decided in 1662, stated that the child's fate as a slave or free person depended on the status of the mother; see Jennifer Morgan (2021), *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic*. Duke University Press, pp. 3-4.

2 The English translation turns the French "*la condition*" into "precondition," which is commonly understood to be of stronger causal relation, what in French would be "*condition préalable*." The English translation by the Institute of Marxism-Leninism tipped its hand in 1955 (because of Cold War rhetoric?) on the side of slavery being a necessary precondition for the thriving capitalism of the West, primarily in Europe.

(historical materialist) argument to say something about America itself: “Without slavery, North America, the most progressive of countries, would be transformed into a patriarchal country.” And then he contextualizes America in the world (primarily nodding to Europe): “Wipe North America off the map of the world, and you will have anarchy – the complete decay of modern commerce and civilization. Cause slavery to disappear and you will have wiped America off the map of nations.” It’s one thing to say that without slavery and the accumulated wealth it brought to the colonies America would disappear from the “map of nations,” and quite another to suggest that America’s disappearance would bring about (cause?) the “complete decay of modern commerce and civilization.” The second claim puts the centrality of America’s slavery (as an economic category) not simply as a condition of the “greatest importance,” but, as an economic category without which European “large scale industry,” that is European capitalism, comes to a halt (“complete decay”).<sup>1</sup> Before continuing with Marx’s analysis, perhaps a quick critical note is in place here about another text that uses “poverty” in its title, Popper’s *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957). Without detailing its various arguments, suffice here to insert two relevant comments: first, the dialectical Marxian movement that displaces Proudhon’s remains just as problematic for Popper as any historicist (read determinist or predictive) attempt to comprehend history; and second, Popper’s preference for “social piecemeal engineering” over any revolutionary pretense (1957: 64) remains a point of departure from any historicist meta-narrative. From the abovementioned critical (and rational) analysis Marx offers in regards to slavery in America, it appears reasonable to find points of overlap rather than contradiction between the Marxian and Popperian approaches to crucial features that enhanced the historical development of modern capitalism.

Back to Marx. It is also clear that the commodification of labor power is a distinctive capitalist method of exploitation, one that transcends ancient modes of production and exchange. The significance of the equalizing power of labor under capitalism because of the commodification of labor-power (1976/1867, Vol. I: 152) stands against the inherent inequality of slave labor in comparison to other kinds of labor in pre-capitalist societies. Similarly, Marx explains that pre-capitalist societies, both ancient and “modern colonies” (presumably including the North American ones) rest on “direct relations of domination and servitude, in most cases on slavery,” and they differ from capitalism which “presupposes from the outset the free wage-labourer who sells his labour-power to capital.” (1976/1867, Vol. I: 452) This difference is crucial in not conflating or reducing the so-called free wage-labor to slavery. In this rendering, slavery remains outside the capitalist orbit as a distinctive form of exploitation and dehumanization, and therefore to claim it necessary for capitalist production or success is false.<sup>2</sup>

1 Though Marx turns his ire onto Proudhon himself (“Let us for a moment consider M. Proudhon himself as a category. Let us examine his good and bad side, his advantages and his drawbacks” (Ibid.)), it becomes clear from these comments that Marx finds slavery of the greatest importance, perhaps even a precondition for the development of large-scale industry. The condescending language in these passages are applied to Proudhon’s appropriation of the dialectic method to political economy’s “categories,” setting them up as if their analysis could conceal the barbarity of slavery, and also to the obvious role slavery plays in furthering capitalism as the systemic mode of human exploitation.

2 This does not mean that Marx’s own words cannot lead to a confusion about the relationship between slavery and capitalist production. For example, when quoting Engels, Marx’s language can be easily construed as equating two different modes of production: “The slavery in which the bourgeoisie holds the proletariat chained is nowhere more conspicuous than in the factory system. Here ends all freedom in law and in fact.” (Ibid. 550, note#9) The factory worker, like the slave, loses freedom, regardless of the capitalist claim that wage laborers are voluntarily engaged in their work and that their wages are fair in the Smithian sense of the natural (and perhaps moral) value that



Ever mindful of Smith and other classical economists, even when they argue against slavery (from an exclusively economic perspective, not a moral one), Marx is clear about the difference between slave labor and wage labor. This distinction is not of degrees of exploitation but of kind. In his words: “In slave labour, even the part of the working day in which the slave is only replacing the value of his own means of subsistence, in which he therefore actually works for himself alone, appears as labour for his master. All his labour appears as unpaid labour.” Wage labor in modern capitalism by contrast is designed so that “even surplus labour, or unpaid labour, appears as paid.” This means that “*In the one case, the property-relation conceals the slave’s labour for himself; in the other case the money-relation conceals the uncompensated labour of the wage-labourer*” (1976/1867, Vol. I: 680; italics added). Not only is there a difference in the kind of social relations in which they engage (slave as property, laborer as free worker), but the very calculus of extraction of labor power differs in kind, as Marx spells out. And this differentiation heralds a deviation from or even a contradictory moment to the thesis about the essential role slavery plays in the development of capitalism.

Unlike these earlier textual cases where slavery is set apart from the capitalist mode of production, the question of the necessity of slavery for capitalist progress becomes more complex and entangled at the end of *Capital* Volume I, when Marx discusses “primitive accumulation.” Finding a parallel between religion and political economy, Marx explains that “primitive accumulation [*Ursprungliche Accumulation*] plays approximately the same role in political economy as original sin does in theology.” (1976/1867, Vol. I: 873) The role, it seems, is being the symbolic anchor that ties so many loose ends and strands of apologist justifications about the state of affairs in which humanity finds itself. Original sin not only helps explain a range of theological themes, from the problem of evil and the human condition on earth to redemption and salvation in the afterlife, it also sets in motion a conceptual hierarchical relation between humans and God, between the sacred and the profane. The high priests of political economy model their conceptual apparatus on the original sin invented by their theological predecessors. Primitive accumulation presumes the same imaginary fountain from which judgments camouflaged as empirical facts culled from the historical record flow. How else would apologists of the status quo explain the disparity between rich and poor, between capitalists and workers? The naturalizing move is similar in religion and political economy: an imaginary starting point is peppered with anecdotal evidence and turned into a “natural” state of affairs (reality) devoid of human agency or culpability.

Marx recounts the original sin of primitive accumulation as the “diligent, intelligent and above all frugal elite” accumulated wealth, while “lazy rascals” who were “spending their substance, and more, in riotous living” ended up having “nothing to sell but their own skins” (1976/1867, Vol. I: 873). The visceral image of the poor selling their “skins” [*Haut*], points to the embodied facet of wealth accumulation as well as to its violence (with distinctive allusion to the way slaves were treated during this time in the American plantations). “In actual history,” continues Marx, “it is a notorious fact that conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, force [*Gewalt*], play the greatest part.” (1976/1867, Vol. I: 874) The German *Gewalt* means violence and power, so that the facticity of the original sinful accumulation of wealth presents itself violently to those who were conquered and enslaved, robbed and murdered, and not as the result of hard work and frugality. Power relations of settler-colonial Europeans, in this historically informed conceptual recounting,

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emerges when supply meets demand in the marketplace. The strong condemnation and outrage over the treatment of wage laborers may be less about equating two forms of labor-power than about tapping into a widespread recognition of the moral depravity of white enslavers as a way of condemning all capitalists.

turn into “capital-relation,” which is a “process” by which producers, “free workers” [*vogelfreie*], free like birds, go through a divorce [*Scheidungsprozess*] from their means of production (1976/1867, Vol. I: 875). This process is defined as “expropriation” wherein producers are dispossessed from their land and ground [*Grund und Boden*], namely, from ancestral sites that grounded them and their labor to a place they could call their own home even when not legally owned in feudal settings. The history of expropriation, continues Marx, “is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire” (1976/1867, Vol. I: 875).

Without chronicling the historical shift from European feudalism to capitalism here, it is safe to say that Marx’s historical arc includes many details of the “forcible expropriation of the people” (1976/1867, Vol. I: 881), where the State became an active accomplice in divorcing poor people from their land<sup>1</sup>. The terror of the “divorce process” presented itself in idyllic terms, covering the pain and suffering associated with expropriation, as if it were a voluntary process. Perhaps *divorce* is too appealing a term today, when we think of two consenting adults separating by mutual consent and being freed from the burden of the marriage institution in general and the particular circumstances of their failed relationship. The “divorce process” Marx describes echoes the legal system that routinely gave a preferential treatment to men who left their wives like the so-called “‘free’ and outlawed proletariat” to fend for themselves. Does the process of expropriation demonstrate that indeed the separation of the worker from the means of production can happen only under conditions of capitalist enslavement? Historical records offer ample evidence for a variety of methods of expropriation that contribute to the circumstances under which the transformation of labor into commodified labor-power is accomplished, especially when imperialist military forces were enlisted.<sup>2</sup>

Crediting E. G. Wakefield with discovering not “something new *about* the colonies, but, *in* the colonies, the truth about capitalist relations in the mother country,” Marx explains that capital is not a “thing” [*Sache*], but “a social relation between persons which is mediated through things” (1976/1867, Vol. I: 932). When applied to the colonies, it becomes even more blatant that so long as “the worker can accumulate for himself—and this he can do so long as he remains in possession of his mean of production—capitalist accumulation and the capitalist mode of production are impossible [*unmöglich*]” (1976/1867, Vol. I: 933). And attributing the conceptual understanding of the shift in social relations within colonial systems to Wakefield, Marx concludes that slavery [*Sklaverei*] is “the sole basis of colonial wealth,” the wealth that

1 Marx summarizes the various historical moments in the following way: “The spoliation of the church’s property, the fraudulent alienation of the State domains, the robbery of the common lands, the usurpation of feudal and clan property, and its transformation into modern private property under circumstances of *reckless terrorism* [*rücksichtslosem Terrorismus*], were just so many *idyllic methods* of primitive accumulation. They conquered the field for capitalistic agriculture, made the soil part and parcel of capital, and created for the town industries the *necessary supply of a “free” and outlawed proletariat*” (Ibid. 895; italics added).

2 An oft-quoted passage in *Capital* compares English work conditions to those in America in the following way: “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 [*verhüllte*] slavery of the wage-labourer in Europe needed the unqualified slavery of the New World as its pedestal.” (Ibid. 925) Though the unveiling of the American pedestal in the New World exposed the horrific conditions of “child-slavery,” it was not the case of equivalence or causal connection. As much as American slavery reminded observers of the English exploitation of wage-labor (and vice versa), there is no indication of either causality or correlation between the two modes of human extraction. Instead, one set of labor relations is seen in the other, unveiled and exposed. There is a radical difference in the understanding of enslaved mothers and their progeny as property in the American context and child labor practiced in England and elsewhere. In relation to imperialist military force bringing about capital accumulation, see Rosa Luxemburg (1951), *The Accumulation of Capital*. Translated by Agnes Schwarzschild. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.

feeds “motherland” England and its industrial-capitalist progress (1976/1867, Vol. I: 934). This recognition sounds as close to an argument that American slavery is a necessary if not a sufficient condition for the prosperity of European capitalism, but in what sense of “necessary”? At least in the sense of “divorcing” people from their means production, as was done with kidnapping, buying, and transporting enslaved Africans across the Atlantic. This expropriation enhances “primitive accumulation,” but not necessarily capitalist modes of production. Yet without primitive accumulation, there is no starting point for capitalism and in this sense, and therefore, expropriation is indeed a necessary condition for capitalism; but is this the same as arguing that slavery is a necessary condition for capitalism?

Marx is explicit, as he ends the first volume of *Capital*, that he is less concerned with the colonies and much more with the “secret” [*Geheimniss*] that is “discovered” in the “New World by the Political Economy of the Old World, and loudly proclaimed by it.” The “secret” is that “the capitalist mode of production and accumulation, and therefore capitalist private property as well, have for their fundamental condition [*voraussetzt*] the annihilation of that private property which rests on the labour of the individual himself; in other words, the expropriation of the worker” (1976/1867, Vol. I: 940). The “fundamental condition” or the presupposition on which capitalism rests is the expropriation of the worker from the land, a separation that defines new economic relations. It may not have been enslavement as such that was necessary for capitalism to flourish, but enslavement illustrated the kind of State legal sanction needed for the separation of workers from the land on which they traditionally labored. Moreover, as Kevin Anderson, for example, argues, “the linkages between capitalism and slavery permeated the whole of Marx’s [writings](#),” and that Marx “did not view the large-scale enslavement of Africans by Europeans, which began in the early sixteenth century in the Caribbean, as a repeat of Roman or Arab slavery, but as something new” (2019). To say that slavery is “an economic category” and not only a social and legal one sets the stage for saying that it is of the “greatest importance.” But being of the greatest importance by itself does not entail that it is essential or critical for the very framework of capitalist production, as mentioned above. The question remains, is slavery a necessary and sufficient condition for capitalism in general or at least for American capitalism, and how can one make the case for it.<sup>1</sup> Rebuffing critiques of orthodox Marxism as not dealing sufficiently with the importance of slavery to capitalism, some neo-Marxists have suggested that if one looks carefully enough, one can find in Marx’s texts “a unique understanding of slaveowner capitalism as a variant of capitalism and colonialism,” one where on the backs of slaves in American plantations surplus value is produced (Foster et al 2020). In this sense, plantation slavery was the necessary condition of capitalism, perhaps even a type of capitalism, one controlled by capitalists who already appreciated the abstraction of labor into extractable labor power. The capitalist logic of extraction and the accumulation of surpluses is exposed in the plantations in nascent but clearly articulated forms of institutionalized alienation and exploitation. For example, in Volume III of *Capital*, Marx clearly states that “The entire surplus-labour of the labourers, which is manifested [in slave economy] in the surplus-product, is extracted from [slaves] directly by the owner of all instruments of production, to which belong the land and, under the original form of slavery, the immediate producers themselves” (1996/1894: 583).

Eric Williams opens his *Capitalism and Slavery*, with the clarification that his study is not concerned with the development of American capitalism or the “study of the institution of slavery,” but instead about “the contribution of slavery to the development of British capitalism” and more specifically, the financing of the

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<sup>1</sup> For a brilliant summary of the debates over the capitalist nature of slave plantations and the capitalist nature of slave labor, see John Clegg (2020), “A Theory of Capitalist Slavery,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 33(1), 74-98.

(European) Industrial Revolution (1944: viii). Williams argues that American slavery contributed more to the British than to the American development of modern capitalism, and as such American slavery could be seen as not a necessary condition for American capitalism which was different from its British counterpart (a point contested by Baptist, as we'll see below). This would also follow some of what we saw earlier in Marx's *Capital*. As much as Marx differentiated ancient slavery from its modern variants, Williams sees slavery as "an economic institution of the first importance" insofar as it had been "the basis of Greek economy and had built up the Roman Empire." He continues: "In modern times it provided the sugar for the tea and the coffee cups of the Western world. It produced the cotton to serve as a base for modern capitalism" (1944: 5). Tea and sugar appear secondary luxuries as compared with American cotton that transformed global trade and financial fortunes, and thus it appears that Williams assumes here that "modern capitalism" covers both the American and British variants.

Williams recounts the three stages of labor relations in the American colonies, with the "Indian" as a first, the white British criminals as second, and lastly enslaved Africans. In his words: "Here, then, is the origin of Negro slavery. The reason was economic, not racial; it had to do not with the color of the laborer, but the cheapness of the labor. As compared with Indian and white labor, Negro slavery was eminently superior" (1944: 19). Emphasizing the economic considerations that motivated the slave trade to the Americas, he insists, "Negro labor" was both the "cheapest and best" (1944: 20). The kinds of crops grown in the colonies could thrive, according to Williams, only because of what we call nowadays economies of scale: "Sugar, tobacco, and cotton required the large plantation and hordes of cheap labor, and the small farm of the ex-indentured white servant could not possibly survive" (1944: 23). The number of slaves in the American colonies increased from 5% of the total population in 1670 to 25% by 1730 (1944: 26). Reminiscent of Marx's phrase a century earlier that the history of expropriation "is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire," Williams' words are just as powerful: "Negro slavery blackened that structure all over the Caribbean while the blood of the Negro slaves reddened the Atlantic and both its shores. Strange that an article like sugar, so sweet and necessary to human existence, should have occasioned such crimes and bloodshed!" (1944: 27).

Williams comes closer to answering the question about the necessity of American slavery for British (and indirectly American) capitalism when explaining the "triangular trade" wherein England, France, and the American colonies supplied the "exports and ships," Africa the "human merchandise," and the plantations the "raw materials," so as to give the British industry a "triple stimulus." In short, "The profits obtained provided one of the main streams of that accumulation of capital in England which financed the Industrial Revolution" (1944: 51-2). Admittedly, Williams says *one* "of the main streams" of capital accumulation and not the *crucial element* in that accumulation, but as he continues to explain later, the amount of profit was so great that it ensured the success of both the Agricultural and the Industrial Revolutions and British capitalism, because technological developments were and continue to be capital intensive. His conclusion:

Britain was accumulating great wealth from the triangular trade. The increase of consumption goods called forth by that trade inevitably drew in its train the development of the productive power of the country. This industrial expansion required finance. What man in the first three-quarters of the eighteenth century was better able to afford the ready capital than a West Indian sugar planter or a Liverpool slave trader? We have already noticed the readiness with which absentee planters purchased land in England,

where they were able to use their wealth to finance the great developments associated with the Agricultural Revolution. We must now trace the investment of profits from the triangular trade in British industry, where they supplied part of the huge outlay for the construction of the vast plants to meet the needs of the new productive process and the new markets (1944: 98).

The involvement of British capitalism with the slave trade and the wealth it produced both in the West Indies and the American colonies ranged from banking and heavy industry to insurance, where “Lloyd’s, like other insurance companies, insured slaves and slave ships, and was vitally interested in legal decisions as to what constituted ‘natural death’ and ‘perils of the sea’” (1944: 104)<sup>1</sup>.

It would seem, then, that slavery in the New World was definitely a necessary and perhaps even the sufficient condition for the development of British capitalism. Williams quotes an explicit expression of this sentiment by the British Prime Minister, Lord North, who complimented in 1783 “the Quaker opponents of the slave trade on their humanity, but regretted that its abolition was an impossibility, as the trade had become necessary to almost every nation in Europe” (1944: 126). The language of necessity is intertwined with the “impossibility” of abolition. One objection about an equivalence between the role of slavery in developing American versus British capitalism is that slavery in the American (and West Indies) colonies could be seen to be itself proto-capitalist. For Williams, though, the colonial system was the spinal cord of commercial capitalism during the mercantile epoch. In the era of free trade, industrial capitalists claimed not to want colonies at all, least of all the West Indies ones (1944: 142). Yet (free trade) commercial capitalism only feigned interest in the abolition of slavery, reminds us Williams. It continued to enjoy the fruits of slavery regardless of the formal abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and slavery in 1833 (1944: 136); despite the faith in the enlightened and liberating powers of commerce, the slave trade had actually increased during that period (1944: 173). His compounded conclusion starts with “commercial capitalism of the eighteenth century developed the wealth of Europe by means of slavery and monopoly” and continues with arguing that “in so doing,” commercial capitalism “helped to create the industrial capitalism of the nineteenth century.” Once industrial capitalism takes hold, it “turned round and destroyed the power of commercial capitalism, slavery, and all its works.” The replacement of commercial with industrial capitalism veils the role the former played in bringing about the latter. In Williams’ words: “Without a grasp of these economic changes the history of the period is meaningless” (1944: 210). More than Marx a century earlier, Williams can be understood as answering in the affirmative that slavery (and monopoly) were essential for the development and eventual success of British and indirectly American industrial capitalism, given the triangle of the slave trade.

Both abolitionists and proslavery writers, according to Edward Baptist, agreed that slavery was a “flawed economic system that was inherently less efficient than the free-labor capitalism that was developing in the North,” even “inherently unprofitable” (2014: xvi). With this in mind, many historians of the period presupposed that “slavery was not implicated in the US growth, success, power, and wealth” (2014: xix). Against this background, Baptist claims, with a great deal of empirical evidence that enslaved African-American were forced to “pick cotton faster and more efficiently than free people.” This greater productivity, “transformed the southern states into the dominant force in the global cotton market.” Cotton

<sup>1</sup> See also the extensive study of insuring slaves in the colonies and “renting” rather than selling them for financial and legal reasons by Michael Ralph (2015), *Forensics of Capital*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

was “the world’s most widely traded commodity at the time” in part because “it was the key raw material during the first century of the industrial revolution.” Essential in appreciating the centrality of cotton to global trade and the development of the industrial revolution is the fact, according to Baptist, that “the returns from cotton monopoly powered the modernization of the rest of the American economy, and by the time of the Civil War, the United States had become the second nation to undergo large-scale industrialization” (2014: xxi). The so-called Second Industrial Revolution took place in the American North.

This chain of conditional statements makes it clear that “efficient” (whipped, tortured, dehumanized) slave-labor was indeed the engine that pushed not only the emergence of modern British capitalism (with wealth accumulation), but also its American variant. Baptist calculates that “cotton pickers [between 1800 and 1860] produced gains in productivity similar to those of cotton factories [400 percent increase]” (2014: 128). Since there were no “mechanical cotton until the late 1930s,” increased productivity was embodied in enslaved pickers and the techniques they were forced to incorporate into their daily practices. The “existential contradictions between productivity and freedom,” says Baptist, would never have to be resolved, since white enslavers did not have to free their slaves to increase their productivity; instead, they used “measurements to calibrate torture in order to force cotton pickers to figure out how to increase their own productivity and this push through the picking bottlenecks” (2014: 130). In fact, Adam Smith’s argument about the increased efficiency of free labor and the lower costs associated with it was falsified in the Antebellum South, and with this empirical falsification the ideals of liberty vanished. The pretense that capitalism was predisposed to and entailed universal emancipation for its optimal success was a sham. In fact, the historical record shows (despite counter-examples by Baptist’s critics) that in order to achieve levels of efficiency only capitalism promised (in contradistinction to feudal modes of production), slaves had to “behave in the fields as if they themselves were disembodied, mechanical hands that moved ever more swiftly over the cotton plant at the wave of the enslaver’s hand” (2014: 142).

There seems to be no doubt in Baptist’s mind that without slavery American capitalism would have not evolved as successfully. The mythic distinction between the backward agricultural South and the enlightened or industrialized North is debunked with ample evidence: “Northern growth in general and the fortunes of its middle and upper classes in particular were built on the forced labor of [slaves]” (2014: 311). The increased and ever cheaper raw materials (cotton) that were transported to Northern mills or exported to European manufacturers (primarily Britain) financed not only the British industrial revolution but also its American counterpart, “the world’s second industrial revolution” (2014: 312). Baptist argues that the Euro-American development of capitalism depended on “the growing [profit] margin between the price of raw cotton and what the price would have been if picked by free labor” (2014: 318). Slave-labor produced greater surplus value than wage labor because of its greater efficiency and the unlimited exploitation and reproduction it facilitated. If this claim seems exaggerated, Baptist is quick to provide statistical evidence: “more than \$600 million, or almost half of the economic activity in the United States in 1836, derived directly or indirectly from cotton produced by the million-odd slaves—6 percent of the total US population—who in that year toiled in labor camps on slavery’s frontier” (2014: 322). To say that cotton was a negligible part of the US economy, as some claim (Eugene 1971: 157)<sup>1</sup>, seems simply false. In fact, as Baptist concludes: “The Northern economy’s industrial sector was built on the backs of enslaved people”

<sup>1</sup> Eugene D. Genovese (1971) *In Red and Black: Marxian Explorations in Southern and Afro-American History*. New York: Pantheon, p. 157.

(2014: 322.) and in this sense slavery was necessary and perhaps sufficient condition for American capitalism.

### III: Racial Capitalism

In the 2000 reissue of his book, *Black Marxism*, Cedric Robinson frames his analysis of the continuous radical Black Radical Tradition and the emancipatory zest it has had for centuries under enslavement and expropriation in a critique of European thinkers, such as Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Engels. His bifurcated critique challenges both their “concealed” “faith in philosophy” and, more particularly, a certain conceptual universalizing move for the sake of “scientific elegance” and “interpretive economy.” The intertwined liberal faith in the philosophical potential for critique and revolutionary emancipation and the quest for scientific legitimacy “consigned race, gender, culture, and history to the dustbin.” This meant for Marx, according to Robinson, that however abhorrent slavery was to him, it remained “an embarrassing residue of a precapitalist, ancient mode of production,” and as such it “disqualified” slaves “from historical and political agency in the modern world” (2000: xxviii-xxix). Admittedly, Robinson’s critique is supposed to point to a European blind spot that prevented 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophers from recognizing the potential agency of slaves to revolt and free themselves (see 2000: 307ff); but this critique also implicitly answers the question about the necessity of slavery for the development of capitalism. If slavery was precapitalist, could it also be the productive engine of capitalist production? Robinson’s definition of Black Marxism is less about a “contestation” between Marxism and the Black Radical Tradition or a “revision” of their intermingling. Instead, it is a “new vision centered on a theory of the cultural corruption of race. And thus, the reach and cross-fertilization of the [Black Radical] tradition became evident in the anticolonial and revolutionary struggles of Africa, the Caribbean, and the Americas. . . [and] a culture of liberation” (2000: xxxii). In this sense, liberal abstractions are recalibrated to include race as an essential feature of emancipatory promise and goal.

For Robinson, “racial capitalism” refers to the “development and to the subsequent structure” of racialism as a “historical agency” found in capitalism’s emergence and dominance. (2000: 2). In this sense, then, slavery and the slave trade should not be consigned to a precapitalist historical stage, but appreciated as “integral to the modern world economy” (2000: 4). Robinson argues that though to some scholars “the relationship between capitalism, colonization, and slave labor had appeared almost coincidental,” for him the relationship between capitalism and slave labor became the “very foundation of New World enterprise” (2000: 110), a capitalist enterprise that depends on settler-colonial barbaric militarism. Though crediting Marx with recognizing the importance of slave labor in the development of industrial capitalism, Robinson relies more on Williams’s insistence that the “fabulous wealth” that was “created by slaves, was enjoyed not only by planters and in the colonies, but by the mother country” (2000: 113). As already discussed above, slavery was crucial for the emergence of industrial capitalism first in Britain and then in the United States. The conclusion Robinson draws from historical records and the scholarly work of others is that “historically, slavery was a critical foundation for capitalism” (2000:116). Capitalism here is universalized to include the different capitalist modes of production apparent in the European continent and in the Americas, and the notion of *critical foundation* suggests more than the necessary condition for the development of 19<sup>th</sup> century capitalism (wherever spotted). One can read “critical” to mean essential and “foundation” to mean the very framework on which and scaffolding with which industrial capitalism came into its global dominance.

As he concludes his book, Robinson supports this view of the relationship between slavery and (British) capitalism in focusing on the “new imperialism” of “monopoly capitalism” that, with the aid of the “colonial state,” “forcibly recruited labor” (2000: 312), or more precisely, labor power. Citing Du Bois’s view that “capitalism and slavery were related systemically,” that monopoly capitalism “extended rather than arrested that relationship,” and that this “relationship” would dissolve because of its “contradiction,” Robinson intimates that as much as slavery brought about global capitalism, the resistance to it (“mounted the attack on capitalism”) became the “most sustained threat to the American capitalist system” (2000: 313-4). From Robinson’s argument regarding enslaved black resistance and revolt as undermining the very “critical foundations” of American capitalism, we can deduce the essential role of slavery in capitalist production, perhaps even being its sufficient condition<sup>1</sup>.

In conclusion, the hypothesis that the liberal spirit in its political and ideological guises underwrites modern market capitalism or that modern capitalism fully embodies the ideals of liberalism is refuted when considering the slave trade and Chattel Slavery in the American context. The very fact that white enslavement of <sup>blacks</sup> persisted for centuries in full sight and with the legal protection of (liberally-minded) democratic States only solidifies the argument that capitalism itself can thrive operationally only when (primarily European) whites, as witnessed historically, subjugate and exploit (African transported) blacks (as slaves) or other (incarcerated or wage) laborers when slavery is formally abolished so as to extract surpluses. Adherents to any variant of Critical Rationalism should continue and pursue such critical examination of long-held philosophical myths ungirding theories and conceptual frameworks, whether they relate to liberalism or capitalism and their accompanying attempt to conceal their failures under the veil of ideal democracy. Suggesting that slavery, for example, was a minor aberration that does not reflect the true liberal spirit of capitalism, or extending this way of thinking to the all too familiar contemporary carceral state<sup>2</sup> displays nothing short of willful ignorance and racist prejudice. Refusal to tackle uncomfortably long-held and cherished misconceptions about capitalism violates the critical and rational mindset that has characterized the works of Popper and those of his disciples who claim to be Critical Rationalists.

If there is anything of Popper’s legacy worth honoring in present and future debates over the political economic realities which some enjoy and others suffer under, as this Special Issue attempts to bring to life, it would be, for example, an unvarnished engagement with the wave of white racism that is spreading globally, veiled as it is with militaristic and religious pretenses about the protection of moral values. The ideal critical rationalist from my perspective is not only a Marxist-Popperian who can draw from *both* sources inspiration for their own work, but also a postmodernist that is leery, like Popper, of meta-narratives that promise too much in their universalizing abstractions, and is likewise insistent, like Marx, that there is more than one perspective from which to view reality. The false binary of Marxism versus Popperianism cannot be upheld anymore when their overlapping critical rationalism is fully recognized. Marx may have been wrong about the impending downfall of capitalism, just as Popper may have been wrong about the

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1 Following Oliver Cox’s lead, Robinson argues that Marx not only had faith in philosophy and universalized it in the name of scientific fidelity, but that like his own critique of classical political economists, he should have made slavery “the center of his study” (Ibid. 341 #47). To think of Marx’s critique as misguided, as Robinson does, is to find in its “errors” that can be corrected, such as giving due credit to the slave trade and slavery as crucial for the development of all forms of capitalism that appeared on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.

2 In this context, see Michelle Alexander (2012), *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press.



potential of liberal capitalism to overcome poverty and suffering. Their respective failures are informative and invite further investigations, not an outright rejection of either, or both. I read them both as having a moral compass that guides their respective methods of inquiry. The responsibility of scholarship remains to search for whatever nuggets of wisdom we can find and sensibly redeploy them with care and moral trepidation. Some of our studies may include odd bedfellows; their oddity should increase our curiosity whatever the discomfort of the journey.

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