Research Foundation of SUNY

Was the Plantation Slave a Proletarian?
Author(s): Sidney W. Mintz
Source: *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Summer, 1978), pp. 81-98
Published by: Research Foundation of SUNY for and on behalf of the Fernand Braudel Center
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/40240791
Accessed: 07/09/2011 13:16

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Research Foundation of SUNY and *Fernand Braudel Center* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Review (Fernand Braudel Center).*

http://www.jstor.org

Review, II, 1, Summer 1978, 81-98.

Was the Plantation Slave a Proletarian?*

Sidney W. Mintz

Between the beginnings of the African slave trade to the New World, shortly after 1500, and the abolition of slavery in the last New World territories where it had remained legal (Puerto Rico: 1873-1876; Cuba: 1886; Brazil: 1888), probably more than 9,000,000 enslaved Africans were shipped westward across the Atlantic.[1] The institution embodied in the capture, sale, transportation, and exploitation of African slaves in the western hemisphere thus lasted nearly four hundred years, and was legal for centuries, in large and much differentiated regions within the Americas. Many different European powers were involved in the sale, use and, often, resale of enslaved Africans. Local practices in these matters varied widely, and were usually subject to metropolitan codes of law and metropolitan bureaucracies (though these never were the last word in regulating the treatment, care, and defense of the enslaved). Hence to try to address generally the nature of slavery as it existed in the New World, or its common features as an institution in the New World setting, is a risky and frequently unprofitable undertaking. Not only was slavery different in the colonies of one power from what it was in those of another, but even within one imperial system, there were often significant differences in the slavery institution from colony to colony. Moreover, time and circumstance deeply affected the way slavery worked in particular milieux. Demography mattered; as did the prevailing form of work at which slaves were employed; whether the slaves were "creolized" – seasoned to the slavery regimen, or born into it, acculturated to the New World conditions, or caught up in the meaning and memories of a distant life – all these, and many other factors, much influenced what slavery was, and how it was experienced.

---

*First presented at a seminar of the Fernand Braudel Center, State University of New York at Binghamton, February 2, 1977, I am grateful to Professor Wallerstein for the opportunity to air my views and, indeed, for the choice of topic, to which he asked me to address myself.

[1] See Philip A. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1969).

In this paper, I shall attempt to limit the geographical scope of my inquiry and, thereby, at least some part of the economic, political, and cultural variation with which I might otherwise have to struggle, were I attempting to look at the whole hemisphere. But I deliberately do not limit the time-span with which I deal, since one of my major concerns here is the significance of different time-periods (and what those differences entailed) for the question the paper means to address: the relationship between the terms and categories "proletarian" and "slave". Plainly, a number of fairly firm lines need to be drawn, to avoid drowning in generalities. The term "plantation slave", as I mean to use it here, refers to chattel slaves, persons purchased or inherited and owned as property, who were used as laborers on large agricultural estates producing commodities for (mainly) European markets, between the first decade of the sixteenth century and the ninth decade of the nineteenth. Nearly all, but by no means all, such slaves were born in Africa or were the descendants (at least in part) of people who were. By the "Caribbean region" I have in mind in particular the Greater and Lesser Antilles, with an important nod in the direction of the Guianas. I think that it would not be impossible (though it would entail extremely burdensome difficulties and a good deal more space) to extend the treatment to include Brazil, parts of Mexico and Central America, and even much of the United States South; I deliberately avoid such extensions, while recognizing that I have already taken on too much.

I am unable to limit myself similarly in time, as I have said; nor can I avoid the complications implicit in refining what I mean by "plantation". Just as slavery itself varied with place and with time, so, too, did the nature of the enterprises upon which slaves toiled. Plantations themselves also varied very widely, according to a great many environing conditions. Perhaps it is enough to say for the present that I am here particularly concerned with sugar-cane plantations, which were present throughout the four centuries that interest me, and were doubtless more important than any other type of Caribbean plantation, during this entire four-hundred year period.

I am not prepared to be so offhand in dealing with the term "proletarian", but I can state briefly, at least, what I have in mind by it. In the first volume of *Capital*, Karl Marx discusses the buying and selling of labor-power as an aspect of the capitalist mode of production,[2] wherein it becomes very clear that a "free" laborer is not thereby and automatically a member of the proletariat. Indeed, as

---

[2] Karl Marx, *Capital* (New York: International Publ., 1939), I, 145 ff.

Marx employs the term "proletariat", it is bound up quite narrowly and specifically with the rise of capitalism, wherein "labour-power can appear upon the market as a commodity, only if, and so far as, its possessor, the individual whose labour-power it is, offers it for sale, or sells it, as a commodity."[3] Indeed, that is the first criterion of proletarian labor-power. Second, by Marx's reckoning, such a seller of labor-power as a commodity cannot sell himself, or sell his labor-power "once and for all," since by so doing he would become something other than a free seller of his own effort. Third, the seller must be obligated to sell his labor, by virtue of having nothing else either to sell, or by which to sustain himself; he has no choice but to sell his labor-power. That a free laborer has nothing to sell but his effort, that he sees and offers to sell that effort as a commodity to its prospective buyer, and that he has nothing but his labor-power to sell, all become parts of the definition of the proletarian.

"We have seen," Marx writes, "that the expropriation of the mass of the people from the soil forms the basis of the capitalist mode of production;"[4] and "so-called primitive accumulation . . . is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production."[5] What I refer to by "proletarian", then, consistent with these assertions, is the free but propertyless seller of his own labor-power as a commodity to a capitalist buyer of commodities, among them the commodity of labor-power, to undertake fresh production.

It was never Marx's sole or explicit intention, so far as I know, to draw an orderly contrast between slaves and proletarians in order to endow these terms with definitions that could become eternal verities. His concern was above all to understand and to reveal the inner nature of the capitalist system, and of the capitalist mode of production, as these typified the history of Europe. Well aware that he could not ignore or treat as irrelevant the activities of the Europeans outside the European heartland, he saw that the forms of labor exaction in different parts of the world in which the Europeans were active both arose from, and reacted back upon, developments in Europe itself:

> Freedom and slavery constitute an antagonism. . . . We are not dealing with indirect slavery, the slavery of the proletariat, but with direct slavery, the slavery of the black races in Surinam, in Brazil, in the southern states of North America. Direct slavery is as much the pivot of our industrialism today as machinery, credit, etc. Without slavery, no cotton; without cotton no modern industry. Slavery has given their value to the colonies; the colonies have created world trade; world trade is the necessary condition of large-scale machine industry. Before the traffic in Negroes began the colonies supplied the Old World with very few products and made no visible change in the face of the earth. Thus slavery is an economic category of the highest importance.[6]

But his interest throughout remained Europe, the pivot of what could be incited to happen elsewhere, the beating heart of capitalist endeavor. From that center, men, materials, and wealth flowed outward in order to integrate within the central design regions, populations, and resources that had lain outside and largely unaffected beforehand. Thus the expansion of European capitalism involved the assimilation to homeland – that is to say, to European metropolitan – objectives, of societies and peoples that were not yet part of the capitalist system. The ways in which this assimilation was set in motion, and the forms that it took were of course highly variable. They were not, they could not be, identical to those processes that had typified European economic growth; yet it was precisely European expansion itself that brought these external areas within the ambit of European power and economy, even if the forms of their integration differed radically from those familiar from Europe itself. In spite of his prevailing concern with Europe, Marx understood this well:

---

[3] *Ibid.*, I, 146.

[4] *Ibid.*, I, 793.

[5] *Ibid.*, I, 738.

[6] Letter of Karl Marx to P. V. Annenkov, December 28, 1846, in *Karl Marx & Frederich Engels: Selected Works* (New York: International Publ., 1968), 13-14.

> The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black skins, signalized the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation. . . .
>
> 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 organized force of society, to hasten, hothouse fashion, the process of transformation of the feudal mode of production into the capitalist mode, and to shorten the transition. Force is the midwife of every society pregnant with the new one. It is itself an economic power. . . .
>
> Whilst the cotton industry introduced child-slavery in England, it gave in the United States a stimulus to the transformation of the earlier, more or less patriarchal slavery, into a system of commercial exploitation. In fact, the veiled slavery of the wage-workers in Europe needed, for its pedestal, slavery pure and simple in the new world.[7]

We see here that, in Marx's view, the looting of the world outside Europe contributed to European economic growth. (In spite of the spirited debates about *how much* it contributed, we have fortunately not yet reached that cliometric melting point where the non-European world will turn out miraculously to have been an economic burden upon Europe from the very beginning.) That growth in turn affected the new ways in which Europe continued its developmental efforts elsewhere. But in spite of the citations from Marx, it is not completely clear, at least to me, just how he envisioned slavery – and particularly plantation slavery, for the production of agricultural commodities for European markets – in his picture of world capitalism. I have suggested elsewhere[8] that Marx himself may not have been wholly satisfied with his own understanding of how "slavery pure and simple" fit within capitalism – as when he refers to plantation owners in America as capitalists who "exist as anomalies within a world market based on free labor"[9] – but I do not wish to pursue this exegetical problem further.

---

[7] Marx, *Capital*, *op. cit.*, I, 775, 776, 785.

[8] Sidney W. Mintz, "The So-Called World System: Local Initiative and Local Response," *Dialectical Anthropology*, II, 4, Nov. 1977, 253-70.

Indeed, my task as I understand it must be to concentrate on the Caribbean region, on the plantation system that developed within it, on the nature of slavery as the principal form of labor exaction over nearly four centuries, and on the linkages between slavery and other forms of labor in the same region. I will not, that is, seek to counterpose definitions of slaves and proletarians in some specified epoch, in order to see to what extent they are similar or different. Such an undertaking might be useful within narrow limits; but I would rather concentrate on the nature of slavery in certain specific historical instances to give some idea of its character and variation, against which notions of the proletariat and of proletarians might then be silhouetted.

In a recent essay,[10] I have hypothesized why slavery turned out to be so appropriate a solution to the labor problem in the Caribbean region, beginning as early as the dawn of the sixteenth century, and disappearing completely only in the dusk of the nineteenth. It is not necessary to repeat the argument here, but I do need to make several points in passing, to advance my wider presentation. First, the history of Caribbean slavery was usually marked by the accompanying presence of other forms of labor exaction, frequently in the same industry and even on the selfsame enterprises. That is, only for certain periods, and in certain colonies, did slavery function as the sole form of land-labor relationship on the plantations. Second, the other forms of labor exaction which accompanied slavery all seem to have involved varying degrees of coercion, though the laborers themselves were in most such cases "free" by conventional definition.

For present purposes, I would schematize Caribbean plantation and slave history as falling within five periods:

a) the first Hispanic sugar-cane plantations in the Caribbean, located on the Greater Antilles, *ca.* 1500-1580, manned with enslaved aborigines, and enslaved and imported Africans;
b) the first British and French sugar-cane plantations in the Caribbean, located in the Lesser Antilles, *ca.* 1640-1670, manned with enslaved aborigines, European indentured servants, and enslaved Africans;
c) British and French plantations based exclusively on enslaved African labor, at their apogee in English Jamaica (post-1655) and French St. Domingue (post-1697);
d) a new stage of Hispanic sugar-cane plantations, again on the Greater Antilles (now only Cuba and Puerto Rico), *ca.* 1770-1870, based on enslaved, "contracted" and coerced labor;
e) plantations based on free and "contracted" labor, successively throughout the sugar colonies after emancipation (post-1838, British; post-1848, French; post-1876, Puerto Rico; post-1886, Cuba, etc.).

This five-part schema could be carried forward into the present by the addition of at least two other stages (the emergence of a "genuine" rural proletariat, and then its elimination with progressive mechanization); and of course, it should be elaborated and detailed far more fully. Its principal usefulness here, I believe (as in my review of Wallerstein's *Modern World System*, where I first proposed it),[11] is to indicate how labor forms other than slavery were usually combined with slavery itself, in practice.

---

[9] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (London: Penguin Books, 1973), 523.

[10] Mintz, *op. cit.*

These different forms of labor exaction, existing for the most part in combination in Caribbean history, were *not* interchangeable, each representing a variant response to labor needs; nor was it accidental or random that they usually occurred in combined form, answering needs for labor that could not be most conveniently or profitably met by using one or another form exclusively. Padgug has argued eloquently against the notion that such forms were freely interchangeable, though he concedes that some substitutability was possible:

> There can be no doubt that, to a certain degree, this view is correct. The post-emancipation American systems, for example, were indeed able to convert to other systems of labor without losing their position in world markets. But that they were able to do this was not in fact a function of the absolute interchangeability of labor systems, but rather of the dominance of capitalism in the world, a dominance which created and kept in operation a major system of commodity production and exchange, and which could convert to its own use several more primitive systems of labor, which otherwise would have been by themselves incapable of sustaining a commodity system. . . .
>
> The apparent interchangeability of labor systems at particular historical moments paradoxically exists, therefore, only because of the peculiar nature of the *dominant* labor form, a form which in terms of dominance is not at all interchangeable with other forms. That this should be so ought not to be surprising. For slavery, like other modes of production, has particular characteristics and particular effects which differentiate it from all other modes. And at points where it is precisely those characteristics and effects which dominate the entire socio-economic formation or which are decisive for its functioning (as, for example, in the period when slavery in the Americas proved to be the only system capable of providing labor in sufficient quantities to enable the colonies to be tied to the world), it is not all interchangeable with other modes. It is true that Marx tends to lump slavery and serfdom together on occasion as if they were interchangeable, but this is only vis-à-vis wage-labor, and is only meant to demonstrate the vast differences which exist between all pre-capitalist labor relationships and the capitalist one.[12]

---

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] Robert A. Padgug, "Problems in the theory of slavery and slave society," *Science and Society*, XL, 1, Spr. 1976, 24-25. Padgug's use of the term "pre-capitalist", under which he places slavery and "other pre-capitalist formations . . . the real division [being] between capitalism and all earlier socio-economic formations," can be seriously questioned on several grounds. As Tomich points out in *Prelude to Emancipation: Sugar and Slavery in Martinique, 1830-1848*, (unpubl. Ph.D. dissertation, Univ. of Wisconsin, Madison, 1976) and in "Some Further Reflections on Class and Class-conflict in the World-Economy," (Seminar I, Working Papers, Fernand Braudel Center, Dec. 1, 1976, mimeo), plantation slavery in the New World was in no sense "pre-capitalist", but a very specific *product* of evolving capitalism.

"*Negro slavery* – which is besides incompatible with the development of bourgeois society and disappears with it, *presupposes* wage labor, and if other free states with wage labor did not exist alongside it, if, instead the Negro states were isolated, then all social conditions there would immediately turn into pre-civilized forms." (Marx, *Grundrisse, op. cit.*, 224). It is essential to draw analytical distinctions between different abstracted stages in the history of capitalism, and to explore the differences between so-called merchant capital and industrial capital. But it does not follow inevitably that slavery was coterminous with

Indeed, the history of Caribbean plantations does not show a clear break between a slave mode of production and a capitalist mode of production, but something quite different. The succession of different mixes of forms of labor exaction in specific instances reveals clearly how the plantation systems of different Caribbean societies developed as parts of a worldwide capitalism, each particular case indicating how variant means were employed to provide adequate labor, some successful and some not, all within an international division of labor transformed by capitalism, and to satisfy an international market created by that same capitalist system.

My division of Caribbean plantation labor history into five periods, except insofar as these can be vouchsafed by *legislative* (which is to say, politically documentable) stipulations as to the laws *intended* to regulate the employment and care of laborers of different categories, are quite arbitrary and imperfect. Yet they at least may suggest in some ways the progression of forms of labor exaction or, more precisely, the progression of mixtures of labor exaction, in certain selected cases. We move back and forth here, between some specific historical situation, more or less describable in terms of a dominant mode of production and certain subsidiary, complementary or subordinate but interdependent modes, and an abstract, ahistorical characterization, useful for helping us to understand all instances of concrete and the particular more fully. For my present purposes, it may be sufficient to defend this assertion with a sketchy comparison of two different cases.

Cuba and Puerto Rico, both Spanish colonies, began periods of renewed and rapid plantation expansion dating a few decades apart. In Cuba, the English occupation of Havana for nearly a full year (1762-63) marked the opening of a new epoch; in Puerto Rico, though stirrings of new developments predated the event, the "reforms" of 1809 were the turning-point. In Puerto Rico, the prime mover was legislative, not military; but the legislative process was forced by wider economic pressures, immediately following the loss of all Spanish power on the Latin American mainland, and soon after the Haitian Revolution had destroyed the world's greatest sugar-producing colony. In Cuba, the British set many local economic and political forces in motion by their invasion.[13] Cuba, which was more than ten times larger than Puerto Rico, richer and more populous, and with considerably greater influence in the metropolis, sought to solve its plantation labor problem with more enslaved Africans, and the importation rates in the decades following 1762 were horrifyingly high. Even after Spain had signed an accord with Britain not to import more slaves to its New World possessions, the importations continued, well past the middle of the nineteenth century.

---

one stage only in the world development of capitalism, and surely not that it was pre-capitalist in nature. Because Marxists approach the historical study of capitalism from an evolutionary perspective, it is understandable (but no less in error, I would argue) that they sometimes confuse *non*-capitalist with *pre*-capitalist social formations. Marx himself appears to have understood the difference clearly. The title of the book by Hindess and Hirst, *Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), strikes me as being erroneous for the same reasons.

[13] See Manuel Moreno Fraginals, *El Ingenio* (La Habana, 1964), 5 ff.

But enslaved African labor never sufficed for the Cuban planters of the times. To increase even more the available labor supply, they wrung from the Crown the right to import Chinese contract labor, and imported, during a period stretching out more than half a century, from the height of the plantation system to well after emancipation, perhaps as many as 135,000 Chinese. These "contract" laborers were not slaves, nor could they be said to have been entirely "free", though they were certainly free (as opposed to enslaved) by conventional standards of the time. Knight has cause, it seems to me, for claiming that "Chinese labor in Cuba in the nineteenth century was slavery in every social aspect except the name."[14] But the status of these laborers was not inherited; there were no international treaties against their importation; and there roles on the plantations were not at all precisely those of the slaves.[15] Aimes points out that the large estates of the mid-nineteenth century had mixed labor supplies of Chinese contract laborers and African slaves.[16] "Not one of the giant *ingenios* composed their stock entirely of negroes," he tells us. The gradual addition of Chinese contract laborers to the slave labor force played a particular part in "easing the transition" – to use the euphemism most common in describing this process in the Caribbean – from slavery to freedom. "The industries of Cuba," Aimes writes, "were in an evolutionary stage between slave labour and free labour, and in this change the great *ingenios* were taking the lead. Their first contribution was in the economy of labour effected through better organization and improved machinery, and their second, in replacing half of the slaves by coolies."[17] I shall not attempt here to detail the rationale for this particular process of modernization; suffice it to say that what occurred in Cuba was, on the one hand, consistent with the universal replacement of slave labor by free in the nineteenth century, and on the other, distinctively and uniquely Cuban in some regards.

Puerto Rico, the smaller, poorer, less influential island, entering into the renewed expansion of the sugar industry somewhat more tardily, had no luck in its efforts to influence the Spanish Crown to permit the importation of Asian contract labor. It possessed, however, another potential source of labor which it succeeded in tapping by legislative chicanery. The "reforms" of Don Ramón Power y Giralt achieved before the Cortés in 1809, made it possible for the Puerto Rican government to force onto the plantation freeborn but landless Puerto Ricans, on the elegant grounds that, being landless, they were "vagrants".[18] These measures approximately doubled the available labor force for the plantations; and though Puerto Rico's nineteenth-century sugar industry was very modest, compared to Cuba's, in fact its regimented creole workers played a role neatly analogous to that played by the Chinese in Cuba.

---

[14] Franklin W. Knight, *Slave Society in Cuba During the Nineteenth Century* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin, 1970), 119.

[15] See also Denise Helly, *Histoire des gens sans histoire: les Chinois Macao à Cuba* (in press).

[16] See Hubert H. S. Aimes, *Slavery in Cuba, 1511-1868* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1907), 212-13.

[17] *Ibid.*, 213.

[18] See my "The Role of Forced Labour in Nineteenth Century Puerto Rico," *Caribbean Historical Review*, II, 1951, 134-41; "Labor and Sugar in Puerto Rico and Jamaica, 1800-1850," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, I, 3, Mar. 1959, 273-81; and *Caribbean Transformations* (Chicago: Aldine, 1974).

In these two cases, we see at once the significance of the particular and specific, and the general rule each case substantiates. That rule is that forms of Caribbean plantation labor exaction were not interchangeable, and that slavery rarely occurred in absolutely pure form. It is my contention that findings of this sort throw some light on the general question as to whether the categories "slave" and "proletarian" can be viewed as the same, similar, or best understood only by contrast. I intend to enlarge on this general point at greater length in another publication, so that it need not be developed further here. Let me, then, return briefly to my "stages" to suggest something of the different character of each.

The first developments of the sugar industry in the Hispanic Greater Antilles involved early importations of enslaved Africans, who were used as laborers alongside enslaved Native Americans, on the plantations. These developments had no significant long-range implications for the European sugar market; indeed, the early plantations of this period disappeared in some cases, and exported declining quantities of sugar, for the most part, after the middle of the sixteenth century. Though we lack adequate details, it seems that the labor arrangements for enslaved Africans and Native Americans on these early estates were in fact quite different, American Indians were supposedly "commended" (*encomendados*), a status vaguely resembling enfeoffment, and based upon European practice as a source of legal status. In contrast, enslaved Africans were known to be, and recognized as, slaves, subject to different legal conceptions and laws. Granting that legal prescriptions are a poor guide to actual behavior, it is nonetheless the case that this first period of Caribbean plantation history does not seem to have been characterized by a uniform slave code for its labor force.

The development of more modern plantations in the Lesser Antilles by the British and French involved, first, the use of indentured Europeans, and later, the importation of ever-increasing numbers of enslaved Africans. (There were also some enslaved Native Americans used as labor on these plantations.) Once again, we find a mix of labor-exaction forms, subject to different usages and interpretations. Only after the middle of the seventeenth century does African slave labor begin to prevail; and thereafter indentured European labor plays an ever-declining role in the Lesser Antilles.

Only in the third period, when large-scale plantations were fully developed in Jamaica and French St. Domingue – which is to say, at the zenith of the slave-based system in the eighteenth century – did the plantation labor force (in these two colonies, at least) eventuate in being exclusively African and enslaved. It bears noting that in neither case was this for long the norm. Jamaica was redeveloped as a plantation colony by the English after its invasion in 1655, and became significant as such only well into the eighteenth century. Yet by the first decade of the nineteenth century, the Jamaican sugar industry was in some difficulty, and emancipation came in 1834-38. St. Domingue was developed by the French as a plantation colony even before the western third of the island of Española was ceded to them in 1697; but the plantation system did not reach its zenith there until the eighteenth century. And by the eighth decade of that century, the Revolution was ready to explode upon the colony. In other words, the epoch of "pure slavery" in these two colonies, the most lucrative in European history, was in each case less than a century in length.

In the fourth so-called period, Cuba and Puerto Rico developed their renewed sugar industries on a slave and forced-labor basis; since I have referred to these cases already, however, no more need be added here, except to underline once again the mixed character of the system of labor-exaction.

Finally, a word may be offered concerning the "transitional" period following formal emancipation. In the case of Cuba, as we have seen, Chinese contract labor "eased the transition" to freedom. But in many other instances, it was necessary to destroy the bargaining power of the newly freed in order to approximate conditions of coercion sufficiently continuous with slavery to make the plantation system worthwhile for those who underwrote it. Hence the period following the coming of formal freedom was, in many Caribbean cases, one of intensified chicanery, intimidation, and legislative coercion, reminiscent in its intent of the postbellum U.S. South, but never typified by the specific racist terrorism of the South. The taxes levied on Jamaican freedmen; the trickery used to facilitate the importation of Indian contract laborers to that country; the legislative devices developed to keep land out of the hands of the Guianese freedmen; the so-called "apprenticeship systems" employed to immobilize labor, ostensibly while laborers *learned how to be free*; the importation of Javanese to Surinam – indeed, the list of differentiated "solutions" to the "labor problem" typical of the post-emancipation Caribbean staggers the imagination, and numbs the reader's sense of ethics and fair play. It is only really in the closing decades of the nineteenth century and, in some cases, even later than that, when we are able to note the decline of legislative and other devices limiting in one regard or another the completely free movement of the laborer and the completely free sale of his labor as a commodity. One can argue, accordingly, that only when such a point arrives is it possible to speak of "true proletarians" – but I wish to defer that presumption, and what it brings in its wake.

Instead, I prefer to turn to a somewhat different subject at this point, having to do with slave labor-power, and its significance for the case I am seeking to make. I have already suggested that, like proletarians, slaves are separated from the means of production; but of course, it is not that they have nothing but their labor to sell. Rather, they are *themselves* commodities, their labor is not, under most circumstances, a commodity within the slave economy, but the products of their labor are, under most circumstances, commodities; they themselves appear to be a form of capital, though they are human beings.

The cost of labor, under these conditions:

> ... appears as a series of investments in fixed capital.... Moreover, since the planter has to bear the costs of reproducing the slave, all of the slave's labor appears as unpaid surplus labor for the master.[19] The whole of the slave's product is the property of the

---

[19] Rod Aya, in criticizing the analysis of slavery in *Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production* by Hindess and Hirst, shows how they have misunderstood Marx's treatment. (Review in *Theory and Society*, III, 4, Winter 1976, 623-29). Hindess & Hirst argue: "For the slave all labour is surplus-labour." (*Op cit.*, 132). But neither is true nor did Marx ever claim it. Indeed, he is very explicit: "The wage-form thus extinguishes every

> master. Nonetheless, if the productive activity of the slave is examined, it is apparent that one part of his labor produces the value necessary for his subsistence and the other part produces a surplus. The production of this surplus is the basis of the slave economy, but the value of labor and the distinction between necessary and surplus labor are hidden by the property relation in slave society.[20]

Slaves differ from proletarians not only in that they appear as a form of capital while their labor is not a commodity, but also because they receive no wages, only receiving instead that portion of their labor-power that takes the form of necessary labor, so called. Accordingly, one could assert that they lie outside the commodity system within which they produce; they cannot generate internal demand; and they do not form a consumer market.

This is all very well, to the extent that it allows us to begin to characterize the slave mode of production. All that remains to be done, however, is to move from such postulates to the everyday realities of slave life on Caribbean plantations. In doing so, our grasp of the slave system inevitably becomes more complicated, even as it becomes more nuanced. The cost of slave labor appears, Tomich stresses, "as a series of investments in fixed capital (housing, food, clothing, etc.) . . . [while] all of the slave's labor appears as unpaid surplus labor for the master."[21] Maintenance during the effective productive period of the slave's life (and, indeed, often thereafter) represents a quite different cost from that represented by the original outlay – the purchase price – by which his owner acquires exclusive access to his labor-power.

Not calculated as a part of maintenance is the cost of coercion which, in my view, deserves mention not just because it was an important part of the reality of slave life, but also because I believe that it meshes with the problem of maintenance, and in curious ways. I would be inclined to argue that these two different sorts of running expense, maintenance on the one hand and coercion on the other, can cancel each other out, as it were, under certain conditions. The principal long-term supply-cost of maintaining the slave was, I believe, nutrition. In the slave codes of the Caribbean, slave nutrition usually figured importantly, codes often specifying the kinds and quantities of food with which slaves were supposed to be supplied. Indeed, the provision of adequate food was a prime preoccupation of Caribbean slave systems, and we need not look to altruism for explanation. Debbasch, in his monograph on *marronage* in St. Domingue, argues that inadequate food was probably a principal cause of slave flight from the

---

trace of the division of the working-day into necessary labour and surplus-labour, into paid and unpaid labour. All labour appears as paid labour. In the corvée, the labour of the worker for himself, and his compulsory labour for his lord, differ in space and time in the clearest possible way. In slave-labour, even that part of the working-day in which the slave is only replacing the value of his own means of existence, in which, therefore, in fact, he works for himself alone, appears as labour for his master. All the slave's labour appears as unpaid labour. In wage-labour, on the contrary, even surplus-labour, or unpaid labour, appear as paid. There the property relation conceals the labour of the slave for himself; here the money-relation conceals the unrequited labour of the wage-labourer." (*Capital, op. cit.*, I, 550).

[20] Tomich, *Prelude to Emancipation, op. cit.*, 140-41.

[21] *Ibid.*

plantations there.[22] Yet we immediately see here certain contradictions. The importation of food was always expensive. The slave systems (in their nature, it appears) tended to eliminate the local production of commodities other than those (sugar, coffee, indigo, or whatever) produced on the plantations for export. What is more, plantation systems also tended to eliminate free small-scale producers, as happened over and over again in the Lesser Antilles, as sugar-cane and slavery grew.

In many cases the planters, faced by these contradictions, sought to solve them by using some part of the slave labor force to produce food. Having dealt at length with this subject elsewhere,[23] I do not wish to dwell upon it here; but a few points in passing may be useful. First, it is noteworthy that the slave economies, both directly and indirectly, stimulated the exchange of food plants between the Old World and the New. The most famous particular case, by no means unique, was the commissioning of Capt. Bligh by the Jamaica Assembly to bring the breadfruit from Oceania to that island. Though mutiny thwarted his first attempt, Bligh was successful on his second, and the breadfruit did become an important source of slave subsistence. Second, it deserves note in passing that both the agriculture and the cuisine of the contemporary Caribbean region manifest the interblending of numerous different major traditions, among them African, Asian, European, and Native American; this contemporary picture is, however, centuries old, for the most part, and a byproduct of the economic and demographic history of the Caribbean region. Third, it needs to be stressed that a very substantial part of the slaves' subsistence was, in fact, produced by the slaves themselves, and that in many cases the slaves also produced a goodly measure of the subsistence of the free populations of plantation societies. It is to these latter two points that I wish to devote a little more attention.

In compelling or permitting the slaves to grow subsistence, planters had to balance the value of land put in sugar-cane against its value in food crops. Normally, upland or poorer tracts were used for subsistence cultivation, except on those islands so poor or dry that land could not be made available for such cultivation. It was necessary as well for the planters to balance the slave labor power used on the plantations against its yield if put into subsistence cultivation. Here, once again, the solution where possible was to use the very young and the very old, as well as the adult and ablebodied, and to confine such labor to the periods when work in the sugar-cane fields was less needed. In balancing labor use, a common solution was to leave the slave Sunday and an additional half-day, at least during the so-called "dead time", for the production of foodstuffs. Even this arrangement, however, contained contradictory elements within it.

That these were not without their comical side is suggested by the arguments of Mr. Edward Long, a pro-slavery figure as eloquent as he was virulent, in his two-volume *History of Jamaica*. Long's loyalties were at times confused by the circumstances of slave labor in Jamaica, where slaves were granted at the time each Sunday and another half-day off in order to work on their subsistence plots and go to the market. The slaves of Christians received 86 days per year free from plantation labor (except in cases of very urgent business), which included every Sunday and normally half of every Saturday. The slaves of Jews however, received at least 111 days per year for themselves, because the Jews had more holidays than the Christians.

---

[22] See Yvon Debbasch, "Le marronnage: essai sur la désertion de l'esclave antillais," *L'année sociologique*, 1961, 1-112; 1962, 117-95.

[23] E.g., "Currency Problems in Eighteenth Century Jamaica and Gresham's Law," in R. Manners, ed., *Process and Pattern in Culture* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1964), 248-65; and *Caribbean Transformations, op. cit.*

Long calculated how these additional days not only improved the slaves' morale, but also increased significantly their ability to accumulate capital for themselves. But he recognized that few Christians were Christian enough to give their slaves two free days per week. At the same time, since markets had to be held on Sunday, the only day on which the majority of the slaves was entirely free, the larger part of the market trade was engrossed by Jewish merchants who could work on Sunday, unlike the Christian merchants. In order for Christian shopkeepers to compete with the Jews for the slaves' custom, the market day ought to have been changed to some day other than Sunday. Yet that would have meant a significant loss of labor to Christian slave owners. Long argues for adding Thursday as a free day, to Sunday, both to improve the slaves' morale and to afford Christian shopkeepers a firmer purchase on the buying power of the slaves. He even points out the potential value of religious education for the slaves on Sundays, quoting another writer. "On this day some pains should certainly be taken to instruct them to the best of their comprehension, especially the children, in some of the principles of religion and virtue – particularly humility, submission, and honesty which become their condition."[24] But Long sounds rather half-hearted here; perhaps he knew his Christians too well. The elimination of Sunday markets only came about in 1838, with total emancipation.

Though there was certainly an element of compulsion in the initiation of this form of work, in which slaves devoted a day and one-half per week to the cultivation of their own food plots, we nonetheless see very early in the history of both Jamaica and St. Domingue (the cases for which the information seems to be richest) that the institution soon became one which the slaves themselves preferred. I think this development was of great importance. It reveals simultaneously a whole series of contradictions or inconsistencies implicit, I think, in the slave mode of production, and points to some reservations that I feel about the concept itself. Let me try to enumerate some aspects of this contradiction, or inconsistency.

First of all, the development of food cultivation outside the slavery regimen ran entirely counter to the whole conception of how the slave mode of production was supposed to operate. It meant, above all, that slaves were able to work without supervision. Secondly, it made it possible, (and I believe that it was the only circumstance within the plantation framework in which this was true) for slaves to work in groups of their own choosing – normally in family groups, to judge by the descriptions we have. Thirdly, it permitted the slaves to make calculations – what they would grow, and how much – that not only nourished their own sense of autonomy, but also must have permitted a demonstration within the slave group itself of individual differentiation – a differentiation that did not depend upon the whim of the master. Fourthly – and this comes out in the record, too, particularly in the reports of travellers – it dramatized the nature of the slave regimen, and the humanity of the slaves, to anyone intelligent enough to make the inferences. That these people, seemingly so sodden and stupid and dull, incapable of the simplest operations when cutting cane, could turn out to be lively, intelligent, and even happy when working on their own plots, amazed the planters. But foreigners – travellers – had no difficulty in understanding what the difference was. Moreover, subsistence cultivation by slaves had consequences of even wider significance. In both Jamaica and in Haiti, and in practically all Antillean societies where cultivation of this kind developed, this institution led to production that was not for direct use. Indeed, it led to more than simply the production of food which the producers themselves might consume. Thus the slaves were able to transform what had begun as a coercive form into something else: when a slave sold part of his own production, this meant a "radical breach" in the slave mode of production.[25] The concept of the mode depends, as does that of the capitalist mode, on the separation of the worker from the means of production. When the slave produces food for himself and his family he is adding direct-use production to the economic picture of his structural position. And when he adds the sale of his own product, he adds yet another, somewhat contradictory element to the reality of Antillean slavery. When he buys, with the money he earns by selling, he adds yet another element of a contradictory kind. And when – as was the case in these societies – he provisions the free classes within slave society, this adds yet another such element.[26]

---

[24] Edward Long, *History of Jamaica* (London: T. Lowndes, 1774), I, 491-92.

---

[25] The expression was apparently coined by T. Lepkowski, and appears in his *Haiti*, Vol. I (La Habana, 1968). It is also employed by Ciro F. S. Cardoso in his interesting paper, "La brecha en el sistema esclavista" (ms., 1977). But the idea that Caribbean slaves should not suffer the terminological confinement to which some scholars had consigned them goes back a good deal further; long before the twentieth century, observers noted that slaves and runaways both had done much to alter the nature of slavery itself, and to produce a reality the masters had neither intended nor calculated upon. I have treated this matter more fully in: *Caribbean Transformations, op. cit.*; "Toward an Afro-American history," *Cahiers d'Histoire Mondiale*, XIII, 2, 1971, 317-32); and, with Richard Price, in *An Anthropological Approach to the Afro-American Past: A Caribbean Perspective*, Ishi Occasional Papers in Social Change 2 (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues Press, 1976). Neither Cardoso nor Lepkowski, however, views these "breaches" in the slave system as requiring any revision in the concept of a slave mode of production. I remain a little unsure.

[26] That one mode of production is dominant over other modes within the same formation; that the coexistence of such modes is entirely to be expected and that the concept of mode of production is not intended nor expected to be identical with any particular, on-the-ground reality, are assertions generally accepted by Marxist scholars, I believe. But it does not seem to me to be useful to treat particular historical instances as irrelevant to our understanding of what the ideal-type mode of production consists in, and represents. Nor do I find it useful to seek to explain what might mistakenly be perceived as exceptions, irregularities, or freak instances as being "transitional" phenomena. This part of the argument relates, on the one hand, to old-fashioned dispositions to describe concrete historical cases as examples of "feudal" or "slave" stages of evolution cut off from events elsewhere in the capitalist world, and, on the other, to ignore those very concrete particulars that enable us to grasp precisely what the term "contradiction" means, in understanding better how social formations, and their component modes of production, change over time.

One may say in response to this that, while the case complicates our understanding, it does not affect the nature of the mode of production, or our means for conceptualizing it. Nonetheless, I think we must try to specify what, precisely, is happening here. Moreau de St.-Méry, one of the most thorough observers of prerevolutionary St. Domingue, tells us in a beautiful passage that, in the marketplace of Clugny, in Cap François (today's Cap Haïtien), in the years immediately preceding the revolution, 15,000 slaves came each Sunday to buy and sell.[27] Again, in Jamaica, we know that the first marketplace was established in 1662, only seven years after the conquest of Jamaica by the British, and was followed by hundreds of others. Edward Long tells us that, in the late 18th century, 20% of the metallic currency in Jamaica at that time was in the hands of the slaves who sold to each other, to their masters, to the free population of the towns, and – a fact that would be funny if it were not so tragic – to the garrisons of British soldiers maintained in Jamaica to control the slaves.

Now, if one leaves aside the significance of cultivation and marketing for any elegant theory of mode of production, considering it only in terms of its everyday meaning, I think it leads to at least three points. First this institution puts in doubt any economic formulation that bases itself purely on commodity production in interpreting Antillean slave society. Second, it raises questions about any monolithic definition or explanation of what constitutes resistance. The way that I have couched this before – and one can think of other examples – the cook of the master's family, that faithful lady who prepared the meals three times a day, sometimes put ground glass in the food of her diners. But she had to become the cook before this option became available. What I mean to say, of course, is that the concept of resistance is really very complicated, ideological considerations aside. Third, the institutions of slave cultivation and marketing can help to throw light upon the historical sequences from slavery to other forms of labor exaction – though I believe that neither the research nor the thinking needed to reveal the full meaning of these institutions has taken place so far. "There is something in human history like retribution," Marx has written, "and it is a rule of historical retribution that its instrument be forged not by the offended but by the offender himself."[28] Nothing else during the history of Caribbean slavery was as important as marketing and provision cultivation in making it possible for the free person – in the case of Haiti, the successful revolutionary – to adapt to freedom without the blessings of the former masters.

But of course the process was in no sense a simple one, and both slaves and masters knew it:

> The practice which prevails in Jamaica of giving the Negroes lands to cultivate, from the produce of which they are expected to maintain themselves (except in times of scarcity, arising from hurricanes and droughts, when assistance is never denied them) is

---

[27] See Louis Moreau de St. Méry, *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique, et historique de la partie française de l'isle Saint-Domingue* (Paris: Sociéte d l'histoire des colonies françaises, 1958), I, 433.

[28] Karl Marx, "The Indian Revolt," *New York Tribune*, Sept. 16, 1857, in S. Avineri, ed., *Karl Marx on Colonialism and Modernization* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1969), 224.

> universally allowed to be judicious and beneficial; producing a happy coalition of interests between the master and the slave. The negro who has acquired by his own labour a property in his master's land, has much to lose, and is therefore less inclined to desert his work. He earns a little money, by which he is enabled to indulge himself in fine clothes on holidays, and gratify his palate with salted meats and other provisions that otherwise he could not obtain; and the proprietor is eased, in a great measure, of the expense of feeding him.[29]

Bryan Edwards was too shrewd an observer of eighteenth-century Jamaica to have missed the mutual benefit flowing from these institutions – or to have failed to see how the short-term satisfactions of independent cultivation and sale might have dulled long-term dissatisfactions with the realities of slavery itself. All the same, the development of such institutions within the context of slavery suggests that our conceptions of freedom and unfreedom are probably too narrow and extreme.

Indeed, it is by this assertion that I return to the major aim of this paper: to consider in what ways, and to what extent, the categories "proletarian" and "slave" really approach each other in practice. "The proper role of a definition," Aya tells us, "is to focus attention on observables, to convert disputation over words into disagreement about what they stand for, and thereby open arguments to further inquiry, testing, and refutation. Taken by themselves," he continues, "definitions are arbitrary; they 'prove' nothing. At most they serve to demarcate the problem at issue, not to solve it. They are not subject to 'proof and demonstration' any more than you can 'prove' that a square is a rectangle with all four sides equal."[30] Starting from very meager definitional statements, I have sought to concentrate upon slaves, leaving aside any serious characterization of proletarians. Those slaves with whom I chose to deal were, as we have seen, disposing of some of their own labor-power independently, on the one hand, and often coexisting with representatives of other categories of labor exaction on the other. My aim, clearly, has not been to narrow what might be said about the slaves, so much as to broaden it. Thus, in certain regards it would be accurate to assert that I have touched on some of the ways in which the slaves participated in productive activities not conventionally associated with slavery, or not part of the slave mode of production.

If, on the one hand, I have sought to indicate some ways in which slave economic activities resembled those of free persons, it is also true that I would have liked to have shown how the activities of free persons, working alongside the slaves, were constrained by coercion and force. I have not really done so here; but the note taken of non-slave categories of labor in the Caribbean plantation context was intended to make this general point. Just as slaves were not completely encapsulated by the state of servitude, so those who, technically free, labored at their side were not in fact completely unshackled.[31] The contrast between free and slave, when drawn as Marx drew it in order to dramatize the distinctive nature of European capitalism, is not incorrect, but extreme, and does not – could not – take account of specific historical conditions in every case. As Tomich has asserted, "while Marx stressed the importance of the capitalist world-economy for understanding New World slavery, he never explicitly developed a theory of slave economies, and the question of the social forms of slave production is not systematically treated in his work."[32] Padgug makes a different, but related, point when he writes: "It is true that Marx tends to lump slavery and serfdom together on occasion as if they were interchangeable, but this is only vis-à-vis wage labor, and is only meant to demonstrate the vast differences between all pre-capitalist [*sic*] labor relationships and the capitalist one."[33]

---

[29] Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies* (London: J. Stockdale, 1793), II, 131.

[30] Aya, Review of Hindess and Hirst, *op. cit.*, 625.

[31] F. H. Cardoso, in criticizing very helpfully an early draft of my review of Wallerstein (*Dialectical Anthropology, op. cit.*), writes: "On the one hand, it does not seem to me that these new 'indentured

I do not mean to suggest by these citations that I believe the fundamental economic difference between Caribbean plantation slaves and European factory proletarians can be abandoned by simple recourse to the theme of the global world-economy. I do believe, however, that Wallerstein's insistence is justifiable, that local forms of labor can be made analytically more comprehensible by prior reference to the world-economy:

> The point is that the "relations of productions" that define a system are the "relations of production" of the whole system, and the system at this point in time [the sixteenth century] is the European world-economy. Free labor is indeed a defining feature of capitalism, but not free labor throughout the productive enterprises. Free labor is the form of labor control used for skilled work in core countries whereas coerced labor is used for less skilled work in peripheral areas. The *combination* thereof is the *essence* of capitalism.[34]

Put otherwise, it is not analytically most useful to define either "proletarian" or "slave" in isolation, since these two vast categories of toiler were actually linked intimately by the world economy that had, as it were, given birth to them both, in their modern form. I have not aimed here at assimilating either category

---

servants' from China, India or Java could be thought of as free by anyone making a considered judgement. On the other, abolition did not mean to anyone the passage to a typical capitalist system in regard to productive relations, since slavery was replaced by sharecropping and similar arrangements, which represented a high level of personal dependence, including extra-economic coercion. I believe this is one of the clearest cases of the formal subjection of non-capitalist forms of labor to a clearly capitalist process, thereby preventing internal opportunities for preexisting structures – productive forces, forms and levels of accumulation, and a whole historical context – from responding differently to new influences of the world market.... For me... this reveals the necessity of analyzing, in transitions of this sort, the contradictions [arising from] the confluence of external and internal forces" (personal correspondence, my translation).

While I agree entirely, I believe that these contradictions must raise continuing questions of a theoretical nature about the categories themselves ("proletarian", "slave") and the adjectives ("free", "unfree") we use to describe them. The contradictions are both a cause and an outcome of specific and particular circumstances that *should* affect the nature of our categories. It is the categories which are *abstract*.

[32] Tomich, *Prelude to Emancipation, op. cit.*, 138.

[33] Padgug, *op. cit.*, 24-25.

[34] Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Academic Press, 1974), 27.

to the other, but at suggesting instead why a purely definitional approach leaves something to be desired. I shall not attempt to broach a related theme – the specific economic linkages between European proletarians and Caribbean slaves through the products of their labor – which deserves separate and detailed treatment in its own right. But it may be appropriate to conclude by suggesting that both the similarities and differences between these abstract categories will become much clearer, once those linkages have become fully exposed.