

MARX: THE HISTORICAL NECESSITY OF SLAVERY&AGRICULTURE

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ABSTRACT: According to a Marxist code of evaluation, slavery seems to be an institution existing as an outdated anachronism, an economic remnant from a past phase in the historical development of man, as yet still present in modern economics as a defect. Upon further readings, Karl Marx clearly articulates that slavery is an integral part of the existent economic model, i.e. capitalism, both in industry and in agriculture. The separation of town and country according to a Marxist conception of history however leads to two distinct types of labor being present in capitalism; in agriculture slavery is blatant and honest in appearance, while in industry slavery is now disguised as ‘free’ labor. More importantly, by looking at Marx’s criticism of direct slavery we are better able to understand his criticisms of free labor, indirect slavery. The primary question of Marxism then becomes: What material condition precipitates the transition of direct slavery to that of indirect ‘metaphorical’ slavery or *free* labor? Why did chattel slavery as an economic institution end, and what were the material historical conditions that necessitated the transition from Wall Street to Wall Street? I want to know the fundamental relationship between slavery and capital. This paper then is more fundamentally an exploratory examination of whether or not Marx gives a compelling account for the material end of slavery as well as slavery’s relation to capital. I thus examined how and why the division of town/country and industry/agriculture marked the differences between these kinds of slavery, and how this material condition then led to direct slavery’s ending as an economic model in agriculture. By navigating the implications of slavery upon agriculture and the development of capital a much deeper analysis begins with questioning the ‘necessity’ of historical developments and the creation of ‘historical necessity’. In the interstices of history, cause and effect, agricultural slavery and capitalism, are much cloudier than Marx would have us believe.

KEYWORDS: Marx; Arendt; Agriculture; Slavery

According to a Marxist code of evaluation, slavery seems to be an institution existing as an outdated anachronism, an economic remnant from a past phase in the historical

development of man, as yet still present in modern economics as a defect. Upon further readings, Karl Marx clearly articulates that slavery is an integral part of the existent economic model, i.e. capitalism, both in industry and in agriculture. The separation of town and country according to a Marxist conception of history however leads to two distinct types of labor being present in capitalism; in agriculture slavery is blatant and honest in appearance, while in industry slavery is now disguised as 'free' labor. More importantly, by looking at Marx's criticism of direct slavery we are better able to understand his criticisms of free labor, indirect slavery. Marx refers to the Satires of Horace, "Mutatonomine de tefabula narrator. For slave-trade read labor-market...",¹ the Latin reads, "The name being changed, this story is about you," clearly indicating that Marx' main criticism is against slavery. In *Das Kapital*, Marx's primary concern is with industry and as such he preoccupies himself with the relation of the free labor to capital which alternately leads to a relatively light evaluation of the use slavery has to capital. This is primarily because direct slavery exists outside of industry only in landed property and agriculture. Capitalism operates within this schism between agriculture and industry, this split between slave and free labor. In a letter to Pavel Vasilyevich Annenko, Marx states:

Direct slavery is as much the pivot upon which our present-day industrialism turns as are machinery, credit, etc. Without slavery there would be no cotton, without cotton there would be no modern industry. It is slavery which has given value to the colonies, it is the colonies which have created world trade, and world trade is the necessary condition for large-scale machine industry.²

Marx, however only sketches here and there the division and competition between the two that drive capitalism. The primary question of Marxism then becomes: What material condition precipitates the transition of direct slavery to that of indirect 'metaphorical' slavery or *free* labor? Why did chattel slavery as an economic institution end, and what were the material historical conditions that necessitated the transition from Wall Street to Wall Street? I want to know the fundamental relationship between slavery and capital. This paper then is more fundamentally an exploratory examination on whether or not Marx gives a compelling account for the material end of slavery as well as slavery's relation to capital. I thus examined how and why the division of town/country and industry/agriculture marked the differences between

¹Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Robert C. Tucker. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 1978, p. 375.

²"Letter from Marx to Pavel Vasilyevich Annenko." *Marx & Engels Internet Archive*, n.d. Web. 02 Oct. 2012, p. 1.

these kinds of slavery, and how this material condition then led to direct slavery's ending as an economic model in agriculture.

WHAT FIRST IS A SLAVE?

Before I can begin to examine slavery's decay in capitalism or its primary relation with industry I must first examine Marx's definition of slavery and the slave. With all things Marx we must necessarily begin with premises. If we take as a given the soundness of Marx's historical and economic model, we must then look at the ways in which slavery exists in these economic models and the changes that accompany slavery through these historical transitions. But what exactly is slavery to Marx? In earlier economic historical phases slavery existed as both class and movable property. Marx states, "Real private property began with the ancients, as with modern nations, with movable property. — (Slavery and community) (*dominium ex jure Quiritum*)"³, and thus slavery has its foundations in landed property and in fact is defined as a class of conquered people, the property of a master. With the advent of feudalism and the appearance of serfs in the Middle Ages it is seen that an individual, "only becomes a slave in certain relations."⁴ Marx holds that slavery is but a social relation and the preponderance to make this social relationship hereditary is due to a lack of knowledge of historical precedents and the desire to preserve the status quo. Being a social relationship, Marx further divides the class into two types of slavery, the indirect slavery of the wage-working proletariat and the direct slavery of forced labor. This division frustrates a reading of Marx, as he is apt to frequently refer to the wageworker as a slave to the bourgeois capitalist, fettered to a work that has come to oppress him. Before we can regulate ourselves to direct slavery and its subsequent relations with capital, we must first establish the material and social differences that come to define direct slavery. By better distinguishing direct slavery from indirect slavery one can examine as to whether or not the distinctions in labor led to slavery's dissolution.

Moreover, in Marx's economic model direct slavery loses the characteristics of property. Where once serfs were a class and property, chattel slaves become commodities. The slave when bought and sold can no longer count himself or his labor as his own, as his property. The two-fold condition of direct slavery is that slave's labor is not his property nor is his labor defined as labor-power. The slave cannot sell his labor as a commodity he and his labor-power are sold once and for all

³Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Robert C. Tucker. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 1978, p. 186.

⁴Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Robert C. Tucker. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 1978, p. 207.

as a commodity. Marx states, “The slave, together with his labour power, is sold once and for all to his owner. He is a commodity, which can pass from the hand of one owner to that of another. He is himself a commodity, but the labour power is not his commodity.⁵ Thus, slavery acquires its chattel characteristics; as a slave-owner buys a horse and not the horses’ labor so too does this relationship replicate itself with the human slave. Furthermore, this estrangement of the slave to his labor is made manifest in the slave’s social relationships in the simple fact that it is only the slave’s labor whose products do not become their social relations. The difference between indirect slavery and direct slavery is a matter of forced relations to free relations, and the social relations that they entail. Slavery by divorcing the producer from the means of production holds that an agricultural slave can never be defined as a farmer. The slave’s labor is not his own, the products of his labor are not his own, and his social relations are not defined by farming but by servitude. This estrangement is not a felt condition of life and labor in direct slavery instead this estrangement could be better expressed as an absent condition of life. Marx observes, “Since the producers do not come into social contact with each other until they exchange their products, the specific social character of each producer’s labour does not show itself except in the act of exchange”⁶. As the plantation owner comes into social contact with other producers his social relation is defined by his two-fold commodities (chattel and cotton). Socially, then the slave becomes his private labor, able to be bought and sold in the town market. Thus, money conceals the slave-owner’s labor, conceals “the social character of private labor”⁷. Capital disguises the social character of forced labor; expends the relation between slavery’s forced labor and the collective labor of society. The social relation of the slave master is defined by his accumulation of human commodities, whilst the slave’s social relation to his material products and therefore society is estranged. Just as slavery comes to define the slave-owner’s private labor and accumulates capital as a commodity the kind of commodity a direct slave and his labor are must be clarified.

⁵Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Robert C. Tucker. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 1978, p. 204-5.

⁶Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Robert C. Tucker. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 1978, p. 321.

⁷Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Robert C. Tucker. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 1978, p. 324.

Marx clearly states, “To become a commodity a product must be transferred to another, whom it will serve as a use-value, by means of an exchange”⁸, and as such a slave becomes a commodity by means of an exchange between individuals other than himself. This difference in alienation and estrangement of the slave and his labor is that the slave never has possession of his labor to begin with. The slave is never placed in his social relation to sell himself or his labor; all his social relations are forced. The social use of a slave is thus directly in opposition to the slave’s social relationship. Marx says, “...that the value of commodities has a purely social reality, and...that value can only manifest itself in the social relation of commodity to commodity”⁹, and thus the slave has no clearly expressed social reality. His value and position to society is as a commodity. The slave is thus distanced from all other social relations with regards to the product of his labor. In the marketplace, men express their position and place in society through their products, the direct slave is instead the product being bought. Thus with the cotton industry, cotton is the value in which the use-value of the slave is expressed. Marx states, “That second commodity is not the one whose value is expressed. Its function is merely to serve as the material in which the value of the first commodity is expressed.”¹⁰ The bodily form of commodity B (cotton) becomes the value form of commodity A (slave), and there is no other relation in which the slave has to society. How then does agriculture - the country, cotton - accrue capital? The surplus value of a slave is never in his labor, as it is unproductive. As there is no competition to be a slave or against slaves themselves, slave labor has no incentive to produce efficiently. Instead surplus value is increased with the rise of economic markets, availability of arable land, increases in slave population, and the introduction of machinery, such as the cotton gin. Slavery is then fixed capital, as opposed to the working capital of the industry. This distinction in capital has a direct impact on the dissolution of institutional slavery as it defines the primary relationship between bourgeois industry and agrarian slavery.

⁸Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Robert C. Tucker. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 1978, p. 308.

⁹Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Robert C. Tucker. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 1978, p. 313.

¹⁰Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Robert C. Tucker. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 1978, p. 314.

TOWN & COUNTRY, INDUSTRY & AGRICULTURE, FREE LABOR & SLAVE LABOR

Direct slavery never exists in the town Marx's economic model; rather it is in the country in which slave labor forms through the division of labor. Class distinctions form in the country around private property, where wealth and servitude are determined by landed property. Marx states, "The separation of town and country can also be understood as the separation of capital and landed property, as the beginning of the existence and development of capital independent of landed property — the beginning of property having its basis only in labour and exchange."¹¹ The separation of town and country was first seen in the historical development of feudalism and is expressed in capitalism through a division of industry and agriculture. In fact, the division presents itself as two distinct forms of labor and economic modes of operation: that of landed property versus industrial manufacturing. Agriculture operated under direct slavery while Industry worked with wage labor. I would be negligent if I did not acknowledge that wage-labor and capital has its historical basis in agriculture in material goods. Marx states, "The expropriation of the agricultural producer, of the peasant, from the soil, is the basis of the whole process [of capitalism]"¹². Thus, the reason slavery ended must not only reflect to its failings in agriculture it must also detail the competition and cooperation the plantation system had with industry. The reasons for the progression of wage-labor in agriculture are precisely where I must begin.

The antagonism of industry and agriculture are first presented during feudalism and the Middle Ages in which town and country became effectively separated. When serfs, who were formerly tied to landed property and under the sway of landowners, fled to towns it announced the advent of capitalism and the formation of the town based on free, equal, and hierarchical labor. The establishment of the town brings about fundamental antagonisms in the country. The prosperity of the town is in direct proportion to the fleeing of serfs from property; the wealth of the nation is transmitted from landed property into that of the town and the petty-bourgeois who eventually form industrial capitalism. Marx states, "The bourgeoisie has subjected the country to the rule of the towns. It has created enormous cities, has greatly increased the urban population as compared with the rural, and has thus rescued a considerable part of the

¹¹Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Robert C. Tucker. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 1978, p. 176.

¹²Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Robert C. Tucker. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 1978, p. 433-4.

population from the idiocy of rural life.”¹³ Slavery then as the main mode of economic and political prosperity for the country is slowly diminished by the rise of industrial cities and free labor. The establishment of the first town was in fact the death rattle of slavery as a historical phase. Slavery still survives as an institution as it increases the wealth of landowners while exponentially increasing the wealth of capital and industrialist. It was the economic nature of slavery that led to its end. Slavery could not accumulate capital as productively as industry. Marx states, “In the sphere of agriculture, modern industry has a more revolutionary effect than elsewhere, for this reason, that it annihilates the peasant, that bulwark of the old society, and replaces him by the wage-labourer.”¹⁴ What other factors then played a crucial part in the cessation of slavery and its transition into industrial agriculture and factory farming? What could capital –the North, the workingman– gain by destroying chattel slavery?

CIVIL WAR: THE TURNING OF AGRICULTURE

In the article, “The Civil War in the United States”, Marx states, “The present struggle between the South and the North is therefore nothing but a conflict between two social systems, the system of slavery and the system of free labor. The struggle broke out because the two systems can no longer live peacefully side-by-side on the North American continent. It can end only with the victory of one system or the other”¹⁵. When slavery is able to keep up with the demand of the industry then these two social systems are in equilibrium; but as slavery creates more raw materials for which productive industry can work with the more slavery can no longer run effectively agriculture. It can no longer adequately provide for the world market slavery itself created. And without force, slavery has no internal basis to keep it in existence. Marx holds that slavery in fact motivates the wage-labor to become more productive thereby increasing competition with industry. By placing the wageworker in relation to an enslaved caste that the free laborer cannot fall into, labor essentially expresses and enhances the workingman’s freedom. Engels writes, “Slavery in the United States of America was based far less on force than on the English cotton industry; in those districts where no cotton was grown or which, unlike the border states, did not breed slaves for the cotton-growing states, it died out of itself without

¹³Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Robert C. Tucker. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 1978, p. 477.

¹⁴Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Robert C. Tucker. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 1978, p. 416-7.

¹⁵“The Civil War in the United States”. *Marx & Engels Internet Archive*. 1999. Web. 03 Oct, p. 1.

any force being used, simply because it did not pay”¹⁶. No person wants to be a slave in his or her social relations!

Consequently, Marx makes the argument that the more the plantation system produced the more it failed to replicate the success of industry, because slave labour although profitable has limits. Agrarian slavery as fixed capital, and therefore dead labor, was the least productive form of labor. Slavery gave no positive incentives to work. Slavery had no interior competition between workers, little circulation of capital, minimal consumption of products, and a division of labor that could not match the simplification of the machine. And more importantly, without land slavery dies! We only need to look to the United States as an example. In the Address of the International Working Men’s Association to President Lincoln, Marx states, “The contest for the territories which opened the dire epopee, was it not to decide whether the virgin soil of immense tracts should be wedded to the labor of the emigrant or prostituted by the tramp of the slave driver?”¹⁷ The American Civil War understood through dialectical materialism was thus the conflict of two social and economic systems. The conflict arose as to whether or not new territories and states would be slave states or free ‘labor’ states. The North, home to capital and industry, mass producers of capital and weapons, financed the war. The industrialist’s interest in the Civil War was that a Northern victory allowed for full political and economic domination of the capitalist and thus the promotion of capitalism as a singular system. The Civil War Amendments were the final death blows of slavery. Free labor was now introduced into agriculture.

Thus, Marx argues that the different historical phases of man are simply structured on the effectiveness and productivity in which they extract labor and material from the soil to quell human need. This revolving process is poignantly expressed in the form of slavery, an economic institution that exists in all historical phases, that seeks to produce cheaply the needs of society. What is revolutionary about slavery is that it reaches its synthesis in the form of free labor. This is possible because Marx’s economic model is founded on dialectical materialism, which states that economic systems endeavor to maximum efficiency, while simultaneously developing the conditions that lead to their demise. Slavery by building capitalism produces its own negation; the more productive the institution the more it strengthens the town industry at the expense of landowners, the petty nonindustrial bourgeois. The workingmen like

¹⁶Engels, Frederick. *Anti-Duhring*. Moscow, Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1959, p. 222-3.

¹⁷ Marx, Karl. "Address of the International Working Men's Association to President Lincoln." *Marx & Engels Internet Archive*, 2000. Web. 02 Oct. 2012.

the serfs of old feudalism have come now back to the country to free the slaves in order so that they may all be free to exploit and plunder the soil productively. For Marx the transition of direct slavery to indirect slavery was a 'historical necessity' based on growing populations and finite arable land. Institutional slavery as an economic model could no longer support the *material* need of a world market. I hold then that slavery is compatible with a Marxist evaluation of capital. However, much more remains to be said about 'historical necessity.'

HISTORICAL NECESSITY

The dialectic approach towards capital, towards history itself, places a demand upon history that cannot in fact be justified without analysis. The necessity demanded by Marx & Engels for a history that not only demands, but also justifies through cause and effect the events of our world is founded on a prejudice of the social sciences. In 'Tradition and the Modern Age,' Hannah Arendt states that, "The thread of historical continuity was the first substitute for tradition; by means of it, the overwhelming mass of the most divergent values, the most contradictory thoughts and conflicting authorities, all of which has somehow been able to function together, were reduced to a unilinear, dialectically consistent development actually designed to repudiate not tradition as such, but the authority of all traditions."¹⁸ When Arendt refers to a 'thread of historical continuity' or, in fact, the historicizing of the common world into a related and simultaneously developed reading of history, all separate and divergent histories and traditions are subsumed into social history.

Unilateral readings of the common world, traditionally read histories and values, are not shattered though by the development of historical continuity, rather it emerged as an artificial stopgap. Authority, meant to be held in check, to literally be held, as modernity brought an end to tradition. The sieve of the historical continuity and development which first was articulated in Hegelian dialectics, the predecessor to Marx, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche, inevitably led to self-defeating efforts. These three men for Arendt represent not sirens nor clarions but rather the first voices, which were able to articulate the break of tradition with authority. All three men were able to articulate modernity's inevitable loss of authority as it became free from traditions that no longer held meaning, while at the same time being unable to break free from the philosophical traditions that grounded them historical grammar. Marx's materialistic inversion cannot be understood without first understanding Hegel's idealism. Kierkegaard's almost fanatic belief cannot be understood without first understanding

¹⁸Arendt, Hannah. *Between past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. New York: Penguin, 1978, p. 26.

Cartesian doubt and the scientific unbelief that would soon follow. Nietzsche's amor fati cannot be understood as an inversion without first understanding Platonism's idealism. These thinkers did not signal the loss of tradition, and therefore a real loss of authority, the loss of tradition was evident according to Arendt by the usurpation of social history and its jargon to replace the much older traditions of Christendom and political philosophy.

When Marx inverted political philosophy and sought to 'realize philosophy' in politics traditional authority became disassociated with political philosophy. Likewise, social history and modernity in their own manner disassociated themselves with all forms of traditions, with all forms of past authority. By reducing, "the overwhelming mass of the most divergent values, the most contradictory thoughts and conflicting authorities" into dialectics, Hegel in a manner subverts the authority of all traditions. Modernity's great loss is that there is no authority left in any institutions, the very traditions that they lie on are in abeyance for authority itself has a tradition that is dismissed by historical continuity. Political authority, at least speaking for Western thought, has historically been Platonic in origin. Authority along with tradition and religion have been lost on modernity specifically because what for Marx, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche had been a, "questioning [of] the conceptual hierarchy which had ruled Western philosophy since Plato and which Hegel had still taken for granted"¹⁹ has become a radical break; a lived reality. There is no hierarchy and no tradition with which any authority can be gained or regained. Historical necessity, the calling card of the social sciences, is that which has usurped the authority present in the Western tradition. By navigating the implications of slavery upon agriculture and the development of capital, a much deeper analysis begins with questioning the 'necessity' of historical developments and the creation of 'historical necessity'. In the interstices of history, cause and effect, agricultural slavery and capitalism, are much cloudier than Marx would have us believe.

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¹⁹Arendt, Hannah. *Between past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. New York: Penguin, 1978, p.28.