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Source: *Theory and Society*, Vol. 20, No. 3, Special Issue on Slavery in the New World (Jun., 1991), pp. 321-349

Published by: [Springer](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/657556>

Accessed: 01/02/2011 08:06

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Slavery in capitalism

The rise and demise of the U.S. ante-bellum cotton culture

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Capitalism and modern slavery have often been associated with one another,¹ but rarely as a unity. In most accounts, slavery stands apart from capitalism as a discrete, alternative, or anachronistic form of labor in the modern world. This perspective displays a conceptual rigidity on the one hand, or a methodological individualism on the other. That is, either “slavery” and “capitalism” are conceptualized in ideal-typical and historically abstract terms, or slavery and capitalism are demarcated as distinct social, and therefore political, systems. In each case, the relation between slavery and capitalism is understood as an “external,” unintegrated relation.

My argument in this essay is that U.S. *ante-bellum* slavery did not stand in such an “external” relationship to capitalism. The slave South had a distinctive politics, but a politics increasingly implicated in a broader social current as industrialism encompassed the slave plantation.² However, the relation was not simply one of political effects. It was also a question of the changing social organization of cotton production. Slave plantations assumed a new intensity in scale and management, referred to by DuBois as a shift “from a family institution to an industrial system.”³ And slave labor itself assumed a new meaning as planters acquired slaves less for social status, and more as commodity-producing labor. In this movement slave labor became a phenomenal form of value-producing labor.

As value-producing labor, ante-bellum slavery was “internal” to world capitalism. This is not to say that *colonial* slavery was not related to European capitalism, rather it is to emphasize that capitalism itself was qualitatively different in the nineteenth century. Industrial capitalism transformed the content of world-market relations.⁴ Instead of being regulated within the mercantilist framework, commerce, now globally

organized, was driven by value relations. Under these new relations, combining metropolitan wage labor and peripheral slave labor, the content of the latter changed while its form remained. The central issue here, to be developed below, is that *phenomenally* slavery and wage labor coexisted as *distinct* social forms of labor, and yet *theoretically* value relations were their *common* determinant. Briefly, the reproduction of metropolitan wage labor depended on the reorganization of global finance to expand and unify commodity circuits. The cotton culture was a creature of this movement. Through this mechanism slave labor was subordinated to the competitive requirements of the regime of industrial capital. One expression of this shift was the adoption in plantation management of a new bureaucratic regimen in the ante-bellum period, characterized by Thompson as “military agriculture.”⁵

My argument depends fundamentally upon demonstrating that industrial capital and its new global circuits reconstituted slavery in the ante-bellum period. The most obvious change was the rise of the gang-system of slave labor in the South, associated not only with the cotton crop in particular (rather than tobacco), but also with the concentration of planter capital in the ante-bellum period. Gang labor proved to be the most efficient organization of agricultural labor in the United States at the time, depending fundamentally upon the open Southwestern frontier.⁶ Planter capital concentration was rooted in the development of a mobile cotton culture, driven by an elaborate system of commercial advancing, where cotton production, rather than a stable plantation culture, became the overriding goal. Land and slaves became less a source of social status, and more the ingredients of a specialized branch of commodity production stimulated by a global financial “putting-out” system.

The framing conception of this essay is the idea that ante-bellum slavery and its political system can be reinterpreted as increasingly subject to the forces of a wage-labor regime with global dimensions. This approach is an attempt to resolve the problems inherent in, for example, Genovese’s essentialist conception of slavery on the one hand, and Wallerstein’s undifferentiated conception of world capitalism, on the other. Genovese identifies the slave-labor relation as his analytical unit,⁷ as the basis of a distinct slave mode of production in the Old South.⁸ But this reduces an already problematic concept of “mode of production” to *extant* production relations devoid of the world-historical dimension of circulation relations. As a result, the world-market context of the ante-bellum South remains external to the

specification of cotton slavery.⁹ And consequently the cotton-culture dynamics reconstituting slavery are discounted. Genovese's abstract methodological individualism is matched by Wallerstein's abstract generality. The concept of the "world-system" tends to reduce differences among systems of commodity producing labor in a mutually determining world economy to variations of capitalism. Arguing as he does that "the essence of capitalism" lies simply in the "combination" of diverse relations of production, Wallerstein forfeits the ability to give analytical priority to any one relationship, in particular, wage-labor.¹⁰

My argument here is that one can understand the specificity of nineteenth-century world capitalism and slavery only by elaborating the global determinants and implications of wage labor. The key to each was the ongoing development of global capital circuits (money and commodities, including labor), and a state system within which to anchor them.¹¹ In the nineteenth century, a unified world market reducing the *legitimacy* and *need* for formal mercantilist relationships emerged as the substantive foundation of British hegemony. Liberal political-economy anchored new commercial circuits, integral to the "self propulsion attained by industrial capital,"¹² and marking the establishment of a wage-labor regime and its world economy. This regime extended and reformulated value relations throughout the world, in particular expanding the industrial inputs (e.g., cotton) and wage foods¹³ of the new metropolitan industrial culture. The master-slave relation, once organized particularistically, was reorganized generally as a value relation through its contribution to cheapening the costs of industrial capital.

In this essay I examine the trajectory of the "cotton culture" as a consequence of the incorporation of Southern plantation slavery into the global wage-labor regime. Incorporation transformed Southern slavery, displacing its patriarchal form with an industrial form. Such transformation generated contradictory social and political currents leading to the eventual political demise of the Southern slave regime. The demise of ante-bellum slavery was not a logical outcome of the confrontation of capitalist modernity with slavery, however. Rather it derived from the intensification of slavery as it was fully incorporated within the regime of industrial capital. Intensification encouraged Southern expansionism, in a proto-nationalist form, and this generated regime-threatening conflict from both within and without the region.

Wage-labor as a world-historical relation

This essay seeks to contribute to a growing body of literature concerned with locating the formation of modern regional identities and local labor systems within larger, world-historical processes.¹⁴ The goal is two-fold: (1) to emphasize the mutual conditioning of world-economic and local processes and actors; and (2) to offer alternative explanations of social change to those conventional linear accounts common to both liberal and Marxist historiography.

The point is not to superimpose a deductive schema on historical processes that identifies wage-labor as the evolutionary goal, or definitive form, of capitalist development. This position renders all non-wage-forms of labor non-capitalist by definition, substituting a rigid, empirical conception of capitalism for a historically informed conception. This tendency informs the long-standing debate about the relative influence of class or market relations on social change. Productionists maintain that social dynamics derive from the relationships of the dominant system of production within a given social formation, because these affect politics and technological change. Circulationists, on the other hand, derive social change from market expansion. They argue that economic development (productive efficiency and innovation) depends on a growing division of labor. Productionists claim that circulationists abstract from the social relations of production and therefore from the specificity of local political-economic systems,¹⁵ whereas circulationists claim the market is a key presupposition of commodity production.

The problem with this standoff is that it fragments the historical unity of production and circulation relations established under wage labor. Capital has always been in principle a global relation,¹⁶ unifying regions differentiated in time and space. Theoretically, then, capital integrates various labor systems via a common value relation. At the phenomenal level, these differences distract us from perceiving the qualitative reformulations of non-wage labor systems as they internalize value relations. This does not mean we should abstract from local commodity production relations and their specific political dynamics. Rather we should conceptualize them as local expressions of a world-historical process. This allows us to recognize that local dynamics are as much the world capitalist economy as those circulation relations encompassing them. It also allows us to concede the analytical priority of wage-labor, as a complex of many historical (temporal and spatial) determinations,

insofar as it organizes and animates the unity of (differentiated) world-market relations.

This perspective derives from Marx's method, which produces social categories that are historically concrete and that constitute, in his words: "a rich totality of many determinations and relations."¹⁷ Marx's concept of "wage-labor" exemplifies this form of *concrete* abstraction. It was of course specific to modern capitalism. The concept of "wage-labor" was not an empirical concept, as wage-labor was neither numerically predominant nor a self-contained relation. It presupposed large-scale historical transformations including the related processes of peasant expropriation and the construction of a world market – both of which were decisive preconditions for the emergence of capitalism. Wage-labor also prefigured the future, insofar as the commodity system anchored in wage-labor would generalize itself. In these senses, the wage-labor relation was a theoretical concept crystallized from historical processes. As such, it presumes a context of commodity circulation, which reproduces (in an expanding scale) social relationships governed by the wage relation.

With respect to the industrial capitalist regime, whereas metropolitan wage-labor historically anchors world capitalist relations, it is not the sole form of labor involved in global commodity production. In temporal terms, wage and non-wage forms of labor coexist within the same universe of value relations, each influencing the other. Theoretically, and historically, the wage relation *unifies* commodity-producers via self-reproducing global capital circuits, within which producing classes mutually condition one another (in production and circulation). While proletarianization has been the governing tendency, it has not been the sole tendency of capitalist development. It is problematic to assume that wage-labor is the endpoint of capitalist development, even if it is the historically definitive form of labor in such an uneven and combined global system.¹⁸ In this sense, the fate of nineteenth-century slavery should not be reduced to some abstract logic. In what follows, I attempt to situate ante-bellum slavery within the changing organization of the world economy, paying particular attention to the local consequences.

Slavery and the world economy

Slave labor was integral to the emerging world economy. It was a com-

modity-producing labor force expressing the close relation between the state and commerce in the formative period of world capitalism. The (international) origins of capital and, later, wage labor lay in the mercantilist system. Merchant capital, of course, was an age-old form of capital, but under mercantilist policy its exclusivist propensities (monopolizing trade routes) were put to work by the European states, which enlarged and sanctioned its exchange activity. The colonial system was an international regime that combined political monopoly and the expanded production and circulation of commodities. Industrial capital was the outcome:

Slavery has given value to the colonies. The colonies have created world trade; world trade is the necessary condition of large-scale machine industry.¹⁹

Aside from the politics of market formation, slavery transcended the social barriers to commodity production on a large scale within Europe. Traditional agrarian relations, guilds, and custom put limits upon European production and trade (including the “putting-out” system), and consequently colonial slavery provided the social organization of labor for large-scale commodity production. As C. L. R. James has reminded us, slave labor was the first form of expropriated social labor: “The slaves ... were closer to a modern proletariat than any group of workers in existence at the time. ...”²⁰ Merchants thus found the colonial system and its associated slave trade a ready apparatus with which to prefigure capitalist production and accumulation (and, incidentally, to spur the “putting-out” system in rural Europe).²¹

The role of slavery changed with the emergence of industrial capitalism and the reorganization of the world market under British hegemony. The change was in the organization of the commercial apparatus surrounding slavery and in the structure of the world market itself. These changes penetrated and reformulated the content of the slave relation, even though the slave form persisted.

Under the colonial system, a protected trade in luxury commodities and slaves underwrote merchant capital accumulation where commercial profits were made in circulation (especially in high commission charges on planters).²² By contrast, under the nineteenth-century industrial capitalist regime, the organization of commercial credit became increasingly abstracted from personal mercantile connections, with the growing sophistication of City of London financial institutions

as English banking centralized. With the rise of the discount market, merchant capital was institutionalized as money-dealing capital encouraged bill dealing instead of simply bill broking. This allowed foreign merchants to discount bills drawn on London facilities, rather than on parent firms, thus proliferating commercial credit and speeding the turnover of commodities in world trade.²³ With this universalization of commercial advancing, profits now depended directly upon the *competitive organization of labor*, rather than the protection of trade. Beiguelman puts it like this:

The Industrial Revolution fundamentally altered the situation. On the one hand, British industry achieved the conditions necessary to compete freely in the North American and world market, and could dispense with the maintenance of a forced consumer market. On the other hand, with the self-propulsion attained by industrial capital, the importance of surpluses created by the slave trade diminished as a factor in the accumulation of capital.²⁴

This was one condition of the abolition of the international slave trade, another being its role in Britain's challenge to rival colonial systems.

The consequences for the South are well-known – the necessity to maintain the regime through slave-breeding and an improvement in material conditions. An internal slave trade sprang up, and a secular increase in slave prices set in. In this changed context slavery was no longer the “pedestal” of metropolitan capital accumulation – it was merely one of several competing forms of commodity-producing labor in the capitalist world market. Slavery was no longer in a special relation (via trade monopolies) to the metropolitan accumulation regime – it was a dispensable form of labor depending on its competitiveness in the world market for survival.²⁵ This historical fact, combined with the desire of slaveholders to maintain their regime, rendered slaveholder paternalism increasingly contradictory.

The very vehicle of maintaining the slaveholder regime (as an expanding one) – the credit system – was at the same time the vehicle of commercial pressure on the planter. The credit system not only set the planter on the land, but it also infused his enterprise with the competitive logic of value relations anchored in metropolitan capitalist production. The cotton planter obtained access to world money markets and world commodity markets through the ubiquitous “factor,” agent for Northern or British commercial houses.²⁶ Commercial advancing by the factor to the planter was only the final link in a chain of credit running through New York and Liverpool, tying planter capital to the

London banking houses. Credit links matched the chain of marketing services moving raw cotton to Manchester, via New York, although a minority portion of Southern cotton exports were increasingly destined for Boston during the later ante-bellum period.²⁷

This commercial relationship with metropolitan economy constituted the basis of expansion of Southern cotton culture.²⁸ Contrary to essentialist notions of the expansionary and defensive dynamic of the master-slave relation²⁹ the ultimate source of planter capital accumulation was the London money market, the hub of British internal and external commerce. The origins and development of this commercial relation lay in the eighteenth-century tobacco trade. The large tobacco planters themselves undertook mercantile activities – for their smaller neighbors. The “great planters” of the eighteenth century “...were not small planters writ large,”³⁰ they held smaller planters and farmers in (crop) debt, and consigned their aggregate crop to English merchants for sale, being ultimately dependent on their credit.

As the eighteenth century progressed, British merchants entered the Southern market itself. Here, the establishment of chains of local stores in the tobacco regions by Scottish merchant capital created the factorage system. By extending credit to the planter, freeing his cash for expansion of his own capital (land and slaves), factors obtained commitment of crops and facilitated purchase of imported British goods on credit.³¹ This system anticipated the cotton factorage system’s active role in promoting expansion (and social levelling) in the cotton culture – as Price notes: “Thus Scottish and other credit created its own tobacco supply much more effectively than did the price mechanism. And behind Scots credit was the French buyer; ... only the quick sales, the mass sales, and the advanced sales to the French provided the basis for the bills of exchange on which credit was sustained within Scotland, hence ultimately in Virginia.”³² Such competition from British merchants, buttressed by imperial legislation,³³ undermined the mercantile operations of the large planters – this was one major area of contention in the Revolutionary period. Following the Revolutionary War, the British factor was replaced by local factors,³⁴ as the plantation system took hold in cotton production.

The factorage system provided the major form of organization of cotton marketing – one 1833 estimate being that it accounted for over three-quarters of export consignments. Only large planters had sufficient funds to consign to Northern or European markets on their own

account. And this form of independent marketing declined during the ante-bellum period, as Buck notes the "...tendency for the cotton to be purchased more and more on British account."³⁵

The key to the expansion of the cotton culture was the new global unity established through the City of London, which elaborated a worldwide credit system integrating banks and merchants in the field. In addition, there was an expanding market for cotton textiles as luxury colonial staples gave way to the new consumption relations arising from the development of the wage-relation and associated industrial classes. The reorganization of the London discount market formalized a form of commercial credit appropriate to industrial capitalism. Credit was now available for large-scale commercial advancing, and, significantly, as the basis for the expansion of the Southern banking system that linked hinterland and London, via a chain of banking intermediaries in Southern and Northern ports.³⁶ This was the vital context for the 1830s boom.³⁷

The commercial impact on the cotton culture

What follows is a preliminary discussion of the relation between the expanding credit system and the westward migration of cotton growing, and some possible consequences for the character of planting. Westward migration began early in the nineteenth century, but the expansion of slaveholding was greatest between 1830 and 1860, with an increase of slaveholders of 170,000. If we term this a process of class formation there was, then, a *lateral* expansion in the slaveholding class. Oakes argues that "(b)etween 1790 and 1860, there was no increase in the concentration of wealth within that class."³⁸ However, that broad stretch does not account for what occurred in between those dates, when the cost advantage of large-scale operation really counted.³⁹ In 1860, while only 24.2 percent of the Southern white population was associated with slavery, only 0.6 percent of these whites held over 100 slaves (making roughly 3,000 "great" planters), and almost 50 percent owned between 1 and 4 slaves.⁴⁰

There are two points to make of these data concerning class structure: (1) long-term averages conceal process, and it is likely that while the profile of the slaveholder hierarchy looked the same at beginning and end of the ante-bellum cotton culture, the lateral expansion that occurred from the 1830s undoubtedly expanded the base of the planter

“pyramid,” followed by a reconcentration after the lean years of the 1840s and the rising slave prices attached to rising cotton prices in the early 1850s. Cyclical movements corresponded to real change in the pattern of the cotton plantation system, which raises the second point. (2) There is a good deal of evidence of a transformation in the slaveholding ranks during this period. While colonial planters and their descendants, the “great” planters of the ante-bellum period, characteristically engaged in diversified economic activities – including land speculation and operating as merchants and moneylenders, and then as railroad and industrial venture capitalists – the characteristic planter of the cotton culture was a more specialized and financially dependent operator.

For Oakes, the dominant slaveholding culture did not center on slave ownership or plantation life – this was confined to “the South’s perimeter, fertile lands and lucrative crops (which) sustained unusually large plantations,” which were stable centers of the traditional planter aristocracy. However, “unlike plantation life, physical movement, upward mobility, and social fluidity shaped the destinies of the vast majority of American slaveholders.”⁴¹ This kind of internal differentiation of the slaveholder class echoes in the unresolved debate about the class character of Southern planters – that is, whether and to what extent a middle-class planter was superseding a planter aristocracy. Boney,⁴² like Oakes and others who argue for a more mainstream culture in the slave South, evidences but does not explain the differentiation. In addition to making the observation that the “middle-class ethic” was in evidence in the South despite slave-holding, thereby revealing its “American” qualities, we must understand that the origins of this trend were more than simply cultural. The cotton culture itself was a new development grafted on to the more traditional slaveholding world.

The lateral expansion of slaveholding occurred precisely at the time of consolidation of the mercantile credit system. The availability of credit matched to cotton set off an explosive speculative boom in the 1830s – suggested in the following correspondence from E. O. Blair of Edenton, N.C. to Colonel William S. Hamilton of Laurel Hill, La. on August 24th, 1829:

... They are ruining all the best families in the County, persons who a few years ago were possessed of real wealth are now bankrupt, sold out and subjected to the mortification of seeing their servants, carriages, and furniture

purchased by some upstart puppy who has nothing to recommend him but his ill gotten wealth.⁴³

In 1835, Henry Watson of Greene County, Alabama wrote:

The spirit of speculation outruns that of any period since 1825. Lands have doubled in prices, within a year, throughout all this section of the state ... cotton was high last year and the year before and the prospect at present is good – so long as that continues up there can be no check. ...⁴⁴

From Mississippi in the same year, William O. Loomis wrote to Henry Watson:

I do not like the habits and customs of the people here. They are in by far too many instances immoral, profane and ignorant – I have seen too much gambling since I have been at the South. The spirit of speculation and money making which persists here I have become acquainted with. The people will neglect all ease and comfort for the sake of making a little money, much more so than I ever saw in the North.⁴⁵

And Watson wrote from Alabama to his father in 1837:

The cry is money! money!! money!!! and nobody has any money! You would think the whole community a set of Bankrupts, and indeed I really believe they are but few of them who do not approach bankruptcy. Since I have been here I have not seen a time like the present – the rich and the poor alike pinched, perhaps the rich the more so, as they have had the least prudence. Every man says he will pay when he can collect and in this way every one is dependent upon one another. ... Yet all this time new Banks have been chartered, and not withstanding the great increase of our own Banking capital our State is flooded with the Bills of new Banks in Mississippi, Georgia and Florida. Mississippi is in a much worse state even than Alabama. ... There have been a good many failures there this winter and at one time, about 30 houses *stopped payment*. ... The main reasons are these – they were mostly *commission merchants*. They are generally upstarts with but little capital, they receive cotton and get money and they have a good deal often on hand and have extensive accommodations in Banks. The temptation to speculate in Real Estate has been too great for most of them. ... Another cause is the practice they have of accepting for the planter in the country in anticipation of his crop which the acceptor expects to be sent to him. The river rises late so that the cotton cannot go down, the planter holds back for higher prices, or, the planter becomes suspicious of his merchant's character or circumstances. ...⁴⁶

The web of credit undoubtedly allowed the proliferation of smaller planters on the frontier, whose social and economic horizons differed from those of the great planter alike. Indeed, in addition to the mobility

of slave wealth,⁴⁷ the extent of available credit – on a short-term basis – encouraged the migratory pattern, insofar as short-term credit does not foster fixed capital investment. Rather it encouraged land-extensive cotton-growing. Short-term credit, and the contingency attached to the cotton trade, encouraged specialization and a considerably ruder style of plantation existence on the frontier for most planters. A John Haywood of Greensboro, Alabama wrote to his brother Ernest of Raleigh, N.C. in 1853:

My own house is now together with gin houses, negro houses in a very leaky state and has so been for years. We will try and do something to them, but then to work on houses will take so many hands out of the cotton field. ...⁴⁸

As a clear statement of the kind of frontier entrepreneurship associated with the commercial cotton culture, the following correspondence from John Haywood to his brother, in 1851, speaks for itself:

I offered you my interest in the whole concern because I was tired of it, I have wasted my time in attention to it solely because I wished the concern to save and make by it and devoted my strength of body and constant nay incessant application of mind to promote its useful prosecution for our mutual benefits, and more for you than myself did I put forth these united powers, weak tho they be, because I wished you to be pleased and satisfied, I have enjoyed no income, no pleasure, but all toil, and nothing to sustain life and its indispensable requisites than I commenced here, with, and self denial in a word in every respect appear to have been uppermost in my mind and a governing rule of conduct agreeably to my actions. Year after year I have indulged a hope for more prosperous times, but events bring about little or no better realization. And through experience I have found that any Agency brings about vast anxiety makes a person feel bound to exert himself more constantly unremittedly, and vigilantly than he otherwise would. He looks upon the growing crop from the time it emerges from the ground to its maturation and gathering with the utmost anxiety and with constant apprehension that it may be injured at some period, of its progression and that its yield will be far short of the most sanguine wishes of those interested in it. ... For a few years after our first settlement here most of men could make purchases of land based upon the prospect of a certain yield of cotton to pay for it. ... But such certainties have of later years very much changed, then little or no Boll worry, shedding of cotton forms etc. to any extent prevailed the ground new and fresh. And our partner and friend being many miles distant. ... And I do not believe there is an Estate in the whole state clearer of embarrassment or goes more quietly on than this same concern of ours. We devote all the land to cotton which is suitable to its growth and some which is not so suitable being exhausted, worn out bald or open prairie land which I have yearly endeavored to renovate by the tedious process of manuring. ...⁴⁹

The tone of these letters suggests that slaveholders were not reproducing cotton plantations with the object of simply owning slaves and replicating the ideology of the traditional, paternalist planters. They were first of all creatures of the cotton culture, and under pressure to keep ahead of their creditors. Accumulating slaves for the sake of prestige was not a single-minded goal for many planters. Sometimes of course they purchased slaves to keep families together – as the following letter from P. E. Barringer of New Oxford, Miss. to his brother, Hon. T. M. Barringer of Washington City suggests:

...there is some of the best land on the place to clear yet. ... I have not force sufficient to keep up the place. Too much uncleared land, and as I do not desire to purchase Negro property or have any more than the increase of what I have – unless it may be to have families together (purchase some of the boys wives) I could not possibly keep up the place with what hand I would have. ...⁵⁰

It is not clear whether a paternalist or a commercial impulse, or both, encouraged this kind of slave purchase, as the following year Barringer wrote his brother:

I should like in your absence to purchase on your account David's wife. If I can get her at a fair price, his and Georges ... going from home, after their wives is doing them no good ... it is much better for the Negroes and for us that their wives should be with them. ...⁵¹

And John Haywood echoed the pragmatic sentiment regarding slave property and plantation life generally:

In my early days commencing with farming my whole time and attention seemed to be centered on the immediate business before me to increase our means and to avoid as much as possible involvements. Had I been more lavish in expense and made contracts with promises to pay perhaps I might have been better off. But this I was too fearful of ... it seems to me that I have all the time been a toiling for others inheritance, denying myself in toto everything even the article of clothing. To be candid if I had to commence anew I would struggle for nothing more than a bare competency, and after that should providence throw in plentifully I should be thankful I place no high appreciation on more negroes hand – The best way is to enjoy what you make ab initio bountifully. ...⁵²

These are certainly only individual instances of the extension of plantation operations onto the frontier, and can only serve an illustrative purpose. They do, however, point to a significant aspect of the frontier plantation – its commercial orientation above all else. This does not

rule out paternalism in master-slave relations in upholding legal and customary relations in the slaveholding South. But there is no reason to assume the reproduction of slaveholder paternalism to be the animating relationship behind the spread of the cotton culture. The contingencies associated with the commercial nexus surrounding cotton encouraged in planters an increasing concern with productivity and solvency. While a master-slave relationship is paternalist by definition, the greater fluidity of the cotton culture (e.g., the slave market associated with a moving frontier), and the rise of bureaucratic management on the large Southwestern plantations, rendered paternalism increasingly contradictory.

The commercial impact on Southern political-economy

The process of restructuring of the cotton culture by its absorption into the wage-labor regime also transformed the content and form of Southern politics. Southwestern expansion produced a far-reaching demographic change in the social composition of the South. There were two basic migratory movements: 1) of small farmers (who owned a few slaves and grew cotton as a supplementary cash crop) and non-slaveholding yeomen, and 2) of planters concentrating in the Alluvial region of the Mississippi and the Black Prairie region traversing Alabama and Mississippi.⁵³ The non-slaveholding population numerically exceeded the slaveholders, and this differential widened through the ante-bellum period, such that 60 percent of Southern households in 1860 were non-slaveholding.⁵⁴

Compared to the Cotton Belt yeomanry,⁵⁵ this relatively cohesive upcountry yeomanry, once displaced by the spreading cotton culture in South Carolina,⁵⁶ always maintained an ambiguous relation to the planter class. Indeed, it constituted a democratic threat to the slaveholding regime in the 1850s – as a redistribution of upcountry land ownership from planters to yeomen occurred, making the upcountry “more of a yeomen stronghold.”⁵⁷ The collapse of the two-party structure disrupted yeomen farmers’ traditional (Democratic) parochial politics, as planter factions sought to impose new alliances governed by emerging sectionalist politics.⁵⁸ Throughout the ante-bellum period the expansion of settlement westward into the interior (and, within the South Atlantic states, from low- to up-country) generated regional demands for internal improvements and moves for public schooling, as well as for constitutional reform (in terms of extension of the franchise

and political representation). Charging that state government was “an aristocracy of the eastern minority,”⁵⁹ the “western” farmers succeeded in instituting reforms (including a westward shift of state capitals) that amounted to a general political democratization of the South from 1829 (Virginia) onward as the Jacksonian movement gathered steam.⁶⁰ With some variation by state⁶¹ the colonial Tidewater elite lost its monopoly of political power as education and suffrage extended, and voting was reformed, in what Eaton considers an evolutionary shift toward the “middle classes.”⁶²

The westward migration of planters and slaves was a constant feature of the 1810–60 period, the 1830s being the most dramatic decade – with cotton exports from New Orleans and Mobile doubling, while production in the South Atlantic states remained roughly stationary. The ranks of the immigrants included planters from exhausted land, bankrupts, younger sons of the eastern planters, and relatives and/or overseers supervising the extension of eastern plantations into western lands. Until the 1840s, cotton planters settled in the Gulf plains, in proximity to water transport, and thereafter railroad consolidation facilitated settlement of the Black Prairie traversing Alabama and Mississippi. Western lands were superior in fertility, cultivability and price.⁶³ In addition, chartered banks – supplying mortgage loans and also funds for commercial infrastructure – mushroomed in the 1830s to provide an impetus to settlement, complementing the commercial banks’ short-term lending to finance commodity production and circulation.⁶⁴ Western regions therefore competed favorably with the older South, with Southwestern planters for slaves, given their greater productivity in the west.

Expanding opportunities on the frontier essentially democratized the cotton culture. This transformation was not simply a breaching of the aristocratic ranks by a new breed of young, middle-class professional slaveholders who “combined careers to enhance their prospects for upward mobility.” Nor was it simply that an emergent slaveholding culture that “equated upward mobility with westward migration” in an “obsession with the acquisition of land and slaves,”⁶⁵ differentiated itself from the traditional planters of the Southern perimeter. More fundamentally, the democratization of the cotton culture derived from its incorporation into the global commercial system.

It is not as if the South became a commercial society, however. The fundamental change was in the reorganization of the staple trade within

the new global credit system. Not only did credit now follow the commodity, rather than the individual planter, but also planters themselves could negotiate with more than one factor. What was once a particularistic, and often kin-based relationship between (large) planter and commission merchant, became a generalized and functional relationship between cotton planter and factor (as commission merchant and banker), as cotton achieved the status of a valuable industrial commodity marketed through the City of London. This kind of reorganization did not manifest itself in the generalization of exchange relations outside of the staple trade, nevertheless it represented a process of socialization of the cotton trade, such that it was no longer the preserve of the planter aristocracy. What this meant in principle was that while any planter could obtain credit from any factor as long as he committed the commodity, the planter was bound to the credit system in general.⁶⁶

Thus, in conjunction with the political transformations associated with western migration of the yeomanry, the generalization of the factorage system broadened the social base of cotton planting. It is not surprising, therefore, to find descriptive statements of this change in the literature – for example DuBois writes:

The tendencies to a patriarchal serfdom, recognizable in the age of Washington and Jefferson, began slowly but surely to disappear; and in the second quarter of the century Southern slavery was irresistibly changing from a family institution to an industrial system.⁶⁷

And Turner wrote:

But, as the case of the Northwest, a modification of the original stock occurred in the new environment. A greater energy and initiative appeared in the new Southern lands; the pioneer's devotion to exploiting the territory in which he was placed transferred slavery from the patriarchal to the commercial basis."⁶⁸

What was occurring was undoubtedly an erosion of the stable social hierarchy of colonial days. The demographic movements resulted also in “the passing of Southern leadership from the seaboard to the interior.”⁶⁹ What impact did this demographic shift have on the slaveholding regime?

This question must be treated with caution, not only because it is impossible to answer it adequately here, but also because we are dealing with a complex sociopolitical relation the parameters of which were

being redefined in the process of extension of the cotton culture. The traditional elite clearly lost its power base as eastern communities emigrated to the west. But this did not mean the planter aristocracy did not itself have a western presence. Eaton's enumeration of the 1860 distribution of planters shows ownership in excess of 100 slaves as follows: "Louisiana, 547, South Carolina, 449, Alabama, 346, Mississippi 316, Georgia 212, North Carolina 133, and Virginia 114."⁷⁰ The great planters in fact reproduced their estate system through the migration of younger sons, drawing on family resources such as financial connections and slaves – in many cases these western operations were integral to the prosperity of the family.⁷¹

Nevertheless, such expansion was no longer isomorphic, it accompanied – indeed replicated by necessity – the general commercially based extension of the cotton culture that diluted the patriarchal character of the slave-based plantation system. This was reflected in the political system, where democratization of the machinery and laws of government (less so in South Carolina) introduced the "middle-class"/professional planter to political office. Meanwhile aristocrats clustered around the conservative Whig party, disdainful of the new interest-based politics, preferring to espouse an organic political philosophy deriving from the "pre-industrial" status quo and therefore opposing expansionism and hasty secessionism.⁷²

The question of the coherence of the regime was not one of simply establishing a constitutional right to, or the legitimacy of, slaveholding. Slaveholding itself was assuming a different function, and meaning, as the industrial regime restructured the Southern political economy. Slave-ownership may have continued to be a source of social prestige, but the source of slaves was now firmly attached to cotton production, which financed the accumulation of slaves.⁷³ In other words, the extension of the regime acquired a new substantive rationality as industrial capitalism emerged. And it was within this changing environment that the challenges to the Southern regime unfolded.

Let me briefly characterize this changing environment, in world-historical terms. I have argued that the extension of the cotton culture was a commercial phenomenon. Indeed, as Eaton remarks:

Emigration to the Southwest followed a time pattern that throws doubt on the validity of Frederick Jackson Turner's safety valve theory. The heaviest emigration occurred during boom times, 1819, 1830–37, and 1853–57.

During hard times there was a notable diminution of westward migration – one must have cash or good credit to buy land even at the low prices of the public domain. The settler also required money for the trip and to finance himself until a crop could be grown and sold.⁷⁴

And because the commodity market was historically external to the South, and its agencies financed only the commodity and its expanded reproduction, capital was not available to generalize commodity production with the South. Whether or not western emigration was the cause or consequence of soil deterioration it is hard to overlook the point that a patriarchal form of reproduction was yielding to a commercial form (that may then have assumed the traditional style – but now within a competitive commercial context).⁷⁵ One view of this shift was expressed in correspondence of Robert Haynes of Charleston to Lewis Bristol:

In some portions of *Alabama* especially the soil is strongly impregnated with molten limestone and may be planted *to eternity* without being under the necessity of even alternating the crop. . . . The great majority of the planters live in log cabins and their mode of dressing is not the most *fashionable* conceivable, nor do they keep by any means a dainty table. But in the southern part of Autauga and Northern part of Lacondes County, he says there is to be found a refined and polished society as one can meet with anywhere. They are principally composed of persons of respectable families. . . . Persons who at home would not make more than from 3000 to 3500 dollars per annum – *there* make 7000 to \$8000. From this statement which I am informed is no uncommon occurrence in Alabama you can form a correct idea of the causes which induce so many of our young and enterprising men to go to the Country rather than continue here, and persevere in cultivating the barren Acres, almost *worn out* by *long service*, which he receives as his patrimonial inheritance.⁷⁶

The mode of expansion of the cotton culture was highly specific to its commercial role. A good deal of either self-criticism, invidious distinction, and anti-Northern rhetoric engaged in by Southerners missed the point, just as criticism of “parasitical” commission merchants by planters or their collective biographers misunderstood the historical specificity of the cotton culture.⁷⁷ The specificity of the cotton economy – its monocultural specialization – derived from the historic match of metropolitan commercial credit to slave labor to garner the benefits of trade in cotton. In value terms, it was a branch of metropolitan capitalism. Neither advocates of planter organization to regulate the supply and prices of cotton and circumvent commercial intermediaries;⁷⁸ *nor* the direct trade movement emerging from both the Commercial Conventions and the Planter Conventions would provide a feasible substi-

tute. Intermediaries were necessary precisely to provide necessary credit; capital shortage was a consequence of the capitalization of labor (and therefore a prejudice against fixed capital investment outside of the cotton economy);⁷⁹ and finally, to bypass New York would lead to a *reduction* of cotton prices by London buyers.⁸⁰ Whatever the philosophical or sociological distinction between free labor and slave labor, the fact remains that the expansion of slave labor in the cotton culture was the creature of industrial capitalism.

The invidious distinction of the slave South from the North came about not just because of a divergence in economic development patterns, but also because of the growing political competition between the regions. This was at the heart of the emerging commercial slave regime. It began in the 1820s with the conflicts over Missouri's admission to the Union, gathering steam in the 1830s over the tariff question, giving rise to a Southern proslavery rhetoric that became a proto-nationalist "distinguishing characteristic." At this time the rhetoric derived from the conservative defense of slavery, as an organizing principle of an organic and hierarchical society. As McCardell argues:

A second version of the proslavery argument appeared in the late 1840's, when the leadership of the South was shifting from the older, more stable seaboard to the dynamic, adaptive interior. This version minimized the sociological and Biblical defense of slavery and justified it primarily on grounds of the Negro's alleged racial inferiority.⁸¹

As nationalist rhetoric, this shift of emphasis expressed the need to reassemble Southern unity given the (competitive) division between the older supply zones and newer slave-consuming cotton belt of the Southwest, as well as the implicit competition between slaveholders and non-slaveholding whites in the Cotton Belt, leading to "a changing of the emphasis of the proslavery argument from class to race in order to reinforce the belief that all white men had an equal stake in the peculiar institution."⁸² The continual manufacturing of Southern unity was a requirement of the disorganizing mode of expansion, as well as the growing competition with the North. The two trends were related in that slaveholders feared Northern rhetoric would resonate amongst the expanding non-slaveholding population. But the shift in the content of the proslavery argument also suited the greater commercial emphasis in slaveowning. A "scientific" racial view of slavery facilitated the internal slave labor market, and Southwestern absenteeism, where overseers operated large plantations intensively.⁸³

The racial defense of slavery expressed the need to conceive of slave labor as a means – to capital accumulation⁸⁴ – and to gain the allegiance of Southern farmers to the planter regime, either by diffusion among them of cheaper slaves (addressed by proponents of revival of the slave trade) or by asserting that their status depended on a racial underclass.⁸⁵ These various criteria reflected the confluence of economic and political currents influencing the planter regime in the 1850s.

The cotton economy entered a period of sustained prosperity in the 1850s – production doubling while prices increased slightly. As railroad development extended cotton growing beyond planter-dominated river valleys creating “new cotton entrepreneurs,”⁸⁶ a steady inflation of slave prices occurred. There were two, related, consequences of this: (1) a significant concentration of planter capital – which contributed to growing resentment toward planters by non-slaveholders; and (2) an expansionist demand for cheaper slaves and an unlimited frontier,⁸⁷ dividing planters and challenging northern and western interests.

Planter militancy accompanied this prosperity, evident in the shift of convention agendas to economic issues posed in nationalist terms. Commercial confidence encouraged moves to upgrade Southern education, investigate direct trade possibilities and to support free banking campaigns to circumvent the factors’ credit “monopoly.”⁸⁸ A King Cotton mentality developed, exemplified by “Southron,” a frequent contributor to the *American Cotton Planter*:

Cotton has become the conjuror’s wand, beneath whose magic spell, the ocean has been whitened with sails of merchant navies, the bonds of fellowship and friendly intercourse among distant nations been enlarged and strengthened, and the beneficent influences of civilization and religion diffused through the farthest limits of earth. Villages, towns and cities have sprung up as by enchantment, to the sound of the whirling spindle and clattering shuttle; thousands of needy poor have been raised from want to comfort; and untold wealth has flowed into the coffers of the capitalist, and the treasuries of nations.⁸⁹

And Howell Cobb, President of the Association of Cotton Planters, claimed in his 1858 Report, *Organization of the Cotton Power*: “We emphatically hold the lever that wields the destiny of modern civilization, in its widest scope and comprehension.”

Expansionist or not, the slave South required political control over the

western frontier as minimal protection, or indeed, in Hacker's terms, as a method of increasing Southern political power in the Union government to offset pressures on Southern economy through institutionalizing cost-reduction measures.⁹⁰ But the issues of frontier land and parity within the Union were preconditions of secessionists' desires for the security of the South. Even more important was preempting a Republican party *within* the South – among non-slaveholders, as an abolitionist fifth column would dismantle the slave regime. Slaveholder hegemony was indeed problematic, as the ecology of the secession vote in the South confirmed secessionist planters' fears of the ambivalence of the non-slaveholders toward the slaveholder regime.⁹¹

These planters were allies of the Breckinridge Democrats – the faction that emerged in the 1850s to champion the cause of the “nouveau” planters and slaveholding farmers who had a stake in the Cotton culture. These were the younger, aggressive planters who built their power base originally among the non-slaveholders on an “aristocracy of race” defense of the historic role of the slave South in contrast to the vulgar “aristocracy of wealth” in the North.⁹² The Breckinridge Democrats were the forces of expansionism, galvanizing the entrepreneurial planters and farmers behind demands for western lands, revival of the slave trade, free trade with Europe and transport improvement. These demands were anchored in the King Cotton notion, stated by one secessionist thus: “the *cotton bag* will be the cannon in the hands of the South.”⁹³

There were, then, two moments in the 1850s that expressed the contradictory and contingent status of the Southern slaveholders' regime. On the one hand, there was the profound ideological division within the slaveholding class accelerated by the secession crisis⁹⁴ – the division between expansionist Breckinridge planters and conservative, oligarchical whig/unionist aristocrats that revealed the commercial impact on the regime. This division juxtaposed an over-confident faction of commercial planters, blinded by cotton commodity fetishism into over-estimation of their competitive prospects *via-à-vis* the North, with a paternalist, aristocratic faction disdainful of interest-based politics⁹⁵ and reluctant to fracture a Union that they believed to be compromised by democratic excess.⁹⁶ There were, then, two opposing views of the South, its culture, and its relation to the North, which displayed a clear division in the slaveholder class, in composition and ideology.

On the other hand, during the secession crisis when the election

revealed the tenuous unity of the South, threatening slaveholder property – only then did the Whigs realign with the Breckinridge forces to outvote slightly a solid desertion of the yeomanry from Breckinridge ranks. Yeoman disloyalty expressed a shift from white supremacist loyalty to an anti-oligarchical position,⁹⁷ revealing the significance of democratizing trends on the one hand, and the exclusionary character of the cotton culture (in terms of growing land and credit monopoly in the 1850s) on the other. Once again the peculiar structural features of the cotton trade impinged on the political ecology of the South. As the conflict with the North grew, the slaveholders were compelled to organize in such a way that their centralizing political claims within the South (e.g., the movement toward establishing a “patriarchal republic”) began to undermine the long-standing *modus vivendi* established with the Upcountry of states rights’ parochialism. In short, the political economy of the slaveholder regime had shifted with the ongoing transformation of the cotton culture, jeopardizing the domestic social arrangement at the same time as the Southern regime’s contradictory political position within the Union intensified.

Conclusion

I have attempted here to reconceptualize the dynamic of the cotton culture by situating it within its world-historical context. This does not, however, mean a simple extension of view. Rather, it is a methodological matter in the sense that slavery itself needs to be reconceptualized as a component of the global circuits of the wage-labor regime. Nineteenth-century capitalism, under British hegemony, transcended segmented colonial system markets and forged a global unity of commodity circuits reproducing industrial capital. Under this regime, commodity producers worldwide were now subject to the law of value. This is the context within which nineteenth-century slavery needs to be analyzed.

The *resurgence* of slavery during this period appears paradoxical – defying the logic of the industrial regime shaping the world market. Not so if we reconceptualize slavery as now *internal* to that regime, and one of the several forms of labor that expanded with the general development of the regime. But why then did slavery subsequently collapse? Again, being internal to the regime, it was now subject to that regime’s superior economic competition, in addition to being a social and moral anachronism in the ideology of that regime. In either case, the relation

between slavery and capitalism was not governed by some essential linear economic movement in which slavery was a historical anachronism.

The key methodological point is to distinguish the phenomenal form of slavery from its historical content. The same applies to our conception of wage labor. While empirically it may have concentrated in metropolitan regions, theoretically it had universal implications insofar as it was premised on the development of global commodity circuits. Not only was metropolitan wage labor globally sourced, but also non-metropolitan commodity producers were redefined (but not necessarily extinguished) as they absorbed capitalist circuits and submitted to value relations. But we cannot understand the dynamics if it is assumed that non-wage forms of labor are *prior to* wage labor. As Marx wrote: "It would ... be unfeasible and wrong to let the economic categories follow one another in the same sequence as that in which they were historically decisive. Their sequence is determined, rather, by their relation to one another in modern bourgeois society, which is precisely the opposite of that which seems to be their natural order or which corresponds to historical development."⁹⁸

The precondition of this historical method is what unifies the body of literature earlier identified as locating the formation of modern regional identities and local labor systems within determinant world-historical processes. The goal is to understand their distinctiveness as outcomes of a connective historical process, rather than as unique and bounded cultures in their own right.⁹⁹ In this essay the connective historical process is the rise of wage labor, and the generalization of its conditions of reproduction. The process has various dimensions, unifying either *extant* or newly created commodity producers. An illustration of the former process is the restructuring of relations between the Ottoman state and its peasants in the context of late-nineteenth-century European imperialism. New taxes on peasants were geared to expanding grain exports to finance the national debt resulting from public loans from Europe to build railways. Peasant commodity production became linked to the provision of wage foods for the European proletariat – as Luxemburg put it: "and so the peasant grain of Asia, converted into money, also serves to turn into cash the surplus value that has been extorted from the German workers."¹⁰⁰ Illustrating the latter process, of newly created commodity producers, is Friedmann's work on New World family farming.¹⁰¹ But more often than not it is a combination, where *extant* producers are redefined and reproduced on

an expanding scale. This is the case with Roseberry's Venezuelan "peasants" – both "precipitates" of global processes of "proletarianization," and exemplars of an "unresolved historical movement" of small-holder survival strategies (cash-crop coffee growing in this instance).¹⁰²

In conclusion, the rise of wage labor and the generalization of its conditions of reproduction are more than a process of uneven and combined development on a global scale. It is also a process of reformulation of the content of non-wage forms of labor within a contradictory unity governed by value relations. It is here that the concept of a "global wage relation" becomes useful. As an abstract concept, it expresses (a) those value relations common to the different phenomenal forms of commodity-producing labor, and (b) the historical fact of wage-labor's determinant position within this unity. The "global wage relation" is not coterminous with the *phenomenon* of wage labor alone, rather it expresses the world-historical conditions that constitute wage labor and its contradictory movement. Nineteenth-century slavery was one such condition. Its resurgence and demise precisely expressed the fluidity of the "global wage relation," as a world-historical relation.

Acknowledgments

I wish to express my gratitude to Dale Tomich for his perceptive and creative suggestions over the course of this article's preparation. I also thank two *Theory and Society* reviewers for comments, as well as the NEH and the University of Georgia for financial assistance in conducting primary research on this topic.

Notes

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95. Michael P. Johnson, *Toward a Patriarchal Republic*, 55–56.
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