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Slavery, Racial Capitalism, and Human Rights

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It is a commonplace in the historical literature that slavery “dehumanized” enslaved people. There are plenty of right-minded reasons for saying so. It is hard to square the idea of millions of people being bought and sold, of sexual violation and natal alienation, of forced labor and starvation with any sort of “humane” behavior: these are the sorts of things that should never be done to human being. By terming these actions “inhuman” and suggesting that they either relied upon or accomplished the “dehumanization” of enslaved people, however, we are participating in a sort of ideological exchange that is no less baleful for being so familiar. We are separating a normative and aspirational notion of humanity from the sorts of exploitation and violence which history suggests may well be definitive of human beings: we are separating ourselves from our own histories of perpetration.

More importantly for my argument today is the ideological traffic that occurs through the word “dehumanization.” As part of the work of holding on to a normative notion of “humanity,” one that can be held separate of the supposedly “inhuman” actions taken by so many actually existing human beings over the

course of human history, historians sometimes argue that these actions were so violent, so obscene, so “inhuman,” that, in order to live with themselves, their perpetrators had somehow to “dehumanize” their victims. While that “somehow” remains a problem, for it is never really specified what combination of unconscious, cultural, social-functional factors make a “somehow,” it is the assumption that a slave trader could not swing a baby by the feet into a post in order to silence its cries, or that a planter could not try to jam the broken handle of a hoe down the throat of a field hand, or that slaveholders could not refer to their property as “darkies” or “Negroes” or “hands” or “wool,” or, still less, price them out and sell them without first having “dehumanized” their slaves that I want to question.

The apparent right-mindedness of such arguments notwithstanding, I am going to begin by arguing that the idea that slavery “dehumanized” enslaved people is misleading, harmful, and worth resisting. It is misleading because slavery depended upon the human capacities of enslaved people. It depended upon their reproduction. It depended upon their labor. And it depended upon their sentience. Enslaved people could be taught: their intelligence could make them valuable. They could be manipulated: their desires could make them pliable. They could be terrorized: their fears could make them controllable. And they could be tortured: beaten, starved, raped, humiliated, degraded. It is these last that are conventionally understood to be the most “inhuman” of slaveholders’ actions and those that most “dehumanized” enslaved people. And yet it is these actions, I would argue, that epitomize the failure of this set of terms to capture what was at stake in slaveholding violence: the extent to which slaveholders depended upon violated slaves to bear witness, to provide satisfaction, to provide a living, human register of their power.

More than misleading, however, I have suggested that the notion that enslavement “dehumanized” enslaved people is harmful. Even as the notion that the perpetrators of historical wrongs behaved in an “inhumane” fashion serves to shore up a distinction between the inhuman “them,” the slave traders, and

“we,” the humans (a distinction which I’d argue is self-serving and misleading in relation to the historical and structural injustice from which many, if not all, of us benefit), it leaves an indelible trace upon those with whom it supposedly sympathizes. The notion of *dehumanization* suggests a once-and-for-all alienation of enslaved people from their humanity. How does someone get their humanity back after they have lost it? Who is the judge of when someone has suffered so much or been objectified so fundamentally that they have lost their humanity? Who decides when someone has done enough to regain their Humanity? The explicitly hierarchical and paternalist character of these questions suggests to me that the question of the “dehumanization”]of enslaved people, whatever work it was intended to do, is locked in an inextricable embrace with the very history of racial abjection it ostensibly confronts.

Now, it could be argued that my interpretation of the word “dehumanized” is grammatically fundamentalist and intellectually obtuse, that the point of saying that slavery “dehumanized” enslaved people is to draw attention to the immoral actions of slaveholders rather than making any real point about the actual abjection (or not) of enslaved people.. I would respond by citing a prize-winning history of slavery in eighteenth-century North America, which emphasizes that throughout their varied history African American slaves “strove to preserve their humanity.” Even as historians have explicitly and insistently vindicated the notion that enslaved people were human beings, they have implicitly and unwittingly suggested that the case for enslaved humanity was in need of being proven again and again. By framing that their “discovery” of the enduring humanity of enslaved people as the defining feature of their work (after all words I have just quoted are the final words of the final sentence of the final paragraph of the introduction of the book in which they appear), by casting their work as proof of black humanity, by acting as if this is a question that should have been posed in the first place, they have rendered that supposedly proven effect intellectually probationary.

As understandable as they are, efforts to separate the category of “the human,” “the inhuman,” and the “dehumanized,” I am suggesting, create an unanticipated set of intellectual and ethical overflows. Trying to excavate a transcendent and normative notion of humane behavior out of the past misrecognizes the obdurate fact that *these are the things that human beings do to one another*. But, even more problematically, in the effort to lift human beings out of the muck of their own past behavior, it retraces incised ideologies of racial abjection that persist down to the present day.

Narrowing in on the question of dehumanization, I think we can begin to identify a thread in the historical literature that ties the historiography of slavery to the overhanging question of human rights. Elsewhere in the same introduction from which I’ve just quoted, the author, Philip Morgan, writes, “Wherever and whenever masters, whether implicitly or explicitly, recognized the independent will and volition of their slaves, they acknowledged the humanity of their bond-people. Extracting this admission was, in fact, a form of slave resistance, because slaves thereby opposed the dehumanization inherent in their status.” I want first to emphasize that I am not quoting these particular sentences because I think that they are exceptionally stupid. I am quoting them because I think they are emblematically illustrative: they crystallize a set of intellectual impulses and ethical premises that undergird much of the scholarship on slavery. To wit: they counterpoise an emphasis on “independent will and volition” against the possibility of “dehumanization.” They frame their account of humanity as an aspect of the problem of freedom, and freedom of a very particular sort: the freedom to make choices and take intended actions: the freedom of classical liberalism. They suggest, I am suggesting, the peculiar results that flow from trying to write a history of slavery at the juncture of the terms “human” and “rights.”

There are a lot of problems that flow from the notion that underneath every history of slavery lies a history of liberal subjects striving to be emancipated into the political condition of the twenty-first century

western bourgeoisie. From a historiographical perspective, we could say that it alienates enslaved people from the historical parameters and cultural determinants of their own actions: it takes actions from singing a spiritual to breaking a tool to fomenting a revolution to having a good idea about how to run a better sluice way to irrigate a field and collapses them down to a single anachronistic and essentially liberal moral: enslaved people's "agency" proved their humanity.

For our purposes today, however, I want to focus less on the historiographical implication of this particular line of reasoning, which I have treated elsewhere, than I do on its ethical aspect. The tension between the specific actions and idioms of enslaved life and the broadly comparative categories "independent will and volition," "agency," and "humanity," seem to me to be analogically (and, indeed, historically and ethically) related to the tension that Karl Marx noted between the historical and material inequalities that characterized nineteenth-century society and the abstract equality of the rights-based version of human emancipation of which he was critical. In his essay on "the Jewish Question," Marx wrote that the political citizen was "an imaginary member of an imaginary universality." For Marx, the material salients of human existence – "distinctions of birth, social rank, education, occupation" -- continued to actually guide and determine the course of history even as the inauguration of a new sort of history, the history of political equality, was announced to the world. "Political emancipation," Marx wrote in a passage that reflects both the terrific promises and bounded limits of the history of a rights-based notion of human emancipation, "is, of course, a big step forward. True, it is not the final form of human emancipation, but it is the final form of human emancipation within the hitherto existing world order. It goes without saying that we are speaking here of [something greater than that] real, practical emancipation."

It is with Marx's dialectical appreciation and critique of the notion of citizenship (and by extension of the rights-based notion of human being at the heart of the historiography of slavery), that I want to turn

finally to the question of human rights. There is a good deal of recent scholarship emphasizing the importance of both vernacular and institutional antislavery to the intellectual history of human rights thinking. Samuel Moyn's recent and influential account of the history of human rights, however, departs from this timeline to argue for a much later set of historical benchmarks. It was not until well into the twentieth century, Moyn argues, that the idea of "a new world," in Moyn's words, "in which the dignity of each individual will enjoy secure international protection," emerged. While many of my usual scholarly co-conspirators are critical of the way that Moyn's timeline sets the history of slavery, antislavery, and anti-colonialism to the side of the history of human rights, I think there is a lot to what he is saying. The emergent notion of human rights, the version of human rights that dominates contemporary super-sovereign rights claims, I am suggesting, is not significantly inflected by the history of slavery. And, I will suggest in a moment, it would be better if it were.

Moyn is equally critical of the notion of what he terms the "commonly accepted notion" that horror at the Holocaust was the historical origin of modern thinking about human rights. Moyn's argument at this juncture turns on the separates of the idea of human rights -- intellectual reclassification of various forms of violence as violations of a single norm -- from the emergence of a global social movement actually capable of penetrating, as if from above, politics within which those abuses occurred. While the core impulses of human rights activism may have emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War, Moyn argues, they did not come to characterize the emergent norms of international law until the 1970s. And perhaps he is right about that, too. Moyn's foundational reliance, however, on Hannah Arendt's meditation on *The Origins of Totalitarianism* for his definition of the problem -- i.e. the problem of a "right to have rights" superintending the patchwork pattern of state sovereignty -- suggests that the intellectual origins, if not their full-scale expression in a global social movement, lie in the Holocaust.

The cultural dominant notion of universal human rights, that is to say, has its origin in a particular historical experience: that of Europe in the twentieth century. Guided by the searing moral injunction “Never Again,” human-rights thinking has emphasized the problems of democratic self-determination, freedom of conscience and expression, protection from political violence and, above all, the anathematization of genocide as the universal rights according to which we should address ourselves to global wrongs. Paraphrasing Marx, I think it is fair to say that the emergence of a global movement in support of human rights thusly defined is perhaps the greatest historical achievement of the twentieth century. It is the summary accomplishment of “the hitherto existing world order.” It is not, however, nor in my view should it be, “the final form of human emancipation.”

As a way of explaining what I mean, let me return to the history of slavery, although this time with a focus on the writing of a particular historian, W. E. B. DuBois. In the first chapter of *Black Reconstruction* (1935), DuBois outlined an account of human emancipation in the shadow of the history of slavery that I believe stands at odds with (or perhaps in excess of) the liberal notion of human rights that I have emphasized as being the emergent form of universalist notions of global justice.

That dark and vast sea of human labor in China and India, the South Seas and all Africa; the West Indies and Central America and in the United States – that great majority of mankind, on whose bent and broken backs rest *today* the founding stones of modern industry – shares a common destiny; it is despised and rejected by race and color; paid a wage below the level of decent living; driven, beaten, prisoned, and enslaved in all but name spawning the world’s raw material and luxury – cotton, wool, coffee, tea, cocoa, palm oil, fibers, spices, rubber, silks, lumber, copper, gold, diamonds, leather – how shall we end the list and where? All these are gathered up at prices lowest of the low, manufactured, transformed at fabulous gain; and the resultant wealth is distributed and displayed and made the basis of world power and universal

dominion and armed arrogance. . . Here is the real modern labor problem. Here is the kernel of the problem of Religion and Democracy, of Humanity. Out of the exploitation of the dark proletariat comes the Surplus Value filched from human beasts which in cultured lands, the Machine and harnessed power *veil* and conceal. . . . The emancipation of man is the emancipation of labor and the emancipation of labor is the freeing of that basic majority of workers who are yellow, brown, and black. (Oxford Edition of WEBD, *BR*, 10-11)

If it is true that, for Du Bois, slavery was not wrong among many, but a particular (if paradigmatic) wrong, then it follows its redress needs also to be thought through in specific rather than universal terms. Its wounds might not be susceptible of being bound by general remedies; its wrongs might not be mended by universal rights.

So: what I want to try to do here today is simply fill that out a bit by using Cedric Robinson's notion of "racial capitalism" to draw out some of the implications of DuBois. More specifically, I want to trace the simultaneity and consubstantiation of four things: 1) slavery (the condition of being a human beast) 2) capitalism (the global extraction of Surplus Value) 3) race (the dark and vast majority of mankind) 4) racial human being (the souls of black folk).

I want to do that by arguing a few related propositions, which roughly follow DuBois four points of emphasis:

- a) Capitalism never happened without slavery
- b) Slavery (at least in the New World) never happened without capitalism
- c) Slave-Capitalism was ineluctably racial

- d) Human being in slavery was fundamentally determined by the material context of slavery, even as it was insistently transcendent

Capitalism Never Happened Without Slavery. In the orthodox account “Capitalism” and “Slavery” are distinguished by difference in the mode of production. “Capitalism” differed from “slavery,” the argument goes in the separation of labor from the land, the abstraction and commodification of labor power rather than labor (the payment of a wage by the hour rather than the purchase of a human being), the mystification of coercion in the legal and cultural forms of consent (what Amy Dru Stanley has called “contract freedom”), and the outsourcing of the social reproduction of the working class to the marketplace. In orthodox Marxist terms, the line between slavery and capitalism has been analytically shored up by a distinction between formal and real subsumption to capitalism relations of productions: the idea that there are people and places (read enslaved people in the American South) whose condition is determined by capital without being defined by capitalist social relations (read wage labor). In the historiography of the United States this position has been re-worked both spatially (the idea that slaveholding households were “in but not of” the economy of global capitalism) and temporally (the idea that the Atlantic economy of the nineteenth century joined an “archaic” form of raw material extraction in the fields of Mississippi to an “emergent” form of production in Mississippi).

- a) Without contesting the ultimate importance of the world-making ideologies distinguishing between slavery and freedom, between slavery and wage labor, and between black and white, I want to embed them in a very simple observation. Historically speaking, none of the developments they describe -- not the crossing of the threshold between formal and real subsumption, not the in *and* of the global capitalist economy, not the emergence of the industrial mode of production -- actually occurred in the material absence of slavery: slavery was their condition of possibility. To take the

mode of production that characterized the mills on Manchester (or Massachusetts) and abstract it from its embeddedness in the fields in Mississippi is to create an ahistorical ideal type – “capitalism” – and then turn around and use it to establish the non-capitalist (or, more frequently, pre-capitalist) character of the extractive regime that was in fact its historical and material foundation – “the founding stone of modern industry,” wrote DuBois, in an image emphasizing, at once the simultaneity, the structural identity, and the functional differentiation of slavery and industry.

- b) During the antebellum period, eighty-five percent of the cotton produced in the United States was exported to Great Britain. During the same period eighty-five percent of the cotton manufactured in Great Britain was imported in raw form from the United States. Raw cotton was thus the largest single export of the United States and the largest single import of Great Britain. We can better understand this world-making fact if we spend a minute reviewing the often-cited but perhaps less-often actually read work of Eric Williams. In *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944), Williams argued that the declining economic and political fortunes of West Indian sugar planters provided the precondition of West Indian emancipation: that declining profitability rather than rising philanthropy was the essential aspect of British abolition. It is this aspect of his argument that has been remembered and reworked in a set of fascinating and productive historical debates over the true character of Emancipation. Less often remembered is Williams’ detailed account of the supercession of sugar by cotton and merchant capital by manufacturing capital in the political economy of nineteenth-century Great Britain. In essence, Williams’ argument is that Great Britain freed its slaves, but did not free itself from slavery (a related argument frames Kenneth Pomerantz account of *The Great Divergence*). British capitalists simply outsourced the production of the raw material upon which they principally depended to the United States of America. On this side of the Atlantic, cotton yearly accounted for 2/3 of the exports of the United States; in 1860 the

cotton crop itself was worth some two-hundred and fifty million dollars, five times the dollar value of the entire federal budget in the same year.

Slavery Never Happened Without Capitalism. Although it has long been among the most contested of the propositions I've outlined above, this seems to me to be the easiest to sustain. What else to call the kidnapping and sale for profit of twelve millions Africans? As I've elliptically suggested above the categories that relegate the history of slavery and the slave trade to a sort of everlasting historical waiting room -- that condition that history had to pass through in order to reach mature capitalism -- seem to me to recapitulate an untenable Eurocentrism: the idea that the pure forms of history are defined by the forms of historical development in Europe, and that events elsewhere are either archaic (pre-capitalism) or specific deviant forms (merchant capitalism) of the European archetype (capitalism as such). Of what ethical or analytical use is the term "capitalism" if it cannot describe the world-making commodification and transportation of twelve million Africans to the New World? Or, put differently, what does it mean to our analytical categories (capitalism, specifically for our purposes today, but also perhaps human rights, another enduring concern of DuBois) to replace Europe with Africa at the center of World History?

- a) That is almost as abstract as it is tendentious, so let me be very concrete for a moment, and ask another sort of obvious question about the history of slavery: why did slaveholders care if enslaved people picked cotton faster and cleaner: Why did they establish daily quotas and beat those who did not meet them? Why did they, in the words of Solomon Northup, establish a "graduated" scale of "offenses" against the cotton crop: "twenty-five lashes are deemed a mere brush, when a dry leaf or piece of boll is found in the cotton, or when a branch is broken in the field; fifty is the ordinary penalty following all delinquencies of the next higher grade; one hundred is called severe: it is the

punishment inflicted for the serious offense of standing idle in the field.” (RDD, 168) Character of a cotton plant and the cotton market. A single, variegated economic space.

So far, I have argued that Capitalism Never Happened Without Slavery and that Slavery (at least in the Cotton Kingdom, although I think the argument could be quite easily and productively generalized to the New World) Never Happened Without Capitalism. I have made an argument about the simultaneity and codependence of what happened in Manchester and what happened in Mississippi. But I have not yet made an argument about the *consubstantiation of slavery and capitalism*, or put another way, I have not yet made an argument about the ineluctably racial character of nineteenth-century capitalism, of the web of subordination and extraction that joined Mississippi and Manchester, or, more pointedly in the following example, Louisiana and Liverpool.

After all, one might argue, indeed many have argued, that the juncture the of slave-labor-cotton-as-a-raw-material economy and the wage-labor-cotton-as-a-manufactured-good economy occurred along a durable conceptual line, the line separating slavery from capitalism. The fact that the value of American slaves in 1860 was equal in value to all of the capital invested in railroads, manufacturing, and agricultural land combined might be seen as a sort of creative mis-application of the categories of one sort of history to another -- sort of like figuring out the present-day value of the pyramids, denominating it in dollars, and concluding that the ancient Egyptians were capitalists, and that Marx was on to more than he thought when he referred to price as a hieroglyphic of exchange value.

To make that argument that not only did the business of slavery constantly traverse the line between capitalism and slavery, but that it rendered any sort of hard-and-fast distinction between formal and real subsumption meaningless -- indeed, in many ways misleading -- I need to spend a minute talking

about the way that the actually existing political economy of slavery and cotton worked in the nineteenth century.

Every year British cotton merchants advanced millions of pounds sterling to American merchant bankers who in turn advanced millions of dollars to Southern cotton planters who used that money to purchase cotton seed, agricultural equipment, draft animals, human beings and the supplies to feed and clothe them, and all manner of other things they would use over their year while their crop grew in the field, was harvested, packed, shipped, and finally sold. As the pro-slavery political economist Thomas Kettel wrote in 1860, “The agriculturalists who create the real wealth of the country are not in daily receipt of money. Their produce is in but once a year, whereas they buy supplies [on credit] year round . . . The whole banking system of the country is based primarily on this bill movement against produce. (Kettel, *Southern Wealth & Northern Profits*, 89-91). That moment of final sale, which usually occurred in the spring and in Liverpool (at, that is a distance of several months and several thousand miles from the original advance that had been made against the cotton), marked the moment when a planter could finally close the books on their season, and zero out the money that had been paid in advance for the not-yet-existent cotton with the actual cotton that had been grown by their slaves over the course of the season.

Unless the crop came in short or, for some other reason, failed to cover the money that had been advanced for it. In that case, the planters found themselves indebted to the merchant-banker factors who had lent them money over the season (and who were themselves often indebted to still wider circles of merchant bankers and cotton speculators). At the moment when that happened it became apparent that there were two forms of collateral underwriting the entire economy of the Atlantic World of the nineteenth century: land and slaves, both of which were regularly sold in state-ordered auctions to cover cotton planters unpaid debts to merchants and bankers.

Put another way: the actually existing capital that backed yearly advances on non-existent crops was of two sorts: 1) Indian lands (including, in many cases, improvements made Cherokee and Choctaw planters) that had been cleared, and fenced and plowed and ditched and drained by slaves, and 2) African and African American human beings. It was racial capital. The conventional distinction between slavery and capitalism (as well as the equally conventional attendant distinction between capital and labor) misstates the character of the economy of the nineteenth-century: it is not useful to make a distinction between capitalism and slavery in a situation in which enslaved people themselves are the capital.

Let me spend a minute trying to draw out the implications of this elementary fact.

1) It brings the question of enslaved and sexuality to the center of the “new history of capitalism.” The social reproduction of the institution of slavery depended upon enslaved people’s biological reproduction or on its replacement with a commercial model of social reproduction: the slave trade. The value of enslaved people included a temporal dimension that conscripted their sexuality to the reproduction of capital.

2) It brings the question of slavery into the heart of discussions of the emergence of finance (as well as merchant and manufacturing) capital. In the nineteenth-century South, the relative durability and portability of enslaved people in comparison to land determined their usage as collateral for a variety of mortgage-backed securities that ranged from third-party I.O.U.s provided by a slaveholder to a creditor and by that creditor to another all the way to bundles of mortgages taken out by slaveholding investment banks and used to back stock offerings made on European exchanges. And, in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century Atlantic, the relative frailty of enslaved

people in comparison to other vessels of capital led to the invention of life insurance, which emerged first in the slave market, and only afterwards as a hallmark or bourgeois self-valuation. Slavery, that is to say, was an integral aspect of the emergent temporality of finance capital: of the speculation, risk, and indemnification, the ways of pricing uncertainty and commodifying time that emerged and came to characterize the Atlantic capitalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

- 3) It suggests the possibility of a history in which the two implications of this elementary aspect of New-World slavery – the fact that capital, labor, and futurity might reside in the same subjugated body – might be traced out in connection with one another. To wit: a history of finance capital, actuarial reckoning, the estimation of risk, and the commodification indemnity dependent upon the reproductive alienation of African American slaves.

There is much to be said about the sort of notion of global justice that follows from DuBois stipulation of slavery and its afterlives as the emblematic forms of twentieth-century injustice, and I only have time for a few brief observations:

- 1) It mounts its critique of modern injustice from the standpoint of Africa and what has come to be called “the global South” rather than Europe and “the global North.”
- 2) It is focused on the question of extraction and distribution between classes and areas of the world: it proposes the generalization of an account of historical wrong based in the experience of racial capitalism’s dark global working class rather than of the generalization the rights of citizens that have emerged as the characteristic freedoms of the metropolitan bourgeois.

- 3) It is historically deep, emphasizing the ways in which present distributions of privilege and abjection are related to past patterns. It opens a pathway along which historically deep notions of reparations rather than a synchronic focus on “rights” might be seen as the only adequate form of redress.
- 4) Further, an emphasis on slavery as a paradigmatic wrong would entail a notion of justice predicated upon questions of gender and sexuality, on the ways that reproductive invigilation and natal alienation -- the subordination of the social reproduction of one group of people to the purposes of another – were core features of the human wrongs of slavery – a theme of DuBois’ writing, although not of the passage I have just quoted.

Finally, it suggests the possibility of relating a critique of the instrumentalization of human being through slavery to the instrumentalization of nature in capitalist forms of extraction. To quote DuBois again, this time from his essay “Of the Black Belt,” Yet even then the hard ruthless rape of the land began to tell . . . The harder the slaves were driven, the more careless and fatal was their farming.” In contradistinction, however, to many recent efforts which assert that a forthright treatment of global environmental history require the elevation of the category of the “human” over and against other historical categories – principally the categories of race, class, gender, and (post)coloniality – Du Bois seeks to seeks to understand the intimate and dialectical relationship between the domination of labor and the domination of nature.