

thorny questions of ideological alignment, disagreement and education through which collectivities reproduce themselves after their initial efflorescence. Absent, too, is a consideration of political struggle, whose vicissitudes must necessarily be located outside the work's ambit. In retaining the theoretical openness of nonsensuous correspondence, the work then risks relegation to the realm of the minor, as epistemic agility ticks over into tactical stasis. What from one angle looks like a holding open of space for anarchic rupture looks from another like a retreat into endless preparation, the revolt coded as transcendent event rather than buildable form.

In our era of emergent fascist hegemony, to construe the political in this way would be a mistake. Contesting fascism's deadening of social life requires mobilisation, the construction of mass organised opposition – an anti-fascism that integrates the levels of the social, the aesthetic and the political. We need mediating steps that

allow for the spontaneity of the revolt to be prolonged and escalated.

One wishes, then, for a more developed account of how we get from the aesthetic sociality of rehearsal and improvisation found at Billie's to a more deeply political one. How are we to bring these practices with us from the bar to the workplace or the community hall? How do we place the branch meeting into nonsensuous correspondence with the club? How do we foster the capacity to 'fail to be disturbed by non-relation' in our unions and mutual aid groups, as limited as these forms may be? If it is not ultimately for *Billie's Bent Elbow* to provide us with a political strategy, it is a mark of the book's generosity that it holds open the possibility that some provisional moves in that direction may be made. For those of us who see the meeting of Black Studies and Marxism as a political necessity as much as a theoretical one, this cannot be underestimated.

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The impossibility of the 'chattel proletariat'

David McNally, *Slavery and Capitalism: A New Marxist History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2025). 368pp., £28.00 pb., 978 052041 5973

It is nowadays difficult to contest the claim that Atlantic slavery is 'surely among the greatest repressed moments of capitalist civilization.' The nature of this repression is largely brought to attention by interventions in black studies that seek to re-centre an analysis of slavery in relation to capitalism's social forms. Marxism has had to take this demand seriously in order to recover its merit against proponents who, even when contending slavery to be integral to capitalism's development, either reduce the connection to crude financial histories of 'banks, trades and credit markets' to write a story of 'capitalism born without blood', or provide an analysis 'disabled by the superficial treatment of Marxism' (Eugene Genovese and Walter Johnson are cited as exemplary in this regard). This is the fraught context to which David McNally's *Slavery and Capitalism* responds, suggesting that such attempts have converged on the terrain of methods that 'favor description over theoretical analysis', thus 'evad[ing] the reciprocities of system and entity'. This results in

overly historicist endeavours that have abandoned the insights of critical theory to suggest instead that "the facts" can speak for themselves'.

The rejection of vulgar empiricism is an insight that might align McNally with Hegel, whose notorious adage proclaims any contradiction between theory and empiricism to always stage a losing battle for the latter: 'so much the worse for the facts!' Nonetheless, *Slavery and Capitalism* is a study that relies heavily on historiography to frame convergences between its titular referents. 'Part One: The Planter, the President, and the Political Economist' considers the 'foundations of capitalist slavery' through three sites of plantation development that correspond to three key figures: Richard Ligon, whose account of plantation life in Barbados records the early distinctions between servants and slaves, and the 'political arithmetic of plantation profit'; George Washington, whose letters and ledgers as a Virginian plantation owner evidence slavery's 'exercise in abstrac-

tion' by combining techniques of 'agrarian improvement' with 'the metrics of abstract labour time'; and Edward Gibbon Wakefield, whom Marx had engaged in developing *Capital's* theory of primitive accumulation, which inaugurated colonial capitalism as a 'regime of unfree labour ... without legal enslavement'. This is a promising opening that builds towards 'a dialogue between concept and evidence' – a phrase McNally invokes from E.P. Thompson – but one that still holds each at arm's length from the other through a comfortable dependency on the concept of 'racial capitalism'. This functions as an ambiguous framework, recognising a co-constitutive relationship between race and class but only at the level of the historiographic (precisely, the *facts* against which Hegel warned ventriloquising). As such, 'racial capitalism' can only be deployed descriptively (of explicit ways that capitalism appropriates, leverages and deploys techniques of racial differentiation as modes of social control on the plantation) rather than diagnostically (to analyse the logic that mystifies slavery and race's relation to the self-valorisation of capital). This tendency subsumes race into the structures of capitalist relations and consigns slavery to what Sara-Maria Sorentino has called its 'domestic-economic configuration'.

This ambiguity is central to 'Part Two: Political Economy of the Plantation System'. Three categories of Marx's critique of political economy as it defines the worker – living labour, the wage and self-possession – are stretched to encompass aspects of slave labour. This is intended to strengthen the book's overarching and emphatic claim that *slaves were workers*. McNally's argument hinges on a disagreement with the 'static protocols of formal logic' (one assumes this to be directed at Marxist value-form theory) on the question of whether slave labour is 'productive' (i.e. whether it produces surplus value). McNally, 'in defiance of sterile formalism', suggests that attention primarily to form provides the wrong answer through 'deductive reasoning'. Marx, however, maintained that the *scientific* quality of historical materialism was precisely a question of form's primacy. In *Capital*, he writes that 'scientific analysis of [capitalism's] forms, take a course directly opposite to that of their actual historical development', a claim which Evald Ilyenkov has suggested should be taken as definitive of Marx's method. Nevertheless, Nick Nesbitt's *The Price of Slavery* becomes paradigmatic of formalism's short-

comings, reproduced in McNally's formulation as such: 'if bondspeople were constant capital, and constant capital according to Marx produces no surplus value, it follows that plantation slaves did not produce surplus value'. McNally disagrees, arguing that slave labour must constitute variable capital, not constant capital, because the latter '*does not strike*'. It follows, for McNally, that slave labour is *living labour*, understood with reference to the sociality of enslaved people which renders the violence – indeed, the social death – of slavery incomplete.



It would be prudent to note that the specificity of Nesbitt's claim is not given adequate representation; if Nesbitt is made to stand in for the consideration of the differences between slavery and waged labour, it should be acknowledged that his intention is to parse out the historical convergence of slavery and capitalism from analytic distinctions that cannot be flattened for the sake of 'political wish-fulfilment', as Sorentino calls it. For it is precisely this care that both anticipates and problematises the conflation that McNally makes by collapsing the formal distinction between worker and slave. For Nesbitt the stakes are clear: such a distinction does not obfuscate the horrors of racial slavery but in fact 'read-

ily exhibits' their full extent by revealing the reduction of 'certain categories of humans to mere commodities, to constitute motive means of production that require direct, brutal violence to compel their labor'. Without this nuance, a series of concepts become metonymic for McNally: 'chattel proletariat', 'plantation proletariat', 'bonded labourers', 'bonded labour-power', 'coerced subsumption', 'black plantation agriculturalists', 'chattel workers', 'Atlantic bondspeople' and 'gang labor'. It is striking that the nomenclature given to slavery here is not intended to function as aporetic (in the sense of an impasse, what Gillian Rose called the 'broken middle'), but as undifferentiated, coherent and logically consistent categories, a move that relies on post-racial abstractions that go largely unexamined. For if all labour can be, in this account, abstract labour (the condition of surplus value's possibility), then all labour (enslaved and waged) is rendered universal. This claim is contested by Fanon's infamous declaration of the master-slave dialectic in the colonial context: 'what [the master] wants from the slave is not recognition, but [only] work'.

There is a surprising reading – or, following Beverly Best and Nesbitt, I would suggest misreading – of Marx that enables this universalisation of labour to occur. It also demonstrates why some theorists in black studies argue against a 'labour theory of slavery', since using labour as the central analytic through which to understand the violence of slavery depends on a transhistorical notion of exploitation. In McNally's account, dead labour maps neatly onto the objective resources of commodity production – 'tools, buildings, machines, raw materials' – as constant capital. I read this slippage between dead labour and constant capital as a categorical error that emphasises the subjective and phenomenological qualities of their counterparts (variable capital, living labour) such that constant capital is defined by its inability to deploy strategies of direct action, rather than by the rate at which value is transferred to commodities. Living and dead labour, for Marx, are always in relation to each other in the labour process. The wage is key: it emphasises the contradiction of 'double freedom' that engenders the worker and is internal to her subject-formation. Dead labour corresponds to the surplus of wealth extracted from the subject who is subjected to the terms of her employment by contract (a legal form). It is this partial and contradictory subjectivity

that distinguishes worker (formally free, if not always empirically so) from slave (formally unfree, if not always empirically so). In fact, Marx explicitly says as much in the *Grundrisse*, when he elaborates this distinction: 'In the slave relation, [the enslaved person] belongs to the *individual, particular* owner, and is his labouring machine. As a totality of force-expenditure, as labour capacity, he is a thing [*Sache*] belonging to another, and hence does not relate as subject to his particular expenditure of force, nor to the act of living labour'.

The contradictions of both subject formations are distinct: where the slave's contradiction is between a 'living labour-machine', the worker's is as a living-labourer who cannot always access her constitutional freedom. The subtleties of the difference are important to any claim about the surplus value: with the worker, the exchange of one's labour-power for a wage is central to this contradiction, because it presupposes a relation of exchange, of symbolic commensurability between worker and capitalist, largely one that neither McNally, or even Marx, understand on the terms of race. The protraction of slavery's racial specificity – that is, sutured to blackness – enables McNally's substitution of the social relation specific to both slavery and waged labour for terms that want to consider all humans equal, against the structural conditions in which this has not been so. Without acknowledging these contradictions, McNally ends up reproducing the very error of formalism that he has critiqued: 'squeeze[ing] the concrete history of plantation slavery into the simplified formulas of formal logic'.

Erased from McNally's argument, then, is a proto-theory of social death already present in Marx, one that puts, in a surprising twist of disciplinary coincidences, the formalism of value-form theory closer to the insights of contemporary black studies, and certainly to Afropessimist thought. If *Slavery and Capitalism* serves as a marriage between studies of both its titular referents, it further obfuscates the contradictions to be found between these two structures and their social forms, by placing both slavery and waged work on a spectrum defined by varying degrees of exploitation. The result is a loss of the complexity that enables the book's third part, 'The Making of a Chattel Proletariat', to deepen the argument that resistance to slavery ('slowdowns, strikes, absenteeism, escapes, assaults, poisonings, and insurrections') constitutes evidence of class struggle, such that the slave's

capture is not total. This approach betrays a romantic view of struggle made possible through a hermeneutics of optimism, such that even ‘bargaining chips’ placed in the slave’s hand – the ability to buy candy with a bit of change, or receive a Christmas gift as an ‘annual bonus’ – become ‘exercises in de-reification, affirmations of life against death’. This leads to claims that are a little more shocking, verging on a Nietzschean will to power – for ‘even when the laborer is chattel property ... a living personality always possesses will’ – to express ‘aspirations for freedom’: ‘all dominated people have a degree of freedom, even if this is simply “the possibility of committing suicide”.’

On the one hand, this argument speaks to the poverty of freedom’s rhetorical purchase, which functions as an empty signifier; it floats from its deployment as ‘struggle from below’ (which reads any diremptions from the logic of capital as proof of autonomy, rather than as circumstantial) to the teleological promise of a ‘not-yet’ (‘genuine freedom – whose day we await – is the antithesis of slavery’). On the other hand, it betrays the book’s lack of engagement with contemporary black studies in which such claims are explicitly problematised. David Marriott, for instance, wages that the concept of ‘revolutionary suicide’ doesn’t negate social death but fulfils it, since ‘if being sovereign is to be found in suicide, one’s sovereignty does not exist, sovereignty does not exist, but cancels itself by the fact of being dead and is therefore never master even of its own death, even if this becoming-dead is its only chance at redemption’. For McNally, suicide joins fugitivity, marronage, and other ‘cultures of freedom’ present in the ‘rival geographies’ of the plantation’s ‘carceral landscape’ – ‘kitchens and craft shops’, ‘workshops, gardens, and slave dwellings, [even] sites for laundry, sewing, spinning, and raising slaughtering animals [which] were claimed by Black people as *their* domains of work and social interaction’ – as sites of working class unity. This reproduces what Sorentino has critiqued as a mode of ‘new labour history’ that is ‘alive with the promises of solidarity’ but remains ‘caught in a web of desires

that Sylvia Wynter names “the hegemony of the labour conceptual frame (i.e. the frame of the struggle against capitalism)”.’ The result is that, where the ‘[Marxist] old guard reifies class, new labour history experientialises it’.

Ultimately, *Slavery and Capitalism* succeeds in speaking back to this ‘old guard’ by advocating for the inclusion of racial slavery into the terms of capitalist history (hence, its subtitle: a ‘new Marxist history’). It must, however, not be recognised as a singular contribution to the marriage between these two fields of study; it should be read against those in contemporary black studies that expand lines of inquiry to contest ‘[resolution] at the level of totality’. Against such a resolution, I read *Slavery and Capitalism* as a symptom of slavery’s repression in the method of Marxist historiography, which, against McNally’s own warning, reduces totality to ‘undifferentiated uniformity, to identity’. The result is a reification of Marxist categories that do not, in this text, stretch to let themselves be transformed by their engagement with the contradictions between slavery and capitalism, which might see a rupture at the limit of form. One thinks of the ‘stretching’ of Marxist categories here not only in the classical Fanonian sense, but also through Fred Hampton: ‘As a matter of fact, some things if you stretch it so far, it’ll be another thing[!].’ Rather than stretching, then, slavery is reconciled too easily with capitalism’s co-determinate evolution through the logic of inclusion into existing Marxist categories. *Slavery and Capitalism* thus produces a theory of totality that is symptomatic of an aversion to the absolute ambivalence in the Hegelian dictum precisely to ‘tarry with the negative’. For if Hegel – scientist of the void’s horror, as Althusser once called him – described Kantian categorisations as a collaboration between ‘feeling, popular practicality, and erudite historiography’, they collaborate to disavow what is unknowable – the contradictions between worker and slave no exception here – based on that ‘impossible wish to evacuate the void’.

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