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Black labor: From chattel slavery to wage slavery – Part 1



Enslaved family, 1850

The following is excerpted from Chapter 2 of Sam Marcy's "High Tech, Low Pay: A Marxist analysis of the changing character of the working class," first published in 1986. Marcy is the late chairperson of Workers World Party. The book is available as a free download at workers.org/marcy. Read part two at workers.org/2024/02/76810/.

The scientific-technological revolution has affected and will continue to affect Black workers much more significantly than is commonly acknowledged by the capitalist press. Automation takes even more than its usual toll when oppressed people are concerned. It intensifies racist oppression and increases unemployment among Black people even when a capitalist economic recovery is said to be sharply on the rise, as in 1983-84.

But the impact of the scientific-technological revolution on Black people is not only a recent phenomenon. It has historical roots that go back to the beginnings of the slave trade.

The compass and the slave trade

The speed and momentum with which the scientific-technological revolution has taken off in recent years have tended to shrink into insignificance inventions which exercised a profound influence on developing social relations in the early stages of the capitalist system. Take the compass, which is regarded today as a basic direction-finding device in navigation. It is not a capitalist invention. It is said to have been discovered as early as the year [200 B.C.E.] in China and may have also been discovered independently in Europe somewhat later; it was used by Arab sailors in the early 13th century.

Its development and perfection over the years became indispensable to world trade. While not invented in a period of capitalist development, the compass and other navigational instrumentation were appropriated from earlier modes of production by capitalist shipping companies at the very crest of the period of colonization — what is called the “age of discovery.” It gave a tremendous impulse to world trade and commerce.

But what was the content of this trade? Why is it important in relation to our study here? Because as trade became a world phenomenon, it was essentially an international trade of slaves.

Millions upon millions of Black people were kidnapped, tortured and brought on slave ships to the vast new continents of the Western Hemisphere. The slave trade began in the mid-15th century when Spain and Portugal began importing a significant number of Black slaves to their plantations on the Canary and Madeira islands. Most of the very same leading imperialist powers that are today concerned with maintaining the South African regime in the face of the revolutionary mass movement there earlier participated in, promoted and in fact fought ferociously to maintain the slave trade and obtain a monopoly over it.

Modern transnational monopolies differ fundamentally in their economic content from those days, but they still show the same greed and avarice, the utterly unprecedented cruelty and barbarous treatment which characterized the slave trade. This is what lay

behind the flourishing of world commerce and laid the development for what Marx later called the primitive accumulation of capital.

The word “primitive” was not a characterization of the many millions of people captured as slaves. The term primitive was applied to the fiendish method by which the early capitalists accumulated the primary, original capital that was so indispensable for the development of their system of oppression and exploitation. Not only Spain, Portugal, England, France and Holland, but also Denmark, Sweden and Prussia participated, garnering fabulous profits as a result of the slave trade.

The compass was one of the things that made the slave trade possible, but it alone can't be held responsible for the transportation of this vast number of human beings from one continent to another thousands of miles away — away from their homeland and loved ones to a strange new country where the whip and the gun held them at bay.

Scandinavian people had made a transoceanic voyage earlier, in the [10th century]. They too may have had a compass of a sort, for it is well known that the Vikings undertook long voyages and established settlements in Iceland, Greenland and even Labrador. But these voyages differed fundamentally in that they were oriented toward settlements in the northern part of the world in harmony with the climatic conditions of the Scandinavian countries.

Until the development and perfection of navigational instrumentation such as the compass, the Western world was mainly confined to the Mediterranean and the coastal areas of the Atlantic so far as maritime commerce was concerned. The new era of discovery and colonization opened up the Atlantic for the first time. This could not have been done without the necessary technological improvements in navigational instrumentation as well as in the making of ships.

By 1745 the English inventor Gowin Knight had perfected a method of efficiently magnetizing needles of harder steel. He designed a compass with a single bar needle large enough for a cap resting on the pivot to be screwed into its center. He thus greatly improved the compass. This significantly shortened the time of voyages, increased the safety of the ships and — what is of greater social and political significance — increased the volume of slavery.

As Marx was to write, “It is slavery that gave the colonies their value; it is the colonies that have created world trade, and it is world trade that is the precondition of large-scale industry. Thus slavery is an economic category of the greatest importance.”

The contract for supplying slaves to the Spanish colonies was called the Asiento. While British slave traders provided the necessary laborers for their own plantations, Spain contracted with the slave traders of other nations to supply its needs. The first Asiento was granted in 1518 to a Flemish company, and it specified that a certain number of tons (!) of slaves be delivered to the Spanish colonies.

The Portuguese were the first traders to hold the Asiento, but the other rising capitalist powers were not to be outdone. The Dutch broke into this very lucrative form of trade around 1640, and Spain, France and Britain followed soon after.

The war for the Asiento continued until the Treaty of Utrecht (1713) when the English triumphed over their competitors. The English bourgeoisie from then on maintained control of the slave trade through the Royal African Company. This slave trade covered not only the English, French and Dutch colonies in America and the West Indies but also the vast land of Brazil. It was in this way that such a vast portion of the African people were uprooted and thrown into the vortex of capitalist slavery.

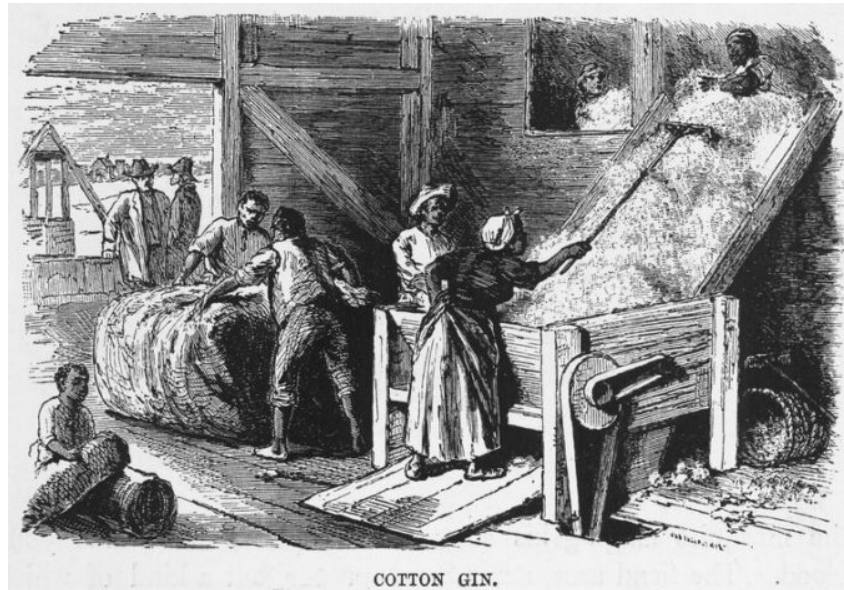
In connection with Holland, it should be noted that earlier, in the years 1636-37, the Dutch had engaged in a flourishing trade and development of tulips, for which they are still world famous today. But that trade attained extraordinary speculative proportions so that at one period just one tulip was valued at thousands of dollars.

Eventually the market broke and the Dutch bourgeoisie turned from trafficking in “a thing of matchless beauty” to the slave trade, one of the most odious, foul and certainly most inhuman forms of commerce ever seen in history. This illustrates with what ease and facility the capitalists can plunge from one area to another in their insatiable appetite for profits, without any regard for human values whatever. The latter are totally irrelevant in the process of capitalist production. Capital simply flows to wherever profits are highest.

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The observations made over a century ago by a certain T.J. Dunning, and quoted by Marx in *Capital*, ring all too familiar today: “With adequate profit, capital is very bold. A certain 10 percent will ensure its employment anywhere; 20 percent certain will produce eagerness; 50 percent, positive audacity; 100 percent will make it ready to trample all human laws; 300 percent, and there is not a crime at which it will scruple, nor a risk it will not run, even to the chance of its owner being hanged. If turbulence and strife will bring a profit, it will freely encourage both. Smuggling and the slave-trade have amply proved all that is here stated.”

The invention of the cotton gin



Enslaved people operating cotton gin.

While the compass as a technological device in the field of navigation was appropriated by the developing bourgeoisie from an earlier mode of production dating back many hundreds of years, the invention of the cotton gin in 1793 belonged strictly to the era of capitalist development. Its invention was called forth by the development of capitalist trade and commerce. Its influence on slavery was stupendous.

A great deal has been written about Eli Whitney as the inventor of the cotton gin and as a great scientist, which he certainly was. However, according to some accounts, the first gin made in Mississippi was constructed on the basis of a crude drawing by a skilled slave. This was probably not very unusual in light of the fact that even among the first slaves brought to this country from Africa, many were skilled craftsmen. Also in both the South and the North there were skilled free Blacks.

Since the slaves were never recognized in law as persons, the slave owners could appropriate their property as well as any inventions they might conceive of.

The cotton gin has often been described as the very soul of simplicity. However, it should be borne in mind that cotton has been spun, woven and dyed from the earliest times. Cotton formed the staple clothing of India, Egypt and China. Hundreds of years before the Christian era, cotton textiles were woven in India with matchless skill, and their use spread to the Mediterranean countries.

In the first century, traders brought fine muslin and calico to Italy and Spain. The Arabs introduced the cultivation of cotton into Spain in the 9th century. By the 17th century, the East India Company was bringing rare fabrics from India.

Before the arrival of the Europeans in the Americas, cotton was skillfully spun there and woven into fine garments and dyed tapestries. Fabrics were found in Peruvian tombs that even belonged to pre-Inca cultures. Cotton was first planted by the Europeans in Virginia's Jamestown Colony in 1607.

The so-called Cotton Belt in the U.S., where cotton has historically been the main cash crop, extends through North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, west Tennessee, east Arkansas, Louisiana, east Texas and south Oklahoma and also in smaller areas of southeast Missouri, southwest Kentucky, north Florida and southeast Virginia.

But prior to the invention of the cotton gin, cotton production was at a very low level. It was almost insignificant in the prevailing Southern economy. The plantation system rested mainly on tobacco and to a lesser extent on rice and indigo.

Rarely has an important technological development taken place which was as simple as the cotton gin. It separated the seeds from the cotton through a process using a cylinder with bent spikes sharpened to form hooks. They were set in a ring and revolved through slots in a bar. The teeth pulled away the lint, which was then cleaned from the teeth by brushes. A hand crank operated the whole machine.

What did this machine accomplish? As Eli Whitney himself explained in a letter, "The machine makes the labor 50 times less without throwing any class of people out of business." Of course, the slave economy was not characterized by unemployment, unlike wage slavery.

The cotton gin tremendously increased the productivity of Black slave labor on the plantations. The figures in cotton crop production speak for themselves. In 1790, before the use of the cotton gin, the cotton crop of the U.S. amounted to 1.5 million pounds. By 1800 it had risen to 35 million pounds. By 1810 it had soared to 85 million pounds and by 1860 it reached the astonishing sum of 2 billion pounds.

The introduction of the cotton gin thus brought about a profound social revolution. A machine that could increase the productivity of labor 50 times was nothing less than sensational. It thoroughly revolutionized Southern agriculture as well as Northern production methods.

Furthermore, [the gin] was a response to the tremendous social transformation evoked by the Industrial Revolution in England, which had brought about a skyrocketing demand for cotton and a sharp price increase. As Marx explained it in broader terms; "A radical change in the mode of production in one sphere of industry involves a similar change in

other spheres. This happens at first in such branches of industry as are connected together by separate phases of a process, and yet are isolated by the social division of labor, in such a way that each of them produces an independent commodity.

“Thus spinning by machinery made weaving by machinery a necessity, and both together made the mechanical and chemical revolution that took place in bleaching, printing and dyeing, imperative. So too, on the other hand, the revolution in cotton spinning called forth the invention of the gin, for separating the seeds from the cotton fiber; it was only by means of this invention, that the production of cotton became possible on the enormous scale at present required.”

But how did it affect slavery itself, the “peculiar institution” as it was called at the time? Did the sensational, spectacular development in technology retard slavery or expand it?

From the time school children attend their earliest classes they are taught about the wonders of modern science and what a liberating influence it has. Did the cotton gin at the time help to weaken slavery, as the general conceptions cultivated and promoted by the bourgeoisie maintain? As we shall see, it strengthened slavery. And this happened at a time when it appeared (although it was only appearances) that slavery was in a decline.

Here it is necessary to look at the currents of thought which gave political expression to this phenomenon. For instance, the Continental Congress of 1774 proposed that the practice of importing slaves be stopped. Rhode Island and Connecticut passed laws providing that all chattel slaves brought within their respective provinces be freed, and Delaware prohibited the importation of bondsmen in 1776. Later, Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia, North Carolina and Maryland all forbade the importation of slaves.

The slave trade itself, of course, was finally prohibited in the U.S. more than a decade after the introduction of the cotton gin, in 1808. But it should not be forgotten that the Constitutional Convention of 1788 wrote a clause into the Constitution making it impossible as a matter of federal law to abolish the slave trade on a national basis before 1808.

The demise of the slave trade has to be viewed in the light of class interests, first of the slavocracy itself. Why would they as slave owners be interested in abolishing it? Why, for instance, would George Mason of Virginia, himself a slave owner and supporter of slavery, condemn the slave trade as “diabolical itself and disgraceful to mankind”?

Only by piercing the veil of capitalist hypocrisy, only by going behind the political rhetoric and seeking out the materialist interests of any given class, only by applying the

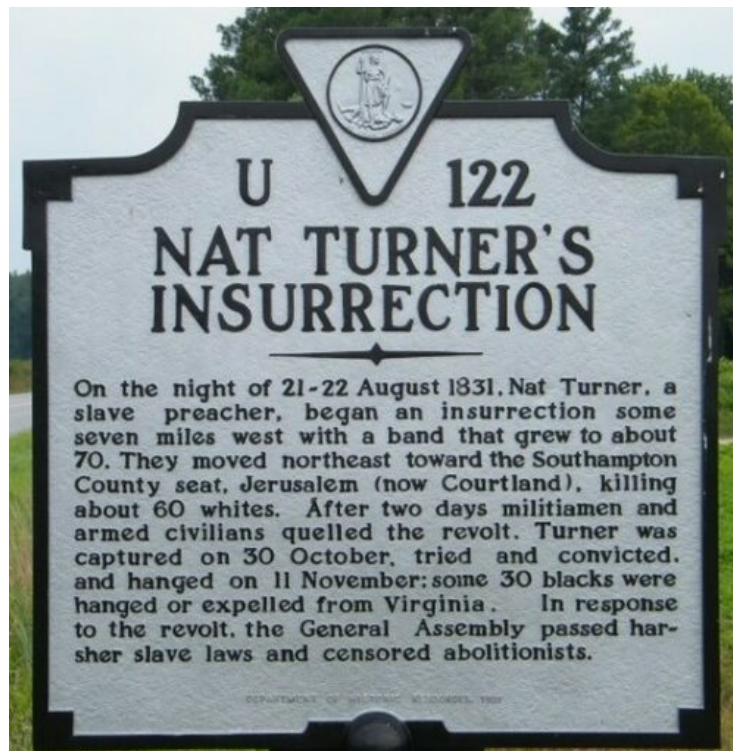
materialist interpretation of history and analyzing social and political phenomena in terms of class interests, can we understand the politics, the social and political values.

Thus the basic reason behind abolishing the importation of slaves even in the above-named Southern states and castigating the trade as a “disgrace to mankind” was the fact that there had been a huge influx of slaves. Like the excessive influx of any commodity governed by the law of supply and demand, this cheapened the price of a slave. The reasons behind [proposed abolition] were economic in origin, masked in moralistic phraseology.

A surplus of slaves in some of the Southern states motivated the agitation against further importation. Most of this agitation, it should be noted, was before the use of the cotton gin really took off on a mass scale, producing unprecedented profits.

But there was also opposition to the slave trade motivated by an entirely different set of circumstances. This was a thoroughgoing revolutionary development which is highly obscured in U.S. history, particularly as it relates to the early struggles of the Black people before the Civil War. The revolutionary development [of insurrections] fired the imagination of the enslaved Black people in this country and frightened the ruling class, both North and South.

Insurrections



The insurrections given the most detailed accounts in modern literature were those of Gabriel in Virginia (1800), Denmark Vesey in Charlestown, South Carolina (1822), and, most famous, that of Nat Turner in South Hampton County, Virginia (1831).

However, a great many insurrections took place which are only beginning to be taken note of. The Civil War itself demonstrated many instances of insurrections by the Black people. The Black masses under slavery were not the passive, docile force imagined by bourgeois historiography, especially in the literature predating the mass movement of Black people [in the 20th century].

Black rebellions go back in history to the very beginnings of slavery in this country. As early as 1687, “one year previous to the Glorious Revolution in the mother country,” the revolution in England that consolidated the power of the bourgeoisie as against the old feudal aristocracy, there was “widespread revolt throughout the colonies and at a time when the Negro population of the Old Dominion [Virginia] was about equal to that of whites. ... That was the attempted insurrection in Northern Neck.” All were executed when the plot was discovered and the revolt was crushed.

How interesting, in light of present-day developments in South Africa, that the Virginia Council placed a ban on public funerals for the dead slaves in fear that they would bring out mass demonstrations and might even provoke another rebellion!

One thing to remember in connection with the early slave insurrections is that they were influenced politically by the English Revolution and, much more profoundly, by the French Revolution. The great revolutions of this century (especially in Russia, China, Cuba, Vietnam and Angola and now the emerging revolutionary struggle in South Africa) have also had the most profound effect among the exploited and oppressed masses everywhere.

The spectacular success of the cotton gin in raising the productivity of labor of the slaves tremendously strengthened the South, strengthened slavery and impelled the slaveholders to become not only more aggressive and bellicose but, far more important, more expansionist. Slavery drove into the Southwest and everywhere it could in order to expand its plantations and garner unprecedented profits. Cotton production was extensive in character, appropriating more and more land, rather than intensively applying mechanical devices. It drove the slaves harder and harder, often beyond endurance.

But the very invention which had become such a tremendous advantage to the Southern planters, like all social phenomena, soon began to develop one of the sharpest social contradictions which ultimately would undo the slavocracy altogether.

Part Two: Marcy on “Slavery vs. capitalist production” and “Black labor today.”

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