

MODERN TRANS-ATLANTIC AFRICAN SLAVERY

We have tracked the notion of freedom as it was expressed in the writings of La Boétie, Montaigne, Spinoza, Hume, and Kant. Now let's talk about the great struggle for freedom of the enslaved people in the world from 1492 to 1804.

In doing so, we are not leaving philosophy to enter history and politics: we are instead studying philosophy as it is done in practice. We're going to call this the "the enactment of the philosophy of freedom."

If you think we are leaving philosophy, you have made an "idealist" move: you've determined the limits of philosophy as ideas and the arguments that express them.

But "materialism" is a perfectly good philosophical stance, and it enjoins us not just to the study of the social conditions for ideas and arguments but also to acting in the world. Thesis 11: "hitherto philosophers have interpreted the world; the point, however, is to change it."

Now even as a materialist (especially as a materialist) I don't like to oppose theory and practice. Recall the Greek notion that philosophy was living the good life. Theory and practice are intertwined, as each feeds off the other and intensifies the other.

So we can't say that in the enactment of the philosophy of freedom that there are not arguments: we will study those of Haynes and Cugoana. So we can't think that anti-slavery action is just the expression of some natural instinct without thought: that feeds into de-humanizing tropes about African "naturalness" if not "animality."

On the other hand, if the philosophy of freedom is to have any effects, if it is to mean something real and concrete in the world, its concepts and arguments have to be true to the experience of those enacting freedom in anti-slavery and anti-racism struggles. (And other struggles of course.) Otherwise they are just words on the page.

The central paradox of slavery: slavery denies the full humanity of slaves, but only human beings could do the work demanded of slaves.

The humanity of slaves can be seen in their resistance, flight, and rebellion. Acts of resistance, flight, and rebellion are the enactment of freedom, the enactment of the philosophy of freedom. Freedom is not a property of a person (X is tall, strong, and free), but is how you act, how you enact your freedom by resistance, flight, and rebellion.

Now writing and speaking can be acts of resistance (tearing down the arguments of your pro-slavery enemies), flight (flight from dominant ways of thought by creating new concepts), and rebellion (inciting action that will defeat slavery). So we see the mutual feedback of theory and practice here.

The critical point of modern African slavery is racism, which denies the full humanity of Africans. Modern anti-slavery has to be anti-racism then.

This paradox and its critical point of anti-racism is the key to textual anti-slavery arguments and to the enactment of the philosophy of freedom in resistance, flight, and rebellion. We'll talk about three such rebellions. From Gwendolyn Midlo Hall's *Africans in Colonial Louisiana* we'll talk about the Natchez Rebellion of 1729 and the Pointe Coupee conspiracy of 1795. And we'll talk about CLR James's account of the Haitian Revolution from his book *The Black Jacobins*.

We have to see modern trans-Atlantic slavery as part of GLOBAL POLITICAL ECONOMY.

European conquerors in the Americas tried using natives as slaves, but the death rates were too much. They then expanded upon existing Portuguese slave trade from West Africa (there are complex interactions with African kingdoms and Arab slave traders) to their Atlantic island colonies (e.g., Madeira) and started bringing African slaves across the Atlantic to the Americas.

A few key concepts from Marx.

PRIMITIVE ACCUMULATION: We must use a global perspective on slavery as it relates to the notion of "primitive accumulation." This is Marx's notion of how rich folks get rich in the first place so that they could control the labor of others (slaves or poor people).

"Capital" for Marx is not money: it's a social relation; it's the control of the labor of others in order to gain profit from selling the products they produce. Often that is via money [wages] but I want to claim that modern slavery is a capitalist social relation because slaves were commodities whose labor produced commodities.

COMMODITY: A key concept for Marx is "commodity," that which is sold in a market.

Marx says that waged workers sell their labor power as a commodity, but the whole person of a slave was a commodity (they themselves were bought and sold) and they produced commodities. Often they were exploited for their skills (on small farms or in town, as architects, cooks, bookkeepers and so

Lecture notes on modern trans-Atlantic African slavery

on), but some were "proletarianized" (de-skilled so that labor was routinized and organized, as on big plantations) and they produced commodities for sale in global markets (coffee, tobacco, sugar, cotton).

Okay, back to primitive accumulation, the establishment of capital as the social relation of the control of labor of others to gain profit from selling the products of their labor. Primitive accumulation is not just a one-time thing; it's always occurring.

Three aspects of primitive accumulation in the modern era: 1) enclosure; 2) national debt; 3) slavery

1) ENCLOSURE (or "formal subsumption"): the transformation of a previous economy ("primitive" as in New World, or feudal as in Europe) to a capitalist one means producing "workers" from "primitives" or peasants. That means removing them from the land on which they had their own economy of production (hunting, gathering, fishing, horticulture, agriculture, crafts) and distribution (webs of obligations to tribe members, trade with other tribes, or tribute in kind due to the lords of the manors or the New World emperors). Sometimes the new workers were "proletarianized": not only were they removed from their old economy but they were de-skilled.

Peasants and "primitives" have enormous skill sets but proletarianized industrial workers perform routine actions. Now "industry" happens on plantations as well as in factories. Sidney Mintz in *Sweetness and Power* will claim the Caribbean plantations were the first industrial operations. They were laboratories for control and organization of proletarianized labor; their techniques were exported to Europe in the Industrial Revolution. (We will see this trans-Atlantic radicalization move as well in *The Black Jacobins*: it's slavery in the New World that radicalizes politics in France.)

2) NATIONAL DEBT: Incurred from military adventures abroad, that is, from colonial or imperial adventures aimed at enclosure.

National debt means raising government revenues by borrowing from the rich rather than from taxing them. In other words, government bonds promise their holders a share of future tax revenue in return for the use of loaned money; combined with the way tax codes are written to shift burdens from the rich to the poor and middle class, this means the rich evade both current and future taxation while being able to shift a portion of future tax revenues from social spending into interest payments to themselves.

3) SLAVERY: The catalytic role that profits from slave plantations in the New World played in the European factory industrial revolution is a form of primitive accumulation as the establishment of capital as a social relation. By finding its way

to early factory owners slave profits enabled the homeland European rich to get richer and employ wageworkers in factories.

Cash from such profits provided support for key experiments in new mass production techniques. A key text here is from 1944, Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*. It fits into a general Marxist framework. The "Williams thesis" is that profits from slavery were integral to the Industrial Revolution. The key point here, made by the contemporary historian Robin Blackburn, is that the proper interpretation of the Williams thesis will look at the catalytic effects of such profits at key points, not just at the total money input.