http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/2236-463320181908
Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1329-5499

Capitalist slavery in the great Caribbean?

Charles Post[1;2]

Review of ROOD, Daniel B. *The reinvention of Atlantic slavery*: technology, labor, race and capitalism in the Greater Caribbean. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. xiii + 272 p. $74.00 cloth.

There has been a revival of the capitalism in the United States since the great recession of 2008. The New Historians of Capitalism (NHC) have created new academic programs and departments at Harvard, Cornell, Brown and the New School for Social Research. This is welcome relief from the "linguistic turn", returning historical inquiry to the systematic investigation of social and economic structures. However, the New Historians insist that in order to reinvent the study of capitalism, they must abandon any attempt to specify *what they mean*

[1] University of New York - New York – United States of America

[2] Professor, Sociology, borough of Manhattan Community College and the Graduate Center-City University of New York. E-mail: cpost@bmcc.cuny.edu.

Almanack, Guarulhos, n. 19, p. 321-330, ago. 2018
http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/2236-463320181908
Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1329-5499

by capitalism[3]. However, as Althusser argued – "*silences* are not innocent" –, the New Historians do have an implicit conceptualization of capitalism. Essentially, they adapt Adam Smith's notion of "commercial society"[4], where capitalism is any economy geared toward profit maximization through productive specialization and market exchange. They also include among capitalism's features as warfare, finance and legal-physical coercion in the appropriation of surplus labor. Put another way, the New History of Capitalism identifies capitalism with social processes like trade, finance and violence, which have existed for most of the last eight to ten thousand years.

This implicit understanding of capitalism contrasts with most Marxian accounts which view capitalism as a distinctive set of social property relations (social relations of production) with specific rules of reproduction (laws of motion)[5]. From this perspective, capitalism is the first form of social labor in which both non-producers (capitalists) and producers (workers) reproduce themselves through market competition. Capitalists are thus *compelled* to specialize output, continually introduce labor-saving technology, and accumulate capital in order to reduce costs and maximize profits in a competitive "war of all against all."

Not surprisingly, the New History of Capitalism has radically altered the study of new world plantation slavery. Walter Johnson, Edward Baptist and Sven Beckert[6] argue that new world slavery was not some

[3] ROCKHMAN, Seth. What makes the history of capitalism newsworthy? *Journal of the Early Republic*, n. 34, p. 442, Fall 2014. Similar arguments are made by most of the participants, including BECKERT, Sven. Interchange: the history of capitalism. *Journal of American History*, 101, n. 2, p. 503-36, September 2014.

[4] SMITH, Adam *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations*. New York: Modern Library, 1937 [1776].

[5] The concepts of social-property relations and rules of reproduction are derived from the work of BRENNER, Robert. Property and progress: where Adam Smith went wrong. In: WICKHAM, Chris (ed.). *Marxist history-writing for the twenty-first century*. London: British Academy/Oxford University Press, 2007. p. 49-111. Brenner's work, of course, is rooted in Marx's mature work in the three volumes of *Capital*.

[6] JOHNSON, Walter. *River of dark dreams*: slavery and empire in the cotton kingdom. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013; BAPTIST, Edward. *The half has never been told*: slavery and

Almanack, Guarulhos, n. 19, p. 321-330, ago. 2018
http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/2236-463320181908
Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1329-5499

atavistic throwback to pre-capitalist societies, but a thoroughly capitalist form that was the foundation to the development of industrial capitalism in both Britain and the United States in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Despite their commonalities, there is considerable debate among these historians about the respective role of physical coercion and technological innovation in the increases in productivity of slave labor, in particular in the harvesting of cotton in the antebellum United States[7]. Daniel Rood's *The reinvention of Atlantic slavery* clearly situates itself in the emerging cannon of the New History of Capitalism on plantation slavery, while coming down clearly on the side of those who argue that the master-slave relation was no obstacle to the introduction of labor-saving technology during the "second slavery" of the nineteenth century.

The "second slavery" refers to the revival of plantation slavery in the nineteenth century, after the "colonial slavery" of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries ended with the Haitian Revolution, the British attempt to suppress the Atlantic slave trade, and the gradual emancipation of slaves in the Jamaica and other British colonies. Most studies of the "second slavery" focus on the US slave produced cotton providing the raw material for British industrialization[8], and Cuban and Louisiana plantations providing the sugar that began to substitute for other, more nutritious and expensive foods in the diets of British workers[9]. Rood broadens this discussion by incorporating the "Great

the making of American capitalism. New York: Basic Books, 2014; BECKERT, Sven *Empire of cotton*: a global history. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014. For a lengthy discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of these works, see POST, Charles. Slavery and the New History of Capitalism. *Catalyst*, 1, n. 1, p. 173-192, Spring 2017.

[7] Baptist (2014) is the most articulate exponent of the physical coercion/torture thesis, while Alan J. Olmstead and Paul W. Rhode make a convincing case for the role of technical innovation in raising the productivity of slave labor in cotton harvests, in OLMSTEAD, Alan J.; RHODE, Paul W. Biological innovation and productivity growth in the antebellum cotton south. *Journal of Economic History*, 68, n. 4, p. 1123–71, 2008.

[8] Beckert (2014) summarizes this literature.

[9] MINTZ, Sidney. *Sweetness and power*: the place of sugar in modern history. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985.

Almanack, Guarulhos, n. 19, p. 321-330, ago. 2018
http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/2236-463320181908
Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1329-5499

Caribbean" nexus between Cuba, Brazil and the upper US South, in particular Virginia.

Faced with sharpening competition from European beat sugar producers and US and British tariffs, Cuban cane sugar planters "responded by adapting European industrial technologies, combining planting with finance, taking control of modern transport infrastructure, and vanquishing small landholders to grab a larger share of the market" (p. 2). The transformation of Cuban slavery forged new connections with the upper US South, which provided extensive engineering and technical expertise to build mills and railways and slave cultivated wheat to feed the island. Simultaneously, the shift in Brazilian slavery from declining sugar plantations in the northeast to more dynamic coffee cultivation in the southeast created new ties with Virginia wheat planters and railway engineers. Throughout this "Great Caribbean" nexus, new labor-saving technology was applied to both production and transportation, and the "race management" of labor was transformed as African slaves' practical knowledge was appropriated to "creolize" new machinery, and planters began to use new forms of coerced labor, in particular Chinese indentured servants.

Rood begins by retelling the now familiar story of the transformation of the Cuban sugar refining mills and the construction of railroads during the 1830s and 1840s[10]. Faced with increased global competition, Cuban sugar planters built railroads to quickly transport cut cane to the mills from their ever expanding plantations before it spoiled, introduced steam powered crushing of the cane, and replaced the labor-intensive Jamaica train with the vacuum pan in the refining of white sugar. Rood breaks new ground with his investigation of innovations in the preservation of white sugar, where racially 'tinged" science that assigned manual labor to "darker" people is linked to the struggle to preserve the "purity" of sugar for the US and European markets. His discussion of the transformation of the port of Havana

[10] FRAGINAL, Manuel Moreno. *The sugarmill*: the socioeconomic complex of sugar in Cuba, 1760-1860. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1976.

Almanack, Guarulhos, n. 19, p. 321-330, ago. 2018
http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/2236-463320181908
Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1329-5499

is especially insightful. Havana had experienced a shift from the dominance of middling merchants, whose profits depended upon storage fees, and sales commissions, to a "new generation of Spanish-born elite merchant-planters" whose income came "from buying and selling sugar on the world market, financing illegal slaving voyages, and underwriting sugar-mill operations" (p. 67). To facilitate their new role in the global sugar trade, these merchant planters rebuilt the ports in Havana, introducing railway depots, constructing new warehouses and mechanizing the ports in order to keep "sugar in gentle but unceasing movement" (p. 67). While profiting from the increased speed of circulation, the merchants also remade the port work force replacing black (free and slave) workers with Europeans and Chinese laborers.

Railroad construction in both Cuba and Brazil in the mid-nineteenth century created new connections with the upper South. Rood details how Virginia construction engineers and their slaves were essential to the construction and operation of railroads in new, tropical terrains in the "Great Caribbean". Skilled slaves were crucial, in the upper US South, Cuba and Brazil in constructing rail lines and operating them – despite widespread planter and merchant fear of relying upon these bonded, racialized workers. The spread of railways also created a new, modern iron industry in the upper South. The Tredgar Iron Mills in Richmond, Virginia was one of the largest and most technologically advanced iron producers in the US, relying on the labor of slaves leased by the mill owners from their owners.

The mid-nineteenth century also saw the shift in the center of Brazilian slavery from the increasingly uncompetitive sugar plantations in the northeast to the highly profitable coffee plantations in the southeast, the hinterland of Rio de Janeiro. Again, railroad construction, often by US trained engineers, was central to the expansion of the coffee frontier. As the population of Rio grew, and more and more lands were shifted from the production of foodstuffs for domestic consumption to the cultivation of coffee for export, a new market emerged for the fine white flour produced in Virginia. In the early nineteenth century, Virginia planters began to shift from tobacco to wheat, breaking up their plantations and selling off excess slaves to the booming cotton frontier

Almanack, Guarulhos, n. 19, p. 321-330, ago. 2018
http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/2236-463320181908
Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1329-5499

of the US southwest. By the 1840s and 1850s, the growing Brazilian demand for high quality white flour transformed both flour-milling technology and the preservation and storage of white flour in the Richmond area. The Richmond mills continued to rely on water-power but were relatively capital-intensive and utilized the labor of skilled, leased slaves.

The deepening Virginia-Rio nexus also transformed the harvesting of wheat in Virginia. Rood reveals how the expanding wheat farms of the Shenandoah Valley were the incubator for Cyrus McCormick development of his mechanized grain reaper in the 1830s and 1840s. Ripened wheat has an especially short window before it spoils, placing tremendous pressure on wheat producers to harvest and thresh the wheat as quickly as possible. Rood outlines how McCormick relied on the labor of skilled slave black smiths, wheat cradlers, and carpenters in the development of the harvesting machine that would radically transform US small grain agriculture in the mid-nineteenth century.

Rood's book bring important new insights to the history of the "second slavery" by broadening its scope beyond the US cotton-Cuban sugar-British textile industry node, to include the "Great Caribbean" nexus of Cuban sugar-upper South technical expertise, iron and wheat-Brazilian coffee. His accounts of the transformation of the port of Havana, and of wheat cultivation and processing in Virginia are important additions to our historical knowledge. However, the book suffers from a number of conceptual and historical problems.

First, Rood uses the term "creolization" to discuss the adaptation of technologies to specific production processes in specific geographic-ecological locations. While Rood reestablishes the role of slaves in the adaptation of existing techniques in railroad construction, flour milling and farm implement construction, he sometimes implies that there is something unique about the pragmatic sharing of experimental information on technology among agricultural and industrial producers. This was actually quite typical of technical innovation before the late nineteenth century, when miners, skilled artisans and midwives were often the most important figures in the development and applica-

Almanack, Guarulhos, n. 19, p. 321-330, ago. 2018
http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/2236-463320181908
Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1329-5499

tion of scientific knowledge[11]. It was only during the second industrial revolution (steel, chemicals, electrical power-machinery) of the 1890s, that capital took control of scientific research with the proliferation of "research and development" departments in major corporations.

Rood's use of "race management" is also problematic. As developed by David Roediger and Elizabeth Esch[12], race management referred to the pragmatic way in which the ideological notion of race (the division of humanity into groups with distinct and *unchangeable* characteristics) is used to classify and distribute workers into various positions in the production of commodities. These categories were highly *flexible* in light of the ever-changing demands of the market-driven production of commodities. Rood tends to emphasize the racial anxieties experienced by slave owners as technology changed labor-requirements, but has little to say about how they *adapted* their "racial theories" to meet the new requirements of production. This often goes hand in hand with important errors in analyzing the impact of new techniques on labor requirements. Specifically, Rood reiterates Moreno Fraginals' claim that the introduction of the vacuum pan *raised* the level of skill and knowledge required in the refining of sugar, creating a crisis of "racial management." As Dale Tomich points out[13], it was the earlier technology – the Jamaica Train – that relied heavily on the intelligence and experience of skilled slaves. The vacuum pan, by automating the process of sugar refining, actually *deskilled* labor in that phase of sugar production.

The greatest problems with Rood's analysis flow from his uncritical acceptance of the New Historians' common sense that slavery was a capitalist form of production. There is no question that slave-owners

[11] CONNOR, Clifford D. *A people's history of science*: miners, midwives, and low mechanicks. New York: Nation Books, 2005.

[12] ROEDIGER, David; ESCH, Elizabeth. *The production of difference*: race and the management of labor in U.S. history. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

[13] TOMICH, Dale. *Slavery in the circuit of sugar*: Martinique in the world economy, 1830-1848. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990. p. 199-201, 221-225.

Almanack, Guarulhos, n. 19, p. 321-330, ago. 2018
http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/2236-463320181908
Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1329-5499

in the US were, for the most part, subject to "market compulsion." Slave holders throughout the new world had to borrow capital to purchase their basic means of production – land and slaves. In the British colonies and most of the southern United States faced the loss of land and slaves if they failed to pay these debts. Put in another way, they were subject to what John Clegg has called "credit market discipline"[14] – they had to successfully compete in the global market in order to preserve (no less expand) their ownership of land and slaves. Rood never makes the case that Cuban planters faced these constraints, or whether, like French colonial planters, they were exempt from the loss of land and slaves for the failure to pay debts[15]. Clearly, those planters subject to "credit market discipline" sought to cut costs in order to remain competitive – they sought to adapt the most up to date innovations in crop varieties, fertilizers, tools and methods.

The master-slave social property relation, however, prevented the planters from *continually* adapting the latest, labor-saving tools and methods[16]. The obstacle to the continuous adaptation of labor-saving techniques was *not* any lack of motivation or skill on the part of their bonded laborers. Instead, it was the reality that slave-holders did not purchase the *labor-power* of the slaves (their ability to work for a set period of time), but the *laborers as* "*means of production in human form*". Put in another way, the slave was a form of fixed capital – a constant element of the production process that could not easily be expelled from production in order to facilitate the relatively continuous introduction of techniques that improved labor productivity. So, if planters introduced cost-cutting techniques that saved labor, they would not be able, like

[14] CLEGG, John J. Credit market discipline and capitalist slavery in antebellum south Carolina. *Social Science History* 42, n. 2, p. 343-376, 2018. As it will become clear, I do not believe that market dependence made slaveholders capitalists.

[15] BLACKBURN, Robin. *The making of new world slavery*: from the baroque to the modern. London: Verso, 1997. p. 282-83, 444-45.

[16] The following is a summary of my argument in POST, Charles. *The American road to capitalism*: studies in class structure, economic development and political conflict, 1620-1877. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012. Chapter 2.

Almanack, Guarulhos, n. 19, p. 321-330, ago. 2018
http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/2236-463320181908
Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1329-5499

their capitalist counterparts, to simply lay that labor off. They would be stuck with continuing ownership of the laborer(s), having to keep them around until they could find purchasers for their surplus slaves.

It is true that, like other non-capitalist forms of social labor, slavery did bring about episodic improvements in productivity. However, unlike under capitalism, which tends to spur more or less ongoing technical change, innovation under slavery had a "once and for all" character[17]. Thus, the introduction of labor-saving techniques in Cuban sugar production and shipping, or in Virginia wheat cultivation did not set off a process of continuous technical innovation. Like other technical innovations under slavery, they corresponded to the introduction of new products or the movement of production to a new frontier. Once established, these new labor-processes remained relatively unchanged until new products were introduced, new geographic regions were brought under production, or slavery as a form of social labor was abolished. Those industries where there was continuous technical innovation, Virginia's iron works and Rio's bakeries, utilized *leased slaves*. Leased slaves were, like indentured servants, a form of legally coerced *wage labor*. Those who leased slaves essentially purchased their labor-power for a set period of time, and could easily expel that labor when new, more productive tools and methods became available.

The limitations the master-slave social property relation on continuous technical innovation is most evident in the case of the mechanized reaper. While Rood's discussion of how McCormick's initial motivation was to revolutionize Virginia's wheat harvests is quite insightful, he never poses the question of why McCormick abandoned Virginia for Chicago when he turned to mass producing his mechanical reaper. Rood recognizes that there were serious obstacles to the diffusion and generalized adaptation of the reaper in Virginia's slave based agriculture. Rood acknowledges that two large wheat planters who adapted the reaper found themselves "burdened by the presence of too many

[17] BRENNER, Robert P. The origins of capitalist development: a critique of neo-smithian Marxism. *New Left Review* 104, p. 36-37, July–August 1977.

Almanack, Guarulhos, n. 19, p. 321-330, ago. 2018
http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/2236-463320181908
Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1329-5499

workers" (p. 189). Unlike wage laborers who could easily be laid-off when they were no longer needed, slave owners had to maintain their slaves in order to preserve their value as "means of production in human form". While the wheat producers of Virginia were a relatively narrow market for the mechanical reaper, the petty-capitalist family farmers of north were an ever expanding market for the reaper and other labor-saving tools and machinery[18]. Not surprisingly, despite his personal sympathy for slavery, McCormick relocated his factory to be closer to his customers in the dynamic capitalist north.

Recebido em: 07/07/2018 - Aprovado em : 24/07/2018

[18] POST, Charles, 2012. p. 94-97.