

THE PASSWORD IS 'SUGAR'

BY HUMPHREY MCQUEEN

A prolegomenon to the indirect contributions of Atlantic chattel-slavery to the revolution inside capital

Set in the three decades before 1687 when England took a lead in the slave-trade for its possessions in the Caribbean, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) lays claim to being the best-known English novel.

A strand of ideologues, known as Robinsonades, promotes Crusoe's individualism as the prototype of capitalist enterprise. Progressives, meanwhile, burden Friday with the regime of chattel-slavery. Both conventional wisdoms detract from how Atlantic chattel-slavery connected to the rise of capitalism.

Defoe weaves the Dissenting moral quest of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* with his own career of wheedling the English out of their ignorance of getting and selling. *Crusoe* was possibly a puff for the South Seas Company in which Defoe had invested. For him, 'inland trade' depended on the import of 'all kinds of foreign growth and manufactures', primarily from colonial possessions in the Americas, making the slave trade as foundational as England's Board of Trade and Plantations was aptly named. Defoe also held shares in the slave-trading Royal African Company.

In a microcosm of how the slave colonies depended on goods produced by other kinds of enforced labour in Europe, Crusoe owes his physical survival during twenty-five years alone on the island to the wage-slaves who had produced the goods he salvages from two wrecks far more than he does to his own efforts as a *homo faber*. He never depends on the labour of Man Friday, whom he saves a mere two years before they sail off. Instead, he sews for Friday, as they labour together to improve their shared way of life.

By misinterpreting Friday's relations with Crusoe, critics glide over elements of slavery throughout the novel. Crusoe escapes from years of captivity in North Africa with a slave boy, Xury, whom he sells to the captain of a Portuguese vessel which picks them up off the African Coast before landing Crusoe in Brazil, where he uses that blood money to set up as a planter. Years later, he

commands a venture back to Africa to buy chattel-slaves. On this voyage, he is marooned. After being rescued, he and Friday make their way to England via Portugal where he hears that his Brazilian estate is intact. In the first sequel, they set out to reclaim Crusoe's plantation, chattels and cash. Crusoe never thinks of selling Friday.

False starts

In the wake of Genoese adventurers, Prince Henry the Navigator commanded Portugal's conquest of Ceuta in 1415. The prospect of gold drew his countrymen to the Congo Basin (as it will Crusoe 230 years later). Their lateen-rigged caravels beat the wind, allowing them to tack their way across the Atlantic to Brazil and around the Cape to Calicut by 1500. They began Atlantic chattel-slavery by taking Africans to Lisbon as household servants and then to grow sugar on Madeira from 1452. Embarking 46 per cent of the eleven million captives, they landed 40 per cent of the 9.6 million survivors in Brazil before 1860.

The 9.6 million to survive the Middle Passage were thus essential but not sufficient to initiate the revolution inside capital, let alone guarantee its dominance.

Although Lisbon ruled the waves, carried away most of the chattel-slaves, and held swathes of South America from which its venturers extracted fortunes, Portugal does not become the *locus classicus* for the capitalist mode. Nor does Spain, with larger inflows of gold and silver, much of which go into Madrid's wars, its treasure fleets as productive of value as the tomb that Phillip II has built for his father at El Escorial. Under the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht, Madrid conceded the annual supply of 4000 slaves to British merchants and trading rights into its American colonies for thirty years. By then, Portugal had become a British dependency against Spain, one common foe.

Another mutual rival, the Netherlands, exemplified how to be first in commerce was no guarantee of breaking into value-adding. The Dutch seized Portugal's slave ports and north-eastern Brazil from the 1620s, to be driven out after thirty years. Despite that reversal, Amsterdam by 1700 had become Europe's financial hub, its fleets the

universal carrier, and VOC directors, imbued with the Protestant Ethic, drew riches from the spice islands. Failing to convert their money-capital into the productive form that is capital-within-capitalism, Dutch burghers did not a bourgeoisie become.

Capitalism

If, as Richard Tawney muses, capitalism is not 'unique among human institutions, in having, like Melchizedek, existed from eternity', when, where and how did it come to pass? For 150 years, talk of an 'Industrial Revolution' has trumped Marx's critical analysis of the centralisation of money-capital to fund the concentration of value-adding capitals, crucially the conglomeration of wage-labour (variable capital). From the mid-1700s, the revolution inside capital opened paths for that triad to consolidate as the capitalist mode.

The mistranslation of Marx's '*ursprungliche Akkumulation*' as 'primitive accumulation' instead of 'original', as in sin, still encourages moralisers to explain the origins of capitalism out of the plundering of Africa, Asia and the Americas. 'Primitive' is a question of timing, not location. Because the revolution inside capital could not be secured from a single take-off, correcting 'primitive' to 'original' misses the point that the quanta of capitals needed for the new mode called for *initiating processes*, not just an initial event.

Although industrialisation began in agriculture with the engrossment of holdings, its effects reached beyond processing through the flows between fields and factories, onto construction, mining and transport, as well as the commercial sector's smoothing their interdependent growth. One instance of how Atlantic chattel-slaves underwrote those cross-currents came between the 1730s and the 1770s, when Glasgow's 'Tobacco Lords' directed profits from their re-export business into landed estates, manuring the agricultural genesis of industrialisation with mercantile acumen. Pivotal though merchant houses were for the trade of chattel-slaves and to circulating the wealth extracted from their labour, 'Mr Moneybags' became secondary to the value-adding sectors where the personifications of capital accumulated value out of the labour that European wage-slaves added to commodities for the Africa trade, for plantations and

mines in the Americas, and to the produce sent back for processing.

The Galtons were Birmingham gunsmiths, co-founders of the Midland Bank, and but one Quaker family to square its conscience with producing the weapons and other goods for the Atlantic system. ‘The workshop of the world’ hand-crafted as many as 150,000 muskets a year and fabricated the buttons and buckles, known as ‘toys’, exchanged along the Guinea coast. Supplying parallel needs spurred on every sector across the kingdom. Norfolk farmers raised pulses for dry rations. Hull became a port of entry for the Baltic pine, tar, flax and iron-ore that went into the slave ships, as it was for the North Sea fish that sustained crews and chattels. Liverpool slavers had to wait for the return of the North Sea fleet to recruit the double crews sent on the slave ships in case of mutiny. Watt’s partner, Mathew Boulton, schemed to control the Cornish mines and smelters producing the copper that sheathed Naval and commercial hulls against tropical shipworm and thus reduced the depreciation of that fixed capital item in the triangular trades. Copper also went into pans on the plantations to boil down the raw cane and in the European refineries.

The 9.6 million to survive the Middle Passage were thus essential but not sufficient to initiate the revolution inside capital, let alone guarantee its dominance. Without the trade in and the labour of human chattels, the related undertakings in Europe might never have overthrown a mode constrained by usurers and traders in order to enable one propelled by the proprietors of canals, building sites, farms, factories and mines. Once caught in that revolution, merchants and bankers merged, some with value-adding concerns. The House of Baring, ‘the Fifth Great Power’, began as textile merchants before a second generation went into woollen manufacture, the slave-trade and banking.

Regimes of credit

When Marx points up how ‘direct slavery’ gave ‘value to the colonies; the colonies have created world trade; world trade is the necessary condition of large-scale industry’, he also recognises the pivotal place of ‘credit’, its regimes aiding in the growth of domestic economies as well as easing their interactions with global commerce.

Funds for Watt’s first reciprocating engines in the late 1770s came from private bankers awaiting the return of West Indiamen with their bills-of-exchange and slave-hewn cargoes to replenish their reserves to extend credit at home.

Novel financial institutions fashioned instruments to shorten the intervals between production and payment. A century of judicial wrangling saw bills-of-exchange accepted in Britain as legal tender, their discounting consolidated at a London Exchange after the 1772–73 crisis. Before 1793, 280 private provincial banks could cash local bills. Money-of-account proved as propitious as any mechanical or chemical innovation.

Fourteen years after the Great Fire of 1666, the first insurance corporation bought a Crown Charter. In 1770, 140 sugar-bakers, as refineries were known, operated along the cluttered West India Docks, leaving authorities fearful that a fire in one would engulf its neighbours. Their insurers erected a trellis of the credit upon which landlords, processors and miners came to rely for the money-capital to expand. Griffin Stonestreet took over as managing director of Phoenix Assurance in 1786 determined to build up reserves of £300,000 from premiums to invest in ventures returning more in interest than did shares in the National Debt. Without such institutional backers, His Grace the Duke of Bridgewater had been reduced in the late 1760s to borrowing from his tenants every few weeks to pay the navvies constructing a canal to carry coal from his mines to the Mersey.

Upon the establishment of the Bank of England in 1694, its owners underwent a protracted learning experience as to what they could do beyond funding war as commerce by other means. By 1781, the prime minister, Lord North, could assure parliament that this private undertaking had become ‘from long habit and usage of many years ... a part of the constitution’. Indeed, the Bank was the capstone of Britain’s fiscal-naval state in which the Royal Navy underwrote an oceanic empire by defeating the French and Spanish around the Caribbean, protecting slave ships and their return cargoes. In 1779, George III thought it better were Britain to be invaded than to lose the ‘Sugar Islands’, without which ‘it will be impossible to raise money to continue the war’ against the French backers of the Continental Congress.

The Admiralty tested Harrison's prize-winning clock for fixing longitude on a voyage to where else but the West Indies. Watt could stop stuffing pistons with dried dung to lift their efficiency by spinning-off the Navy's rifled-cannon, which has sealed the defence of Jamaica in 1782.

Which slavery?

Tossed about in 'slave-like conditions' and 'modern slavery', 'slave' remains a cuss word unless connected to social relations of production in order to delineate bond, chattel, contract, doubly-freed labour, debt peonage and sharecropping. Drawing on Hegel's discourse on Lordship and Bondage, Marx reminds us that 'A negro is a negro. In certain circumstances he becomes a slave. A mule is a machine for spinning cotton ...' Outside those circumstances, a negro is no more a slave 'than gold is intrinsically money, or sugar the price of sugar ...'

Following patriarchal slavery in pre-class societies, several chattel-slaverys operated across millennia: around the Ancient worlds; galley-slaves in the Mediterranean until the late 1600s; enslaved vagabonds in Tudor England, confounding Arne's anthem; and in Russia from 1450, kept going by wars against Tartars, Muslims and Poles. Rulers in north and central Africa traded other Africans to Europeans who, before 1700, had coveted ivory and gold more than the slaves who produced those goods and carried them to the coast.

This essay employs the phrase 'Atlantic chattel-slaverys', even though the Portuguese recruited on the East Coast of Africa, the Dutch across Asia, and the Spanish from the Philippines onto Mexico. The prefix 'chattel' distinguishes that kind of forced labour from wage-slavery. Chattels are sold for life: wage-slaves, freed from the means to be self-sufficient, are at liberty to be compelled to sell our labour-power in timed units, an economic necessity for the survival of both buyer and seller, one closely watched on behalf of the former by those whom Max Weber calls 'men in spiked helmets'.

To designate Atlantic chattel-slavery as 'modern' is no help because that descriptor has been captured by the likes of Andrew Forrest, anxious to emancipate fifty-million

'modern' slaves into the ranks of five billion wage-slaves. The Chinese buyers of Fortescue's iron-ore employ steel-workers under conditions never easy to distinguish from his abhorred 'modern slavery', and whose exploitation pays the price for his tax-deductible philanthropies. Forrest's 'modern slavery' is at one extremity of the working conditions of free-labourers that were universal until the 1820s when our class organised to fight back.

Most chattel-slaves had provided use-values for subsistence rather than goods to exchange. Atlantic chattel-slaverys became exceptional during shifts towards the patterns of production and circulation needed for the emergence and triumph of the capitalist mode. That inversion could be not uniform or universal, neither temporally nor spatially, with demesnes in Brazil, for instance, continuing to produce mostly for themselves.

A brisk survey makes it trebly important to point up differences in time, manner and place, and not just between big players—Portugal and France—but closer to the ground. The physical geographies of the Caribbean allowed some estates to grow a portion of their own provisions while others had to import everything from the mainland to the north. Those differences, in turn, shaped the self-sufficiency of the enslaved before and after emancipation. Conditions differed again in the Orinoco delta where runaways had been able to keep themselves.

Allegations that chattel-slaves were inefficient because of some defect in 'the negro' is not rebutted by instances of their operating machines since they were few and far between. On the Leeward Islands, any planter proposing to replace hoes with ploughs was considered a 'crank'. Rather than pay to import a wheelbarrow, a Brazilian Master set thirty slaves to carry three bricks each, which kept them active since the devil makes work for idle hands.

For the productivity of Atlantic chattel-slaves to remain low, their numbers had to be kept up by more efficient slave-catching. Muskets from Birmingham were exchanged for slaves at coastal forts and then by West African rulers for horses from the Sudan. European weapons allied to Arab steeds ensured the human harvest. Landing captives in the Americas at minimum cost per head reconfigured vessels from nine to fourteen tons in the 100 years to 1766. Improved ship-board sanitation reduced the loss of property. Slavers

also found it more profitable to take advantage of the trade winds to return inside six months rather than wait for cargoes of slave produce, which might extend a voyage to two years. Here too, middle-men came into play with bulk sales of human chattels in Africa and the Americas. Hastening turnaround at both ends expedited the return on investment, as did the standardisation of cloth and cowries as measures of market-prices for the captives.

United States of America

From 1654 to 1775, 20,000 Britons contracted themselves for terms of service in the north American colonies, while the government transported 52,000 convicts to Virginia and Maryland (think Moll Flanders). After 1783, Whitehall punished its rebel colonies by depriving them of felons as a source of value-adding alongside their chattels. To hold onto those colonies, Britain had purchased troops from the Landgrave of Hesse-Kassel who recognised that his corps of conscripts was his ‘Peru, and if we lose it we will lose all our resources’.

Atlantic chattel-slavery had begun on the north American mainland in 1619 when a score from a captured Portuguese vessel were resold in Virginia. Some 360,000 landed before 1808 when Congress stopped their shipment. By the outbreak of the slaveholders’ rebellion in 1860, millions had been bred for an internal market. Another result of the ban was that Southern planters took better care of those embodiments of capital since they no longer had access to a reserve army in Africa, as did planters in the West Indies where working-life expectancy remained five to seven years. (Younger sons sent as managers entered a race between a quick fortune and an early death.)

Contrary to Hollywood, cotton became dominant only from around 1810, Britain’s imports rising ninefold to 1.226 m lbs by 1859. A quintet of inventions had made cotton a paying proposition. In 1793, Eli Whitney’s gin for picking out seeds let an adult male slave and two boys increase output from one to 50 lbs in a day. From 1799, bleaching powder further slashed turnover times by replacing the need to spread yarn and fabrics on fields to be watered for as long as three weeks. The yarn had still to be

spun and then woven, activities later concentrated in mills powered by the operatives’ muscles and by waterwheels, not steam, since the potential output of fire-engines in Britain by 1830 approached 250,000 hp, perhaps enough to drive all the internal-combustion engines in Bourke today.

Capitalism became a possibility only once its personifications began extracting relative surplus-value so that reproduction could rise from steady levels to expanding scales. Without machinery, labour can add only absolute surplus-value, a limitation in every kind of chattel-slavery. Not cyclopean machines but the magnitudes of relative surplus-value that wage-slaves could add as their appendages.

The names/cases

If the economic phase labelled ‘the Industrial Revolution’ is reduced to Dark Satanic Mills, accounts of its social relations are etiolated by scholars retreating to the safe pastures of biography and the case study, should they admit Atlantic chattel-slavery to objective investigations of what Robin Blackburn glossed as Europe’s progress from ‘the Baroque to the Modern’.

In 2021, *Slavery & Abolition* devoted an issue to ‘Revisiting Europe and Slavery’, which turned out to be another assortment of case studies, none dealing with how capitalism rose to dominance across 350 years from the 1420s. In criticising the contributors for doing no more than ‘observe the significance of slavery for economic development’, the author of *Empire of Cotton* (2014), Sven Beckert, himself does no more than note the benefits from asking ‘why?’ slavery mattered, when what counts is the pursuit of the how and the wherefores of its connections with the revolution inside capital. Essential as case studies are, they cannot carry analysis far beneath the surface, and thus distract from the structured dynamics running within and between Absolutist serfdoms from c.1500, surges of Atlantic chattel-slavery after c.1600, and the suborning of merchant and financial capitals to reproductive ones throughout the 1700s.

Led by Catherine Hall, a University College London team posted the slave-owners compensated in the mid-1830s for the loss of their ‘speaking tools’ on www.UCL.ac.uk/lbs. The Gladstones and the Lascelles

had been spotlighted in 1944 by Eric Williams, who would later conclude that ‘British historians wrote almost as if Britain had introduced Negro slavery solely for the satisfaction of abolishing it’. Sixty years on, the uncovering of slaver-ancestors kindles a shame game among the likes of Laura Trevallyn, bringing forth a trickle of charitable works from that latter-day Mrs Jellyby but nary a thought about the millions of wage-slaves under her nose.

Naming slave-traders and owners slides into methodological individualism and so is unable to conceptualise how, by the 1790s, 40 per cent of the incomes of Bristol came from slave-related projects, until its every brick was said to be mortared with their blood. More than one statue would have to be tossed into its harbour since not a few of the port’s worthies profited from ‘the bloody business of the day’ without owning a slave, or a share in a plantation or a mine, an abstinence observed by capitalists across Britain who took their cut indirectly. The Rothschilds received a finder’s fee for raising the £20 million to compensate the slave-owners but never had a direct hand in the system, unlike their in-laws and partners in those loans, the Montefiores.

When John Julius Angerstein (1735–1823), the ‘Father of Lloyds’, re-married in 1785, his new wife held a life interest from the sale of a plantation in St Kitts and of a London sugar-factor. Serving as ‘a trustee to the creditors of estates and enslaved people in Grenada’, he did not have to trade in slaves himself, or to own an acre in the Americas, to benefit from what a biographer identifies as the ‘widening circles of finance’. After handling 200 accounts, Angerstein retired in 1810 with £500,000 at a time when a fully-equipped Arkwright mill cost £14,000. His art collection forms the basis for the National Gallery in London. Civilisation underwritten by barbarism.

At one further remove from producers, processors, merchants and creditors were the likes of the Rev. George Austen, Jane’s father, who served as the principal trustee of a slave estate on Antigua, a detail air-brushed by her hagiographers. Austen set *Mansfield Park* (1814) around the eponymous country seat of the Bertrams, whose plantation happens to be on Antigua. The 1807 outlawing of the trade in chattel-slaves explains why Sir Thomas sails there during 1812 on what she calls ‘business’, returning with the family’s affairs in order. Snobs who pride themselves

on the prejudice of revelling in the refinements of Georgian England as they sip their Lady Grey from Wedgwood flesh-and-bone china at what they mistakenly think of High Tea, bristle when the savagery that underwrote their age of elegance is pointed out by Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). How dare that Arab despoil the delights of Hampshire with the muck of Marxism.

Significant absences

Little is more tedious than calling out historians who ignore, marginalise or trivialise Atlantic chattel-slavery, yet who could resist Christopher Hill’s observation that T. S. Ashton, the historian ‘who adopts the most optimistic attitude to the position of workers in the Industrial Revolution has only one reference to the slave trade in his *Economic History of England in the 18th Century* (1955) and that “an attempt ... to mitigate” its “worst horrors”’. Marxists fare little better. Dobb and Sweezy do not mention Atlantic chattel-slavery in their ‘transition’ debate, where Feudalism fades into capitalism without the rough crossings of the Middle Passage.

Lacunae, large and small, offer openings onto the inner workings of both modes. C. B. MacPherson interprets ‘Possessive Individualism’ without mentioning that one of its props, that apostle of English liberties, John Locke, sat on the Board of Trade and Plantations, held shares in the Royal African Company, and arranged for the sale of Carolinian Indians on Barbados where he had investments. In Locke’s political philosophy, wealth belongs to its direct producer, but only if working for him or herself, otherwise, the product belongs to the employer, whose claims were enshrined by the 1689 Bill of (Property) Rights. Applying this sleight-of-hand to chattel-slavery would have been more child’s play for Locke.

Thomas Piketty in *Capital in the Twenty-first Century* tabulates four kinds of capital as percentages of national income between 1770 and 1810. The American South registers more than half for chattel-slaves. Britain and France score NIL. Piketty should reflect on Pitt the Elder’s declamation in 1759 that it was ‘barbarism’ not to ‘consider the sugar colonies as the landed interest of this kingdom’, and on the insight of the economic geographer E. A. Wrigley that it was as if during the 1700s, Britain had

‘imported’ two million acres, to which we might add that twice that expanse was imported in the 1800s, including from Australasia.

Australia

A word or three about settler Australia, beginning with a reprise of the imperial designs traversed above. Britain’s links with Portugal saw Arthur Phillip serve in its Navy during Lisbon’s 1774–8 war against Spain, transporting convicts to Brazil, and becoming fluent in Portuguese, which proved useful when the First Fleet reprovisioned at Rio throughout August 1787.

Botany Bay floated on one by-product of chattel-slavery—rum from molasses—which triggered the 1808 Rebellion against Bligh, who had been twice sent to Tahiti to collect breadfruit specimens to grow in the West Indies to feed the slaves. Rum remained the barter currency for forty years, rewarding the labourers on Macquarie’s Rum Hospital.

Australia remained free of chattel-slavery because of other forms of forced labour, whether convict, bonded, contracted or wage-slavery. Authorities lent transportees to pastoralists but never sold one. Under the Master and Servant Acts, however, ‘doubly-free’ labourers were contracted for a year and were gaoled for ‘absconding.’

In 1835, George Fife Angas used some of the £6,345 6s. compensation for his being deprived of his property in chattel-slaves in Honduras to buy his way into the South Australian Company. He secured labour for that Free Province by funding the immigration of ‘Old Lutherans’, who kept their oath to serve him faithfully, repaying their fares and paying £10 per acre at 20 per cent interest, somewhat in excess of E. G. Wakefield’s ‘necessary price’ to keep up the supply of labour to landowners.

Some Pacific Island labourers were kidnapped, though even those who had been ‘black-birded’ did not become ‘chattels’. Those not repatriated after 1906 joined the European wage-slaves though were barred from their union, the AWU.

Patriarchal slavery pervaded First Peoples, but they never became chattels in the sense of being bought and sold. Yet it is odd that the British seem not to have given a thought to exporting any to the Caribbean even though

the last quarter of the seventeenth century saw the peak of the trade, when close to a fifth of the total were taken.

Only confusion can follow conjuring with ‘serf-like’ or ‘Feudal’ for the capital–labour relations on pastoral stations and missions. Handouts of ‘little bit flour, chugar and tea’ were but one more instance of ‘truck’ wages, against which workers continue to battle. Wave Hill in 1966 brought on a clash between a battered primary communalism and a monopolising capital. Unpaid wages in Queensland means that those domestics had been wage-slaves, forced into servitude for a ‘Lousy Little Sixpence’. Photographs of Aborigines chained together show prisoners on their way to hard labour, not to market.

Envoi

After spending much of the past dozen years grappling with the origins of capitalism, I carry no expectation of delivering more than shards like this one. *Au fait* with Marx’s critical analysis of political economy, and well-stocked with ‘many cheerful facts’ about Senegalese gum arabica for the Lyon silk trade and mahogany out of Honduras for carriage-builders in Newcastle, what I lack is the one thing most needful: the methodical rigour to explicate an avalanche of data into a convincing narrative. That want is no excuse for retreating from the quest for the ‘figure in the carpet’ to discern the woof of Atlantic chattel-slavery and the weave of capitalism as synchronous discontinuities.

Writing in *Meanjin* seventy years ago, Brian Fitzpatrick spelt out why the origins of the people are not in the library. The origins of capitalism lie partly in Atlantic chattel-slavery, but the origins of neither mode reside in the archives but are to be sought in struggles between classes and from within their formation. **A**

Humphrey McQueen is a Canberra pensioner, whose writings are accessible on www.surplusvalue.org.au/mcqueen, including his ‘Born Free: Wage-Slaves and Chattel-Slaves’, Carolyn Collins and Paul Sendziuk (eds), *Foundational Fictions in South Australian History* (2018).

Note: a referenced version of this article will be available at www.arena.org.au