

Building the Atlantic Empires

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Building the Atlantic Empires

*Unfree Labor and Imperial States in the Political
Economy of Capitalism, ca. 1500–1914*

By

John Donoghue
Evelyn P. Jennings



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Foreword

Atlantic history has flourished over the past two decades to become one of the most dynamic fields of historical inquiry. But even its most ardent practitioners have noted its kraken-like nature, tentacles waving frantically for a purchase on something solid. Its gravest weakness, I maintain, lies in the absence of an integrating theoretical framework. Multiple historiographies dot the ocean as islands upon which to founder: national histories colonize the Atlantic; world systems theory reduces the globe to core and periphery; and postmodernist cultural studies devalue the human component for free trade in discourse. Informed by but not shackled to these powerful schools of historical thought (with their own colonizing tendencies), the historians whose essays appear in this collection look to another pole star.

For the current generation of leftist historians, Atlantic history fulfils the role that the history of the working class did for the progeny of E.P. Thompson. Just as Marx's writings on industrial capitalism inspired this earlier cohort, I believe that his model of the "so-called primitive accumulation" of capital infuses much of the better writing on the new maritime history. Against a broader tableaux than nation centered histories of *the* working class, this literature documents the wildly chaotic, at times seemingly conflicted, but typically cruel enterprise of private capital formation and the establishment of colonial regimes, imperial business underwritten by force, whether actual or implicit in the human relations cobbled together in the search for profit. "Capital comes" into the world "dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt," affirmed Marx (*Capital* 1: Chapter 31). That statement could not be truer than of Europe's imperial project.

This collection reminds us that imperialism must be understood in terms of the destructive creation of capitalism. Spread across the globe by states, imperialism produced outcomes of a peculiarly stateless nature. I say stateless not because nations did not play an obvious role in imperialism or that individual states did not produce distinct colonial societies and economies. But the inter-state rivalries that colonized the Atlantic also reordered production and redrafted labor forms that worked ultimately to the ends of capital, making for an *Atlantic empire of capital*. Covering the era of capitalism's globalization, this collection assesses the nature and permutations of its singular creation—unfree labor—as planted by imperial European nations and their colonies around the Atlantic (and beyond). A direct expression of social force, as conceived by Marx, unfree labor forms sank deep and tangled roots, their tendrils binding past to present day.

Control of labor lay at the heart of European imperialism and one cannot underestimate the importance of bonded labor to the history of the Atlantic. But the diversity of colonial settings with distinct economies, infrastructural needs, existing labor forces, access to external labor sources, and defence requirements led to the proliferation of unfree labor forms. At once foreign to one another and at root the same, each labor type expressed both the needs of the imperial state and the requirements of capital. These essays pick apart the various strands of experience so as to enable their twisting together again into a stronger understanding of labor's place in the Atlantic. They provide a more nuanced reading of unfree labor, a historically significant but hard to define category often lost between the compass points of slave and free labor. The overwhelming majority of those who worked well into the nineteenth century in the Atlantic World did so in one form or another of "unfreedom" with slavery but one iteration of bondage.

These essays highlight the complexity that the simple terms free and unfree labor often obscure, being more so rubrics sheltering a plethora of human relationships centered in and around the workplace. They remind us that capitalism acted across time and space, providing multiple "intersections," places where expropriation occurred, labor relocated and multiplied, commodities were produced, and ultimately capitalist social structure took root. The promiscuous conjoining of imperial labor needs and scarce labor supply produced a motley crew of labor forms. Coercion in one form or another scraped as many workers as possible from around the Atlantic. Multiple circuits of labor flows intertwined in the developing global labor market. Each destination proved an entity unto itself with decisions about sources of labor and degrees of subjection made to meet these needs, making for discrete labor systems.

This process of capital accumulation made for temporal and spatial variance that can be studied contextually. But to lose sight of the driving historical forces in becoming fascinated by difference and contingency seduces one into primarily descriptive rather than explanatory renderings of history. From the inception of European imperialism in the New World, labor migration, typically coerced but not uniformly so, has been the currency of colonialism, and that flow from the outset has transcended regions, nation states, and empires. The newly acquired lands' greed for human bodies proved insatiable; or, more accurately, the insatiable need for profit of imperial and colonial statesmen, merchants, planters, soldiers of fortune, indigenous overlords, *et alia* drove them to do harm to other people. In short, capitalism provided the crucible that forged commodities from human actions.

This collection, bridging the primitive accumulation and globalization of capital, contributes greatly to the telling of this story of freedom and

unfreedom, coercion and resistance. Spanning 400 plus years and unwinding on the distant shores of Europe, Africa and the Americas, these subplots nonetheless strike a similar refrain. National and subsequently imperial development comprised not some abstract process but a litany of acts of force. Laborers' coerced toil built empires; from their sweat political elites, landed gentry, and merchant cadres wrung riches. Neither boundaries of nations, nor bounds of human decency stood in their way. These essays testify not only to the Janus-face of capital but also to its mercurial nature, quick to extract silver from any opportunity that arose. At the same time, working people made for a very diverse crew, negotiating where they could for whatever advantage, however small, in the process playing a pivotal role in the construction of this new Atlantic World.

Peter Way

Acknowledgements

A brief recounting of the editors' long and winding path to bringing this book to print provides an outline of the many intellectual and personal debts incurred in its production. Both of us have benefited greatly from the scholarly engagement fostered by Harvard University's International Seminar on the History of the Atlantic World. We owe a great debt to Bernard Bailyn and Pat Denault for providing a forum to share and discuss our work in such a stimulating and congenial environment. We met for the first time at the Seminar's Tenth Anniversary Conference in August 2005 and discussed the value of an Atlantic approach and the comparative and integrative insights it could foster. However, we also noted a lack of attention to labor history and the history of capitalism in the Seminar participants' approaches to Atlantic history. Our paths crossed again over the next several years at conferences organized by the Forum on European Expansion and Global Interaction and the Labor and Working Class History Association and Wayne State University. In Detroit we hatched a plan to put together a conference and edited collection on unfree labor, empire, and the state with encouragement from Marcel van der Linden of the International Institute for Social History.

In June 2010 we organized a conference entitled "Unfree Labor, the Atlantic Empires, and Global Capitalism" at Loyola University Chicago. We wish to thank Prof. Frank Fennell, former Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences for providing the funds that made the conference possible. We would also like to thank all the scholars who presented their work at the conference and for the insightful and often spirited debates they brought to the complex issues raised during the two-day proceedings. These exchanges went a long way in informing the conceptualization of this volume. A special thanks also to the students of the Loyola chapter of Free the Slaves for a presentation that drew connections between scholarship on unfree labor and the on-going struggle to end modern slavery. Erin Feichtinger, a doctoral candidate in Atlantic history at Loyola, also deserves our thanks for her meticulous notes on the conference papers and discussions.

Although we both owe enormous debts to many scholars, we would like to thank two in particular: Marcel van der Linden, who believed enough in our work to commission this volume, and patiently awaited its completion, and Peter Way, for all of his support over the years and for writing the forward to this volume. We also appreciated the comments from Brill's two anonymous reviewers that helped us sharpen and clarify our argument and exposition.

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Evelyn P. Jennings

John Donoghue

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