

Nick Nesbitt, *The Price of Slavery: Capitalism and Revolution in the Caribbean*.

Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2022. viii + 274 pp. (Paper US\$35.00)

This impressive volume is an in-depth analysis of the role and complex definitions undergirding the well-known conjunction of capitalism and slavery in the Caribbean. Nick Nesbitt takes as his point of reference Eric Williams's eponymous volume, querying whether imperialist slavery managed to transform capitalism into a system of accumulative wealth. In his analysis of key Marxian terms, he argues that, far from being a naturally-occurring economic form, capitalism "in fact only appeared as the result of a historically unprecedented structure of social compulsion," as the seizure of food production forced "commonly held means of survival and reproduction ... to accept the terms of wage labor to ensure their continued survival" (p. 24). Crucially, this form of commodity exchange makes of "human labor power in the form of wage labor ... not ... a technical regime ... but ... a *social relation*" (p. 24; emphasis in the original). Nesbitt then concentrates on the "vital foundation of Marx's entire critique of the capitalist social form, his monetary labor theory of value" (p. 36), pointing out that if the accumulation of enormous wealth arguably transformed British society in a capitalist way, as Williams argues, then the question becomes why similar accumulations did not similarly transform, say, Spanish and Dutch New World colonies from feudal to capitalist states. If capitalism is a system based on principles and practices of profitable exchange, this focus on market dependency leaves out "a theoretical system of relations Marx was at pains to develop ... across the three volumes of *Capital*" (p. 24). The key question, then, is whether or not slaves, and slave labor, were themselves commodities.

In Chapter 2, Nesbitt incorporates "nominally Marxist thought," and the extent to which "across the twentieth century" this phenomenon "was arguably marked by a general neglect of the theoretical complexities of *Capital*" (p. 62). This is where his Marx-centered analysis adopts a more Caribbean-centered perspective, as he argues that novelists, poets, and essayists, including C.L.R. James, Aimé Césaire, Jacques Roumain, and Jacques Stephen Alexis, "tended to neglect Marx's critique of the capitalist mode of production"; indeed, even the renowned Caribbean Marxist critic Cedric Robinson is no exception, as his monumental *Black Marxism* is read as reductionist, favoring "the doctrine of 'historical materialism' while almost entirely ignoring ... the conceptual critique of the three volumes of *Capital*" (p. 63). Ultimately, Nesbitt insists that these thinkers "tropicalized Marx, developing his critique in light of the singularity of their experience" (p. 103); this is the logical outcome of an "erroneous mode of reasoning ... from perceived effects backwards to ... imag-

inary causes” (pp. 71–72) which posits—falsely—that since slaves’ “concrete labor” produced “generally profitable commodities,” then “slaves *therefore* created surplus value for capital” (p. 71; emphasis in the original). For Marx (and for Nesbitt), the “complete rupture or disjunction ... between the substance of value ... and its monetary forms of appearance” constitutes “the real limits of capitalist slavery” (pp. 102–103).

The next three chapters are devoted to Marx-driven analyses of James, Alexis, Aimé and Suzanne Césaire, and the revolutionary context of Saint-Domingue. In Chapter 3, Nesbitt reads *The Black Jacobins* as an analysis of “the real destruction of a total social form,” despite the fact that James’s “militantly world-historical” stance does not take into account “Marx’s abstract analysis of the monetary capitalist social form and its structural implications for slavery” (p. 108). This Jamesian framework, clearly inscribed in “the liberal theory of a bourgeois-capitalist French Revolution” (p. 121), creates ineluctable parallels between Toussaint and Lenin, both leaders of genius whose lives together encapsulate and illuminate “Louverture’s repeated self-invention” (p. 117). Chapter 4 concentrates on early forms of postcolonial labor in Haiti, focusing on the drafting and implementation in 1812 of the Code Henry; “inspired by Napoleon’s 1804 Code Civil, at some 785 pages it ... seeks to define and regiment every domain of Haitian social relations” (p. 151).

The readings in Chapter 5 on the Césaires and the Haitian novelist Jacques Stephen Alexis address Aimé’s commitment to the Martinican working class through industrialization, Suzanne’s telling and underrecognized critique of capitalism’s monetary dimension, and Alexis’s valorization of liberating work over exploitation. But Nesbitt’s position that 1789 and 1791–1804 “together constitute a francophone, Black Jacobin radical anticolonial tradition” (p. 161) that refutes Trouillot’s claim of the unthinkability of the Haitian Revolution is ultimately somewhat problematic; rather, this unthinkability is more likely located among the very powers that resisted the Revolution’s clarion call to universal equality.

This is a remarkable and revelatory volume that gives historical events and readings new depth and perspective, and merits a place on the shelves of Caribbean scholars.

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