Chapter Four

Why chattel slavery?

While “free” wage labor grew quantitatively more and more important in the course of time, the relative proportion of slavery was reduced worldwide. So far, Marx’s diagnosis of the future of capitalism seems correct. But that reduction does not make any less important the historical question of why slavery existed within capitalism anyway, and why it still persists in most countries to some or other extent. Just as we asked which factors brake or promote the growth of “free” wage labor, we should also ask why slavery flourished under capitalist conditions at particular times and places, and why it was absent at other times and places.

This is certainly not an original question of mine; political economists already reflected on it in the eighteenth century. Adam Smith, for example, in The Wealth of Nations (Book 3, Chapter 2), claimed that there wasn’t a more inefficient laborer than the slave: “The experience of all ages and nations, I believe, demonstrates that the work done by slaves, though it appears to cost only their maintenance, is in the end the dearest of any.”¹ Slaves, after all, do not have their own positive incentive to labor: “A person who can acquire no property can have no other interest

¹ Smith, Inquiry, p. 345; see also Salter, “Adam Smith on Slavery,” and Lapidus, “Le profit ou la domination.”
but to eat as much and to labour as little as possible. Whatever work he does beyond what is sufficient to purchase his own maintenance, can be squeezed out of him by violence only, and not by an interest of his own.”

In all circumstances, therefore – Smith opined – it would be more rational for the landowner to employ share-croppers or, even better, simple tenants who pay a fixed rent. From this followed immediately the question of why slavery was nevertheless economically so significant in the New World emerging during his lifetime. Smith himself could only solve this problem by appealing to an anthropological constant: “the pride of man makes him love to domineer, and nothing mortifies him so much as to be obliged to condescend to persuade his inferiors. Wherever the law allows it, and the nature of the work can afford it, therefore, he will generally prefer the service of slaves to that of freemen.” In other words, slavery could in the final analysis be explained only psychologically – by referring to its opposite, a domineering inclination in human nature. Put more simply, there were slaves because there were masters.

Though Smith’s answer may not be an intellectually satisfying explanation of the master-slave relationship, I think the question itself is still of the highest relevance. Over the years, many aspects of the problem have been theorized and debated, by economists, sociologists, anthropologists and historians – without however reaching any unambiguous result. Neither is it possible for me to give a complete and definite answer to this complicated question here. I will nevertheless comment on each of the most important conclusions from earlier discussions in turn, as a stepping stone to future research.

Before coming directly to the point, I should emphasize however that the concept of “slave” itself must be qualified. Among the general public, and also often among less well-informed historians, slavery is directly associated with brutal physical oppression. Or, as Max Weber argued: “Production for the market with unfree labor has never been possible for a long time without the whip.” Historical research shows that this generalization is misleading. Actually, it is an important analytical question in itself, under which condi-

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2 Smith, Inquiry, p. 345.
3 Ibid.