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Slavery, Work, and History: Du Bois's Black Marxism

Cover Page Footnote

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W. E. B. Dubois's *Black Reconstruction*¹ revolutionized the historiography of the United States' Civil War. Challenging then dominant modes of interpretation, DuBois's text gave agency to the slaves, making the case that, by abandoning Southern plantations and fighting on behalf of the Union Army, they freed themselves. The withdrawal of their labor from the Confederacy combined with the desperately needed reinforcement of Northern troops not only tipped the scales in the Union's favor, it also forced President Abraham Lincoln's hand, compelling him to pursue a policy of emancipation. After all, DuBois asks, once they paid the ultimate sacrifice on the battlefield, how could the Union justify denying the slaves their freedom? Although his argument was widely derided by historians at the time DuBois wrote, the claim that the slaves freed themselves through their own agency has since become a mainstream view in the discipline. In that sense, as the historian Guy Emerson Mount has argued, "DuBois won."²

DuBois's reading the Civil War not only positions black emancipation as a successful slave rebellion that echoes the Haitian Revolution's echo of the French Revolution. It also renders the emancipation of the slaves as the first successful *workers'* revolution, prefiguring the Bolshevik revolution by more than 50 years. This claim follows directly from the argumentative structure of DuBois's text, which begins with his characterization of the slave as the black worker. Cast in these terms, the slave rebellion becomes a general strike, the Reconstruction Era is a dictatorship of the proletariat in the states of the former Confederacy, and the subsequent dismantling of Reconstruction is a counterrevolution of property.

Although this aspect of DuBois's argument has received less commentary, it too has important implications. Despite the apparently orthodox Marxist structure of his argument, by refiguring of the emancipation of the slaves as a (temporarily) successful workers' revolution, DuBois wreaks havoc with Marx's philosophy of history—in particular, with the latter's conception of historical change as driven by the ambivalent, crisis ridden, and contradictory, yet nonetheless still *progressive*, development and expansion of forces of production.³ In line with this historical materialist view, Marx tended to consider capitalism, despite all of its destructiveness, as a progressive

historical force that expands forces of production and establishes political freedoms, thus paving the way for socialism. However, when we attend, as we must, to the crucial role of slavery and colonialism in the emergence of European capitalism, Marx's philosophy of history threatens to collapse under its own weight. After all, how could the sheer brutality and injustice of slavery and colonialism possibly be considered progressive historical forces? And yet, particularly in his early work, Marx showed a willingness to bite this particular bullet.⁴

To be sure, the mature Marx was a trenchant critic of the brutality of chattel slavery and of the plunder of the colonies, and his critique highlighted the centrality of these injustices to capitalism's emergence.⁵ Moreover, as his journalistic writings and letters regarding the Civil War also make clear, Marx was a strong and vocal advocate of emancipation for the slaves.⁶ So, the point of drawing attention to the implications of Marx's theory of history is decidedly not to accuse Marx of being unaware of or unconcerned with the evils of slavery. Rather, the point is to ask whether the critical awareness of the inhumanity, brutality, and injustice of slavery and its pivotal role in the emergence of capitalism is ultimately compatible with Marx's deeply ambivalent yet resolutely progressive reading of history. And, if it isn't, then (how) can the Marxist critique of capitalism be decoupled from his theory of history? This question, which arguably remains unresolved in Marx's own work,⁷ is at the center of DuBois's Black Marxism.

In what follows, I read DuBois's *Black Reconstruction* as a creative exemplar of the Marxist tradition. DuBois's work radically transforms that tradition from within by placing slavery squarely at the center of the story of capitalism's emergence. In so doing, DuBois offers us a productive model for disentangling the critique of capitalism from Marx's theory of history, with its residual Eurocentrism and progressivism (section 1). As we shall see, the key to this transformation is DuBois' characterization of the slave as the black worker. Brilliant though this move may be, it also has its limits, which I probe by exploring the dis-analogies between the status of the slave and that of the worker (section 2). On this point, I suggest, DuBois's Marxism remains, in the end, a bit too orthodox. However, his work also contains the seeds of a more promising framework for theorizing racial capitalism, one that insists that racism cannot be entirely

subsumed within capitalism, even if we must think through their complex intersections and interconnections.

1. Cedric Robinson's monumental book, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*,⁸ famously interprets DuBois's *Black Reconstruction* as a radical critique of traditional Marxism. While the title of the book might lead one to assume that Robinson reads DuBois as a Marxist,⁹ the thrust of his argument runs in the opposite direction. His aim is to show how the major theorists who are the focus of his study—including DuBois, C. L. R. James, and Richard Wright—passed through Marxism on their way to becoming Black Radicals. Speaking of DuBois, for example, Robinson notes that he “was one of the first American theorists to sympathetically confront Marxist thought in critical and independent terms”—that is, independent of the complicated politics of the American Communist Party (BM, p. 207). As such, “he was articulating in theoretical terms the intersections between the Black radical tradition and historical materialism only vaguely hinted at in the formal organizations of the time. It was in those irreconcilable roles—as a Black radical thinker and as a sympathetic critic of Marx—that DuBois was to make some of his most important contributions concerning Black social movements” (BM, p. 207). Note that the assumption here—and it is an assumption that structures the entirety of Robinson's argument—is that Marxism and Black Radicalism are *irreconcilable*. Ultimately, for Robinson, Black Marxism is a contradiction in terms.

The argument that underpins this assumption, which Robinson spells out in detail in Part I of his book, is that racialism is endemic to the European cultural and intellectual tradition from which Marxism emerged. Indeed, in Robinson's view, Marxism is properly understood as an *outgrowth* of the European racialism that is, he contends, “an enduring principle of European social order” (BM, 28). To the extent that it remains tainted by its racist roots, Marxism is antithetical to Black Radicalism. For Robinson, racialism is rooted so “deep in the bowels of Western culture” that it permeates not only the social and economic structures of feudalism and capitalism but also the very forms of thought through which Europeans understood and criticized those structures, Marxism included (BM, 66). Thus, anyone committed to a radical critique of anti-Black racism would have to break with Marxism.

While the historical story that Robinson traces of the intra-European emergence of racialism in the medieval period and its subsequent extension to non-European peoples is compelling, and an important corrective to the familiar narrative that locates the birth of racism in the 16th century experiences of conquest and colonialism (see BM, p. 74), his Manichean, quasi-metaphysical conclusions about opposing forms of historical consciousness—a collectivist Afrocentrism pitted against a racist Eurocentrism—are more debatable. Be that as it may, the relevant question for our purposes is the following: Does DuBois's *Black Reconstruction* represent the kind of radical break with Western or European Marxism advocated by Robinson?

For reasons that will become clear, I read *Black Reconstruction* not as a repudiation of the Marxist tradition but as a brilliant, creative, and transformative representative of it.¹⁰ Far from employing what Patrick Anderson characterizes as a mere “superficial use of some Marxist vocabulary,”¹¹ DuBois's argument in *Black Reconstruction* is structured through and through by Marxist concepts. Moreover, it is his subversive reinterpretation of these concepts that enables DuBois' text to perform its complicated double movement. On the one hand, by reinterpreting the history of American slavery, the U.S. Civil War, and the Reconstruction era in Marxist terms, DuBois revolutionizes the historiography of the Civil War and Reconstruction. On the other hand, by placing American slavery at the center of the story of capitalism's emergence and its attempted overthrow, he radically transforms Marx's theory of history.

Our primary interest is in the latter aspect of DuBois's argument, but it is worth noting that his theorization of the black proletariat is at the core of both transformations.¹² Although DuBois's text defies neat summary, its argument can be usefully broken down into three main parts. The first part focuses on the black workers, their relationships to white workers and plantation owners, and their resistance struggles against slavery. This part of the argument culminates in the famous discussion of the General Strike in Chapter 4, in which DuBois presents the slaves who abandoned their plantations to fight with the advancing Union Army as a revolutionary class fighting for its freedom. The second part of the book traces the brief period of majority black democratic self-rule in the South during the Reconstruction period, a

period that DuBois understands (with some qualifications) as a dictatorship of the black proletariat. This part of the argument culminates in DuBois's account of the overthrow of Reconstruction by white workers and plantation owners allied, despite their competing economic interests, in support of white supremacy. The third part traces the counter-revolution of property that brought the black worker's revolution—what DuBois characterizes as “one of the most extraordinary experiments of Marxism that the world, before the Russian revolution, had seen” (BR, p. 358)—to an abrupt and violent end.

DuBois's entire argument, then, arguably turns on his recasting of the black slave as the black worker. To be sure, as I'll discuss in more detail below, he acknowledges the uniquely horrible nature of American chattel slavery as compared to the situation of other workers. Still, DuBois nonetheless places the reinterpretation of the slave as black worker at the center of his narrative; indeed, he views slavery as holding the key to what he calls “the real modern labor problem” (BR, p. 16). “Black labor”—that is, slave labor—was, DuBois contends, “the foundation stone not only of the Southern social structure, but of Northern manufacture and commerce, of the English factory system, of European commerce, of buying and selling on a world-wide scale...” (BR, p. 5).¹³

The key to the stability of the slave system, DuBois argued, lay in the way that the white planters split the working class by pitting the interests of white and black workers against one another. They did this in a variety of ways: by presenting black slaves as competition who would drive down wages for whites; by recruiting poor whites to help oversee the slave population; and by rewarding poor whites with a psychological wage, guaranteeing that however poor they may be, they were still racially superior to blacks who were presented as utterly incapable of being civilized. The main weakness of the system, by contrast, was that the planters were always vulnerable to what DuBois characterizes as “the negative attitude of the general strike” (BR, p. 40). Escape could be prevented and slave revolts could be put down, but slaves could not be forced to work well or efficiently. As DuBois puts it: “All observers spoke of the fact that the slaves were slow and churlish; that they wasted material and malingered at their work. Of course, they did. This was not racial but economic. It was the answer of any group of laborers forced down to the last ditch. They might be made to work continuously but no power could make them work well” (BR, p. 40).

This dynamic came to head once the Civil War began, when DuBois claims that black slaves abandoned their plantations in large numbers, joining forces with the advancing Union army. “As soon...as it became clear that the Union armies would not or could not return fugitive slaves, and that the masters with all their fume and fury were uncertain of victory, the slave entered upon a general strike against slavery by the same methods that he had used during the period of the fugitive slave. He ran away to the first place of safety and offered his services to the Federal Army” (BR, p. 57). The general strike wasn’t a planned insurrection, it was a “trickling stream[]” that spontaneously “swelled to flood” (BR, p. 64); DuBois compares it to “the great unbroken swell of the ocean before it dashes on the reefs” (BR, p. 65). But, once under way, it was unstoppable. “This was not,” DuBois explains, “merely the desire to stop work. It was a strike on a wide basis against the conditions of work. It was a general strike that involved directly in the end perhaps a half million people. They wanted to stop the economy of the plantation system, and to do that they left the plantations” (BR, p. 67). As they did so, they took up positions working for the Union army as “laborers, servants, and spies” (BR, p. 65). The simultaneous withdrawal of black labor from the plantations of the South and the addition of it to the forces of the North, DuBois claims, won the war for the Union Army and backed Abraham Lincoln into a corner, compelling him to endorse emancipation for the slaves (BR, p. 57, 82).

After the Civil War, the South looked backward, toward the past, longing for a reinstatement of slavery—or whatever facsimile thereof it could recreate through the Black Codes and, later, Jim Crow laws. The North, meanwhile, was caught between two forward looking visions: the emergence of the United States as the center of industrial capitalism and the attempt to build a truly universal abolition democracy. For a time, these two competing visions formed a fragile and ultimately unstable alliance (spoiler alert: capitalism won). Lincoln’s successor, Andrew Johnson, repeatedly blocked the full emancipation of former slaves, frustrating the will of the majority and even of the party that elected him (BR, p. 343). In the South, poor whites turned against the newly emancipated slaves, viewing them as an existential threat to their own sense of respectability and status, however modest (BR, pp. 349-350).

Such was the deeply unstable and ambivalent context for Reconstruction. Still, against extremely long odds, the Reconstruction era succeeded, albeit briefly, in establishing “a dictatorship of labor” in the states of the former Confederacy, backed by Northern military power (BR, p. 358). During this period, black majorities, led by black labor, re-wrote state constitutions, reconstructed civic and political institutions, and established public educational systems. To be sure, DuBois waffles somewhat on his use of the term “dictatorship of labor,” acknowledging in a footnote that it isn’t technically accurate (see BR, p. 381). His hesitation has to do with the fact that the black proletariat in the Reconstruction era was not committed to the overthrow of private capital; thus, it didn’t fully embody the Marxist concept. Still, DuBois repeatedly casts the Reconstruction era experiment in Black democratic self-rule in fundamentally economic terms, as a battle in the ongoing war between black labor and the defenders of landed property interests who deployed racism to control the white vote and maintain Southern oligarchy (pp. 428-29).

The Reconstruction era abruptly came to an end in 1877, when Northern military support was withdrawn. Characterizing this event as a counter-revolution of property, DuBois explicitly invokes Marx to underscore his claim that the causes of the collapse of Reconstruction were economic, a point that was lost on liberal abolitionist leaders of the day. At the time, he notes, “Karl Marx....had not yet published *Das Kapital* to prove to men that economic power underlies politics. Abolitionists failed to see that after the momentary exaltation of war, the nation did not want Negroes to have civil rights and that national industry could get its way easier by alliance with Southern landholders than by sustaining Southern workers” (BR, pp. 591-92). The overthrow of the dictatorship of black labor resulted in a reassertion of the dictatorship of property (BR, p. 595). Abolition leaders “did not believe in a democratic movement which would confiscate and redistribute property, except possibly in an extreme case like slavery. But even here, while they seized stolen property in human bodies, they never could bring themselves to countenance the redistribution of property in land and tools, which rested in fact on no less defensible basis” (BR, p. 595). Indeed, DuBois goes so far as to claim that the root cause of the overthrow of Reconstruction was not racism but rather the protection of property (see BR, p. 622). As he puts it: “It was not...race and culture calling out of the

South in 1876; it was property and privilege, shrieking to its kind, and privilege and property heard and recognized the voice of its own” (BR, p. 630).

And yet, even as DuBois explicitly invokes Marx to support his contention that property rather than race was at the heart of the overthrow of Reconstruction, his justifiably famous account of the wages of whiteness pushes back against any reductionist conceptualization of the relationship between economics and politics. As DuBois argues, the split between black and white workers in the South in the years leading up to and following the Civil War throws cold water on the Marxist idea of working-class solidarity emerging from a shared experience of exploitation. Here is DuBois: “Most persons do not realize how far this failed to work in the South, and it failed to work because the theory of race was supplemented by a carefully planned and slowly evolved method, which drove such a wedge between the white and black workers that there probably are not today in the world two groups of workers with practically identical interests who hate and fear each other so deeply and persistently and who are kept so far apart that neither sees anything of common interest. It must be remembered that the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white” (BR, p. 700). Even if the counter-revolution that put down Reconstruction was rooted primarily in property rather than race, racism, for DuBois, clearly served as a wedge that prevented black and white workers from uniting in common cause against the dictatorship of property. In the wake of the counter-revolution of 1876, the South established “a new dictatorship of property...through the color line” (BR, p. 707).

Robinson’s discussion of *Black Reconstruction* focuses on DuBois’s theorization of the general strike, paying scant attention to his discussions of the dictatorship of the black proletariat and its violent overthrow in the counter-revolution of property. Recasting the overthrow of slavery as a successful workers’ revolution, Robinson argues, calls into question Marx’s location of revolutionary potential in the urban proletariat. “The critique of the capitalist world system,” Robinson notes, “acquired determinant force not from movements of industrial workers in the metropolises but from those of the ‘backward’ peoples of the world. Only an inherited but rationalized racial

arrogance and a romanticism stiffened by pseudo-science could manage to legitimate a denial of these occurrences” (BM, p. 317). Western Marxism’s failure to acknowledge this fact just serves as proof that this tradition is “insufficiently radical to expose and root out the racist order that contaminates its analytic and philosophic applications or to come to effective terms with the implications of its own class origins. As a result, it has been taken for something it is not: a *total* theory of liberation” (BM, p. 317). By contrast, the Black radical tradition, with which Robinson associated DuBois, is shaped by two commitments. First, an understanding that racism exceeds the bounds of and operates independently of “objective material forces” (BM, p. 308)—that is, that racism cannot be subsumed within capitalist oppression. Second, an oppositional, revolutionary consciousness rooted in Africans’ “native consciousness of the world” and “a shared philosophy developed in the African past and transmitted as culture” (BM, p. 309).

To the extent that *Black Reconstruction* diagnoses the ways that racism operates independently of class oppression through the mechanism of the psychological wage, thereby impeding the development of working-class solidarity, the text offers an example of the first commitment that Robinson ascribes to the Black Radical tradition. Although DuBois appears at times to vacillate on this point—for example when he claims that counter-revolution that ended Reconstruction was first and foremost one of property rather than of white supremacy—he nevertheless provides a powerful and fecund model for understanding the ways that racism and capitalist oppression intertwine without being fully co-extensive. It is, however, much less clear that the DuBois of *Black Reconstruction* endorses Robinson’s second commitment. Although one can certainly read his earlier work—most notably, his discussion of the sorrow songs in *The Souls of Black Folk*—as giving voice to an Afrocentric perspective,¹⁴ this perspective is less evident in *Black Reconstruction*. Perhaps the most prominent example of such a perspective in *Black Reconstruction* is to be found in the chapter titled “The Coming of the Lord,” where DuBois articulates the perspective of the newly freed slaves. From their joy, DuBois writes, “a great song arose, the loveliest thing born this side of the seas. It was a new song. It did not come from Africa, though the dark throb and beat of that Ancient of Days was in it and through it. It did not come from white America—never from so pale and hard and thin a thing, however deep these

vulgar and surrounding tones had driven” (BR, p. 124). Theirs was a song of redemption that arose from the distinctive experience of American slavery. Still, even as he acknowledges “the dark throb and beat of that Ancient of Days” running through this new song, DuBois repeatedly emphasizes not the distinctively Afrocentric worldview of the slaves, but their common humanity (see BR, pp. 121-123). Indeed, in his preface to the reader, DuBois says that his aim is to tell the story of reconstruction as though “the Negro in America and in general is an average and ordinary human being, who under given environment develops like other human beings” (BR, p. xix).

Still, Robinson is undoubtedly right that DuBois provides a powerful internal critique and transformation of the Marxist theory of history (see BM, pp. 228-229). Building on Robinson’s argument, we can distinguish two key elements of this critical transformation, both of which follow directly from DuBois’s placement of slavery at the center of the story of American capitalism. First, DuBois leaves behind Marx’s residual Eurocentrism. Even if one agrees with readers like Kevin Anderson, who insist that there is room in Marx’s late work for multilinear historical trajectories,¹⁵ and with readers such as Andrew Zimmerman, who claim that Marx’s own writings on the Civil War helped to pave the way for DuBois’s analysis,¹⁶ there is no doubt that DuBois’s radical reimagining of the critique of capitalism from the perspective of the black worker develops these insights in much greater depth and detail than Marx himself was able to do. As such, DuBois’s text offers readers an exemplar of a fully non-Eurocentric Marxism. Second, DuBois undermines the residual progressivism of Marx’s theory of history. DuBois’s work shows decisively that the rapid expansion of American industrial capitalism was possible only on the basis of the brutal exploitation of agrarian slave labor; moreover, this was not as an anomaly, but, as Robinson puts it, as “a microcosm of the world system” and “a forewarning” (BM, p. 239). Thus, his work showed, as Robinson explains, that “No theory of history that conceptualized capitalism as a progressive historical force, qualitatively increasing the mastery of human beings over the material bases of their existence, was adequate to the task of making the experiences of the modern world comprehensible” (BR, p. 239).

Not unrelatedly, I suspect, the DuBois of *Black Reconstruction* seems to have lost his earlier faith in modernity as a civilizing force, and thus tempered the much-

discussed elitism of his earlier work.¹⁷ Once again, Robinson is clear on this point. Speaking of not only DuBois but also of other members of the Black Radical tradition such Césaire, James, Cox, and Fanon, he notes: “They would all pass through the prepossessing claims of bourgeois ideology for Western cultural superiority with their only modestly disguised racialism. But eventually they would emerge convinced that a larger and different achievement was required” (BM, pp. 183). Whereas DuBois’s earlier work “had been deeply implicated in the ‘race uplift’ historiographic tradition” (BM, p. 192), the author of *Black Reconstruction* is highly skeptical of narratives of civilizational progress. The “doctrine of Negro inferiority,” though initially rooted in the economic motive of supporting the slave system, came to serve as a powerful ideological justification in its own right: “The South could say that the Negro, even when brought into modern civilization, could not be civilized, and that, therefore, he and the other colored peoples of the world were so far inferior to the whites that the white world had a right to rule mankind for their own selfish interests” (BR, p. 39). In line with this skepticism, toward the end of *Black Reconstruction*, DuBois issues a call to arms that is utterly distinct from his earlier proposal that members of the Black elite should contribute to the education and uplift of their race. “The American black man,” he writes, “will enter modern civilization here in America as a black man on terms of perfect and unlimited equality with any white man, or he will enter not at all. Either extermination root and branch, or absolute equality. There can be no compromise. This is the last great battle of the West” (BR, p. 703). No more waiting room of history.¹⁸

2. DuBois’s Black Marxism thus effects an internal critique of Marx’s theory of history, disentangling the critique of racial capitalism from the progressive, Eurocentric theory of history with which it (arguably) remains entwined in Marx’s work. The key to this internal critique and transformation is, as I argued above, DuBois’s re-conceptualization of the slave as the black worker. It’s an ingenious move that subtly inverts Marx’s analogy between wage slavery and actual slavery, implicitly calling into question his related assumptions that “free” wage labor is central to the capitalist system and that revolutionary potential is located in the urban, industrial proletariat. And

yet it is also a highly questionable move, given the significant dis-analogies between the status of the worker and that of the slave.

Although Marx followed the Civil War in the United States with great interest and was an outspoken proponent of emancipation, slavery arguably remains an undertheorized category in his major writings. It often appears as an analogy designed to illuminate the drudgery, misery, and exploitation of wage work under capitalism. Thus, Marx contends in *The Communist Manifesto* that the bourgeoisie “is unfit to rule because it is incompetent to assure an existence to its slave within his slavery.”¹⁹ This miserable situation cannot be addressed through the raising of wages as, Marx famously insists in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, higher wages would be merely “*better payment for the slave*,” when the problem is precisely his status as a (wage) slave.²⁰

Later, in volume 1 of *Capital*, slavery famously appears as a central and bloody component of the process of primitive accumulation, and thus as a historical precondition for the development of capitalism. Marx writes: “The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins, are all things which characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief moments of primitive accumulation.”²¹ The colonies not only supplied the raw materials for emerging English industrial capitalism, they also provided a market for European goods. A cyclical process emerged whereby “the treasures captured outside Europe by undisguised looting, enslavement and murder flowed back to the mother-country and were turned into capital there.”²² By this time, Marx had clearly come to understand chattel slavery in the United States as crucial to the emergence of capitalism in Europe.²³ It is with this relationship in mind that Marx restates his earlier analogy between wage slavery and slavery in a more expansive form: “the veiled slavery of the wage-labourers in Europe needed the unqualified slavery of the New World as its pedestal.”²⁴ In other words, wage labor is not just a form of slavery in disguise; it also rests on the foundation of “unqualified”—actual—slavery.

While some critics have read the pedestal and the veil image as evidence that Marx downplayed slavery's importance,²⁵ his defenders have insisted upon his deep engagement with slavery and its relationship to capitalism and the international labor movement. In this vein, John Bellamy Foster, Hannah Holleman, and Brett Clark have argued that Marx's late work develops an account of slaveowner capitalism, a distinctive form of capitalism which emerged from a specific type of colonialism rooted in the plantation economy. Still, even his defenders admit that Marx viewed slaveowner capitalism as a secondary form of capitalism. Slave plantations may be capitalist in their form—they are run by capitalists who seek to derive profit by selling the goods they produce in a global market—but they do not run on the exploitation of free wage labor that Marx took to be central to the capitalist value form. Indeed, for Marx, slaveowner capitalism exists only within a larger structure of global capitalism based on wage labor. Thus, Bellamy Foster, Holleman, and Clark conclude: "although slaveowner capitalism clearly existed and had definite historical importance, in Marx's view, it could not constitute the laws of motion of capital as a whole, but rather could only fully develop and prosper on capitalist terms in a context in which wage labor was the predominant form."²⁶ Thus, although it is unfair of Marx's harshest critics to claim that he himself downplayed slavery's significance altogether,²⁷ even his most ardent defenders have to admit that slavery is not central to Marx's account of capitalism. Although he clearly recognized slavery's importance, viewing it as the foundation for "free" wage labor in Europe, he also understood the latter as more central to the structure of capitalism.

Be all of that as it may, by figuring the slave as a worker, DuBois not only clearly puts slavery at the center of the story, he also inverts Marx's analogy between slavery and wage slavery. Rather than seeing wage work as a veiled form of slavery, he figures chattel slavery as a form of work. For DuBois, the plantation slave is a worker, just as the members of the white proletariat in the industrializing North were workers, though they were subject to very different conditions. This inversion is at the heart of DuBois's radical historical and theoretical innovation. It allows DuBois to go much further than Marx himself did in placing slavery at the center of the critique of capitalism, thus enabling us to understand the utter and ongoing economic devastation wrought by the abrupt end of the Reconstruction Era. We should, however, pause for a moment to

consider the limits of this analogy, which obscures certain distinctive features of the slave's status.

To be sure, DuBois is keenly aware of the disanalogies between the slave and the worker. Although he acknowledges that working conditions for "free laborers" are so dismal that one may well conclude that "slavery is merely a matter of name," he also insists that: "there was in 1863 a real meaning to slavery different from that we may apply to the laborer today. It was in part psychological, the enforced feeling of inferiority, the calling of another Master; the standing with hat in hand. It was the helplessness. It was the defenselessness of family life. It was the submergence below the arbitrary will of any sort of individuals. It was without doubt worse in these vital respects than that which exists today in Europe or America" (BR, pp. 8-9). In this sense, slaves "represented in a very real sense the ultimate degradation of man" (BR, p. 9) Their degradation was so total, and the system that enforced their degradation so reactionary, that it is difficult for us to imagine today. After all, "no matter how degraded the factory hand, he is not real estate. The tragedy of the black slave's position was precisely this; his absolute subjection to the individual will of an owner" (BR, p. 10). Even if the "law was often harsher than the practice," the only things that served to curb the master's power over his slaves were "his sense of humanity and decency, on the one hand, and the conserving of his investment on the other" (BR, p. 10).

As DuBois also pointed out, the analogy between slaves and wage slaves had the potential to cut both ways, depending on one's assessment of capitalism. Although Marxists may have used the analogy in an attempt to shame members of the English bourgeoisie who prided themselves on condemning slavery while they ruthlessly exploited their own workers, this argument was often turned back around by slaveowners. As DuBois explains: "What irritated the planter and made him charge the North and liberal Europe with hypocrisy, was the ethical implications of slavery. He was kept explaining a system of work which he insisted was no different in essence from that in vogue in Europe and the North. They and he were exploiting labor. He did it by individual right; they by state law. They called their labor free, but after all, the laborer was only free to starve, if he did not work on their terms. They called his laborer a slave when his master was responsible for him from birth to death" (BR, p. 51). If wage work

is equated with slavery and the former is assumed to be legitimate and acceptable, then, the plantation owners reasoned, how can the critique of the latter be anything but sheer hypocrisy?

These caveats don't stop DuBois from putting the slave as black worker at the center of his story, but they do put the limitations of the analogy into stark relief.²⁸ These limitations become clearer still if we inquire further into the distinctive status of the slave. DuBois viewed the slave as an object of property (see, for example, BR, p. 10). Even on this way of understanding the slave's status, it is far from obvious that it makes sense to analogize the slave to the free worker, however coerced, exploited, and immiserated the latter may be. However, as Orlando Patterson has argued persuasively and influentially, to be a slave was also something more than and something altogether different from being an object of property.²⁹ Indeed, Patterson quite purposefully does not include being the object of property as one of the constituent elements of slavery. While it's undeniable that slaves *are* objects of property, Patterson insists that this does not pick out what is distinctive about their condition. After all, a great many people can be the object of proprietary claims, where this refers to "claims and powers vis-à-vis other persons with respect to a given thing, person, or action."³⁰ For example, in many jurisdictions, a spouse has proprietary claims with respect to their partner's earnings, but this does not make their partner a slave. Patterson identifies three features of slavery that distinguish it from other forms of proprietary relationships: first, slaves are subject to a distinctive, extreme, even total, form of personal domination; second, they are alienated from all natal ties, meaning that they have no rights of birth or political membership; and third, they are subjected to an extreme lack of honor.³¹ Thus, Patterson defines slavery as "*the permanent, violent domination of natively alienated and generally dishonored persons.*"³²

Of Patterson's three constituent elements of slavery, the second has proved most influential. If the slave is shorn of all natal ties, if he does not belong to any community and has no existence outside of his master, then what sort of person could he possibly be? The answer, Patterson writes, "was to define the slave as a socially dead person."³³ The idea that slavery is social death has been taken up and creatively radicalized by Afropessimists such as Frank Wilderson, who argue that social death is

the essence not just of slavery but also of Blackness.³⁴ As Wilderson puts it, explaining what he takes to be the basic premise of Afropessimism: “Blackness is coterminous with Slaveness: Blackness *is* social death: which is to say that there was never a prior meta-moment of plenitude, never equilibrium, never a moment of social life. Blackness, as a paradigmatic position (rather than as a set of cultural practices, anthropological accoutrements) is elaborated through slavery.”³⁵

To be sure, Afropessimism has been criticized by Marxists such as Adolph Reed for being so much ahistorical hyperbole.³⁶ But one doesn’t have to accept Wilderson’s claims that slavery didn’t end in 1865 and that “nothing essential has changed” with respect to anti-Black racism since 1840³⁷ to see that his argument causes trouble for DuBois’s inverted appropriation of the slave/worker analogy. Wilderson repeatedly insists on the distinctive horror of the anti-Black racism encoded in the experience of slavery and the work that analogical thinking does to obscure this horror. As he puts it, “The difference between *someone* dying and *something* dying cannot be analogized.”³⁸ With respect to the analogy between slave and worker specifically, Wilderson writes: “to face the realization that one is a worker and not a capitalist is far less traumatic than the realization that one is Black, a Slave, and not a Human. The former revelation is not nearly as traumatic as one in which the sentient being wakes up to find that she has no capacities for Human production; and, furthermore, comes to understand that just as economic production is parasitic on the labor power of the working class, the production of Human capacity is parasitic on the flesh of the Slave.”³⁹ Even if one remains skeptical of Wilderson’s stark equation of Blackness with Slaveness, on the grounds that such a view overdetermines Black experience as nothing more than suffering, his work offers a powerful critique of analogical thinking as a way of illuminating *slavery*. In other words, one doesn’t have to agree with his provocative contention that racial progress is a myth to see that Wilderson’s work poses a significant challenge to DuBois’s use of the slave/work analogy. His core point is that this analogy obscures the violence of social death that was essential to the experience of slavery.

Thus, if slavery is central to the emergence and functioning of capitalism, and if slavery is a form of social death, then the condition of possibility of capitalist civil society

is not black *work* but black *death*. Or, to cite Proudhon (perhaps against his intention), property may be theft, but slavery is murder.⁴⁰

Conclusion

Where does this reconsideration of DuBois's Black Marxism leave us? My first conclusion is to insist, contra Robinson, that Black Marxism is not a contradiction in terms. Even if I'm inclined to agree with Robinson that progressivism and Eurocentrism remain more of a problem in Marx's own work than some of his defenders have suggested, this does not mean that the only way to avoid these problems is to break definitively with Marxism. Nor do I think that this is how we should read DuBois. Rather, as I have argued, DuBois creatively transforms Marxism from within, leaving behind its Eurocentrism and progressivism by placing slavery at the center of his narrative and, in so doing, offering a model for decoupling the critique of capitalism from the Marxist theory of history.

On the flip side, however, the discussion of the limitations of the slavery/work analogy suggest that Robinson is no doubt right to call attention to the vital importance of the theorization of *racial* capitalism, where this refers to his insistence that racism and class oppression represent distinct yet interrelated vectors of oppression. If it is to do justice to the specificity of the experience of slavery that stands at the core of the emergence of capitalism, the term racial capitalism must mean something more than a racially inflected form of capitalism or the way that capitalism mobilizes or rests on racist practices and institutions. As Wilderson reminds us, we should resist the "assumptive logic" that seeks to subsume racism within capitalism.⁴¹ Thus, my second conclusion is that Marxists such as Asad Haider are wrong to contend that we have no need for the term "racial capitalism" because "capitalism is sufficient to name our enemy."⁴²

For the task of theorizing racial capitalism, DuBois's *Black Reconstruction* provides a powerful model, to some extent despite itself. DuBois's reliance on the slavery/work analogy notwithstanding, his groundbreaking analyses of the psychological wages of whiteness, of the role that racism played in splitting the working class, and of the thwarting of the abolition democracy by an alliance between white planters and white workers grounded in their common interest in maintaining white supremacy all

constitute brilliant exemplars of the critique of racial capitalism. Viewed through this lens, his insistence that the dismantling of reconstruction was not about race but about class—that it was a counterrevolution of property, not a restoration of white supremacy—remains puzzling. Wouldn't the framework of racial capitalism incline us to think that it was both? Is DuBois here simply reverting to an orthodox Marxist line, in some sense going back on his iconoclastic rethinking of core Marxist ideas—regarding the theory of history, the role of slavery in the development of capitalism, the analogy between wage work and slavery—throughout the text? But perhaps if one keeps in mind that DuBois understood slavery as being the object of property, this worry can be dispelled. If slaves are property, and if slavery stands at the core of racial capitalism, then the counterrevolution is not just about privilege and property, but also, by its very nature, about race.

¹ W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), p. 104. Henceforth cited parenthetically in the text as BR.

² Guy Emerson Mount, "When Slaves Go On Strike: W.E.B. DuBois's Black Reconstruction Eighty Years Later," *Black Perspectives*, December 28, 2015, <https://www.aaihs.org/when-slaves-go-on-strike/>.

³ Marx clearly espouses this view of history in his early work, including *The German Ideology* (1845-6) and the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859). See *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd edition, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), pp. 3-6 (Preface) and 146-200 (German Ideology). Although there is vigorous debate about the degree to which he remains committed to this view of history in his later work, it seems noteworthy that he reiterates its main outlines toward the end of *Capital*, volume 1, in the chapter entitled "The Historical Tendency of Capitalist Accumulation" (Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, volume 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), pp. 927-930). However, these issues of Marx interpretation must be set aside here and discussed more fully elsewhere.

⁴ Hence, for example, his infamous view, espoused in his journalistic writings of the early 1850s, that, despite its destructiveness, British colonialism in India would have a beneficial, civilizing effect in the long run. For a judicious appraisal of this aspect of

Marx's work, see Kevin Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), pp. 9-41.

⁵ See, for example, Marx, *Capital*, volume 1, p. 915. I discuss Marx's analysis of slavery in more detail below.

⁶ For details, see the writings collected in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Civil War in the United States*, ed. Andrew Zimmerman (New York: International Publishers, 2016).

⁷ Even as sympathetic a commentator as Étienne Balibar admits that "the idea of a *universal history* of humanity, of an ascending, uniformly progressive line of evolution of modes of production and social formations" is one that "predominates in most of Marx's *general texts*," (Étienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, updated new edition, trans. Chris Turner and Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2017), p. 116). Balibar notes that this progressive reading of history is at odds with the anti-evolutionist, multiplicitous reading of history in terms of singularities and real contradictions that emerges in Marx's late work. My suggestion is that vestiges of Marx's progressive reading of history are evident even as late as *Capital*, volume 1, and that they sit uncomfortably alongside his emerging critique of slavery and colonialism.

⁸ Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000). Henceforth cited parenthetically in the text as BM.

⁹ See, for example, Patrick Anderson, "Pan-Africanism and Economic Nationalism: W.E.B. DuBois's *Black Reconstruction* and the Failings of the 'Black Marxism' Thesis," *Journal of Black Studies* 48: 8 (2017): 732-757.

¹⁰ On this point, see Asad Haider, "The Shadow of the Plantation," *Viewpoint Magazine*, Feb. 12, 2017, <https://viewpointmag.com/2017/02/12/the-shadow-of-the-plantation/>. Accessed November 30, 2021.

¹¹ For this claim, see Anderson, "Pan-Africanism and Economic Nationalism," p. 752.

¹² On this point, see Ferruccio Gambino, "W.E.B. DuBois and the Proletariat in Black Reconstruction," in Dirk Hoerder (ed.), *American Labor and Immigration History, 1877–1920s: Recent European Research* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press 1983), pp. 43-60.

¹³ DuBois's insistence on recasting the slave as a black worker is no doubt in part a response to his frustration with the American Labor movement's refusal to take up the cause of black labor. Whereas the British labor movement followed Marx's lead in attacking slavery as central to capitalism and attacking it, DuBois laments that the American labor movement "simply refused, in the main, to envisage black labor as a part of its problem" (BR, p. 29).

¹⁴ See, for example, Richard Cullen Rath, "Echo and Narcissus: The Afrocentric Pragmatism of W.E.B. DuBois," *The Journal of American History* 84: 2 (1997): 461-495.

¹⁵ See Anderson, *Marx at the Margins*. For a related reading that also emphasizes the multiplicity of historical trajectories in Marx's late work, see Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, pp. 80-112.

¹⁶ See Andrew Zimmerman, "Introduction," in Marx and Engels, *The Civil War in the United States*, pp. xi-xxx. For a related argument, see Tom Jeannot, "Marx, Capitalism, and Race," *Radical Philosophy Today* 5 (2007): 69-92.

¹⁷ For excellent discussion of DuBois's Afro-modernism, see Robert Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of DuBois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009). For a contrasting reading of DuBois's early work that greatly complicates his understanding of progress (though without reference to *Black Reconstruction*), see Joseph Winters, *Hope Draped in Black: Race, Melancholy, and the Agony of Progress* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

¹⁸ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 8.

¹⁹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The Communist Manifesto," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, p. 483.

²⁰ Karl Marx, "The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, p. 80.

²¹ Marx, *Capital*, volume 1, p. 915.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 918.

²³ Indeed, Marx was already theorizing the relationship between capitalism and slavery much earlier. As he wrote in *The Poverty of Philosophy*: "Direct slavery is as much the pivot of bourgeois industry as machinery, credits, etc. Without slavery you have no

cotton; without cotton you have no modern industry. It is slavery that gave the colonies their value; it is the colonies that created world trade, and it is world trade that is the precondition of large-scale industry. Thus slavery is an economic category of the highest importance" (Marx and Engels, *The Civil War in the United States*, p. 2).

²⁴ Marx, *Capital*, p. 925.

²⁵ See, most notably, Walter Johnson, "The Pedestal and the Veil: Rethinking the Capitalism/Slavery Question," *Journal of the Early Republic* 24: 2 (2004): 299-308.

²⁶ John Bellamy Foster, Hannah Holleman, and Brett Clark, "Marx and Slavery," *Monthly Review* 72: 3 (July-August 2020): <https://monthlyreview.org/2020/07/01/marx-and-slavery/>. Accessed November 30, 2021.

²⁷ The same could not be said of certain Marxist historians, such as Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, who argued that slavery, like feudalism, was an archaic, pre-capitalist relic and thus that slavery and capitalism were two entirely distinct economic systems. See Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South* (New York: Random House, 1965) and Eugene D. Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983). For critical discussion, see Johnson, "The Pedestal and the Veil," and Bellamy Foster et al, "Marxism and Slavery."

²⁸ Marx, too, acknowledged the limits of this analogy: "Labour-power was not always a commodity. Labour was not always wage-labour, that is, *free labour*. The *slave* did not sell his labour-power to the slave-owner, any more than the ox sells his labour to the farmer. The slave, together with his labour-power, was sold to his owner once for all. He is a commodity which can pass from the hand of one owner to that of another. He is *himself* a commodity, but his labour-power is not *his* commodity." (Karl Marx, "Wage Labour and Capital," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, p. 205).

²⁹ Patterson also notes that, although slaves can be used as workers, the slave is not necessarily a worker. As Patterson puts it: "There is nothing in the nature of slavery which requires the slave to be a worker. Worker qua worker has no intrinsic relation to slave qua slave. This does not mean that the slave cannot be *used* as a worker. Indeed, his slaveness, especially his natal alienation, made possible his effective exploitation as

laborer in conditions where no other kind of laborer would do. But this does not in any way mean that slave necessarily implies worker.” Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), p. 99.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 22.

³¹ Ibid., p. 26.

³² Ibid., p. 13.

³³ Ibid., p. 38.

³⁴ For Patterson’s reaction to this development, see Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, pp. xviii-xx.

³⁵ Frank Wilderson, *Afropessimism* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2020), p. 102.

³⁶ See Adolph Reed, “Beyond the Great Awakening,” *The New Republic*, December 8, 2020: <https://newrepublic.com/article/160305/beyond-great-awakening>. Accessed November 30, 2021.

³⁷ Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, p. 96

³⁸ Ibid., p. 163.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 192.

⁴⁰ Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *What is Property?*, ed. and trans. Donald R. Kelley and Bonnie G. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 13.

⁴¹ Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, p. 41.

⁴² Haider, “The Shadow of the Plantation.”