

Slaves and Proletarians: The Debate Continues

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Volume 36, 1995

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/ilt36cri01>

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Glaberman, M. (1995). Review of [Slaves and Proletarians: The Debate Continues]. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 36, 209–214.

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Slaves and Proletarians: The Debate Continues

Martin Glaberman

IN HIS REVIEW OF Eric Foner's *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*¹ Noel Ignatiev continues the debate/discussion on whether slaves in the United States were proletarians. Unlike an earlier discussion by David Roediger, who tried to use Karl Marx as a counter-weight to Eugene Genovese, Ignatiev depends on W.E.B. Du Bois to refute Foner.² On this question, unfortunately, I am afraid that Du Bois' shoulders cannot carry the load. At issue is the use of the term General Strike to describe the transfer of the labour of some 500,000 slaves from the plantation masters to the Northern invaders in the Civil War. In addition, Ignatiev notes, "In a revealing footnote to chapter ten he commented, 'I first called this chapter "The Dictatorship of the Black Proletariat in South Carolina," but it has since been brought to my attention that this would not be correct...' He finally settled for a more restrained title, but continued to insist that South Carolina 'showed tendencies toward a dictatorship of the proletariat'."³

It should be noted that over the years the criticism of Du Bois' use of what can be called neo-Marxist terminology has been quite restrained. I think there are two reasons for this. First, Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction* was a classic so far in advance

¹"The American Blindspot': Reconstruction According to Eric Foner and W.E.B. Dubois," *Labour/Le Travail*, 31 (Spring 1993), 243-51.

²See, Dave Roediger, "Precapitalism in One Confederacy: Genovese, Politics and the Slave South," *New Politics*, 11, 90-5; and an exchange between Martin Glaberman and Dave Roediger in, *ibid.*, 13, 167-8.

³Ignatiev, "American Blindspot," 245-6.

Martin Glaberman, "Slaves and Proletarians: The Debate Continues," *Labour/Le Travail*, 36 (Fall 1995), 209-14.

of anything anyone had done in the field that the use of an occasional exaggerated term or phrase did not significantly affect the importance of the book. Second, there was no serious attempt to use the Du Bois terminology in ways that would alter or reject the classic Marxist analysis of capitalism. That is to say, so long as terms like general strike and dictatorship of the proletariat had an agitational significance, rather than a fundamental analytic significance, it did not matter very much. The recent discussions of these questions, however, relate fundamentally to the core of Marx's analysis of bourgeois society, and that matters very much.

I want to deal with the matters in dispute from two aspects: First, what is the advantage in considering slaves to be proletarians; and second, what is the disadvantage in considering slaves to be proletarians.

"Because Du Bois identified the slaves as proletarians, he applied the categories of the labour movement to them," says Ignatiev. "The title of the [fourth] chapter is 'The General Strike.' Foner makes no mention of the general strike. Slaves, apparently, could rebel, but only the worker could strike."⁴ What is one to make of this? That a strike is more important than a rebellion? Why? Slaves, in fact, could strike, and did strike. But that usually consisted of the slaves on a plantation disappearing into the woods and negotiating with the slave owner for the redress of grievances. These strikes were not very frequent and they were not always successful — but they did have the characteristics of working-class strikes, that is, they attempted to change the conditions of work at particular work places without fundamentally changing the social relations of the society. Did that make the slaves proletarians? Why?

Some of this smacks of the distorted legacy of the old Left. This is rather surprising because the people defending the theory of slaves as proletarians (Ignatiev, Roediger, Ken Lawrence), are people who have long rejected the sectarian rigidities of the old Left. But how else to understand their viewpoint which seems to be that the workers are the good guys and all the rest are the not-so-good guys? The traditional views of the American socialist and communist movements, dating back to before Eugene V. Debs, was based on the slogan, "Black and White Unite and Fight." Unfortunately, that was invariably interpreted to mean that black struggles (and all other struggles) should be subordinated to the working class. Anything which threatened working-class unity was to be avoided, even if that meant limiting black struggles. But in the 1940s, the late West Indian Marxist, C.L.R. James, put forward the notion of the independent validity of Afro-American struggles. Afro-American struggles, women's struggles, anti-war struggles, etc., had an independent validity and were not subject to being subordinated to the interests, real or imagined, of a sexist, racist working class, and, least of all, to the leadership of some kind of vanguard revolutionary party. Was the anti-Vietnam war movement diminished because it was overwhelmingly a middle class movement? (There were some significant working class components to the fight against

⁴*Ibid.*, 244.

the war, but that is another question.) Is the contemporary women's movement diminished because it is overwhelmingly a middle class movement?

Let me suggest another line of analysis. Before the Civil War, the American North seemed quite willing to let the South continue as a slave system. Various compromises were worked out so the two regions could live at peace with each other. What prevented that and forced the Civil War to settle the question of slavery was the Underground Railroad (was that also a general strike?). With the Dred Scott decision of the Supreme Court, the South found it necessary to insist on Northern participation in slavery, with the capture and return of runaway slaves. This the North was unwilling to do. It was the slaves who prevented the compromises from working. Does that require us to call them proletarians?

But further. Near the end of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln said that without the participation of about a quarter of a million former slaves in the Union Army, the North would have lost the war. Historians accept that as a valid judgment. However, they tend to trivialize that reality by limiting the significance to such things as showing that black soldiers were really brave, good soldiers, etc. That should not even be open for discussion. What does it mean to say that the North would have lost the war? It does not mean that the South would have conquered the North. The war aim of the South was Secession, that is, independence. The war aim of the North was Union (not freedom). But the incompetence of the Union generals (until Grant and Sherman), the vast corruption of Northern bourgeois society, and the mounting casualties, all led to widespread war weariness, which could have resulted in the North abandoning the war and letting the South go. What that would have led to would have been the disappearance of the United States as a vast continental power, replaced by two or three lesser states. A reasonable conclusion, it seems to me, is that the participation of 250,000 freed slaves in the Union Army was what led to the end of slavery and the preservation of the United States as a major continental (world) power. That, I submit, says much more about the power to make history of Afro-Americans than calling them proletarians or insisting on the term "general strike."

I would suggest as a contrast to Ignatiev, *et al.*, a study of another classic of black history, *The Black Jacobins*, by C.L.R. James. On the half island that became Haiti, the slave population revolted and defeated the attempts of the major empires of the time, France, Spain, and Britain, to reenslave them. They accomplished what in the United States remained only a slogan, a demand, forty acres and a mule — they destroyed the plantation system and divided up the land among the ex-slaves, creating a free, democratic, peasant society. Do we have to call that a dictatorship of the proletariat to understand the power and importance of what they did?

"Compared to the moderation of the [Paris] Commune," says Ignatiev, "the accomplishments of Reconstruction in South Carolina seem like the wildest radicalism: abolishing property qualifications for holding office, apportioning representation based on population not property, abolishing imprisonment for debt,

founding the public school, extending rights for women, building asylums for the insane and the handicapped, modifying the tax structure, and other reforms. A program of this sort, carried out against a background of mass movement, may not yet be communism, but it is no longer capitalism."⁵ This is the purest fantasy. In the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s, the infant labour movement in the North, with support from some middle class reformers, was winning these very things.⁶ Like all victories of the working class which stop short of the overthrow of capitalism, they became incorporated into the capitalist system, in fact, became absolute necessities for the system to survive and expand. Does anyone really believe that universal male suffrage, abolition of imprisonment for debt, free, compulsory education, etc., are "no longer capitalism?" What had become of the universal belief among Marxists of all kinds (and others) that these are all part of the *bourgeois* revolution, whether or not they are opposed by individual capitalists, who are not noted for understanding their long term interests?

"White labour," says Ignatiev, "... was unable to sever its ties with capital; whereas black labour, in pursuit of the American dream of every man his own master, steered a course which led it into collision with all sectors of wealth. Here is the solution to the famous problem, why no socialism in America?" If only it were so simple. One of the sticking points which prevented the unification of white and black organizations of the working class in the period after the Civil War was their divergent political allegiances. The white working class, confronting a national government dominated by a Republican Party that was controlled by big business, tended to vary from attempts to organize independent labour parties to support of the Democratic Party. Organizations of black labour tended, quite understandably, to support the Southern (subordinate) wing of the Republican Party. After all, that was the party of emancipation. Support for the Republicans in the Afro-American community lasted well into the next century, until Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal. That is a bit short of "collision with all sectors of wealth."

Afro-Americans played a tremendous role in the development of American society, in achieving the end of slavery, in the struggle for freedom. They are not simply the objects of history, but the subjects of history. To call slaves proletarians does not add one bit to our understanding and appreciation of the process. But if we look at the reverse side of that proposition, it seems that we lose an invaluable tool in understanding capitalist society.

Let us take the burden off the shoulders of Du Bois and place it where it belongs, on Karl Marx. All through Marx's writings are clear statements that capitalism cannot exist without wage labour. A few examples will suffice:

⁵*Ibid.*, 246.

⁶See, for example, Joseph G. Rayback, *A History of American Labor* (New York 1966), 65-7. The same information can be found in virtually any history of American labour, although Rayback presents it in a more convenient form.

"For the conversion of his money into capital, therefore, the owner of money must meet in the market with the free labourer, free in the double sense, that as a free man he can dispose of his labour-power as his own commodity, and that on the other hand he has no other commodity for sale, is short of everything necessary for the realization of his labour-power."⁷

"In themselves money and commodities are no more capital than are the means of production and of subsistence. They want transforming into capital. But this transformation itself can only take place under certain circumstances that centre on this, viz., that two very different kinds of commodity-possession must come face to face and into contact; on the one hand, the owners of money, means of production, means of subsistence, who are eager to increase the sum of values they possess, by buying other people's labour-power; on the other hand, free labourers, in the double sense that neither they themselves form part and parcel of the means of production, as in the case of slaves, bondsmen, etc., nor do the means of production belong to them, as in the case of peasant-proprietors; they are, therefore, free from, unencumbered by, any means of production of their own.... The immediate producer, the labourer, could only dispose of his own person after he had ceased to be attached to the soil and ceased to be the slave, serf, or bondman of another."⁸

In his writing on the American Civil War, Marx is even clearer. "The present struggle between the South and the North is, therefore, nothing but a struggle between two social systems, between the system of slavery and the system of free labour."⁹

And then in the *Grundrisse* he tries to show how inconsistencies and contradictions can develop: "The idea held by some socialists that we need capital but not the capitalists, is therefore altogether wrong.... Still, this error is in no way greater than that of all philologists who speak of *capital* in antiquity, of Roman, Greek capitalists. This is only another way of expressing that in Rome and Greece labour was *free*, which these gentlemen would hardly wish to assert. The fact that we now not only call the plantation owners in America capitalists, but that they *are* capitalists, is based on their existence as anomalies within a world market based on free labour."¹⁰

There is further clarification in the following: "So long as *both* sides exchange this labour with one another in the form of objectified labour, the relation is impossible; it is likewise impossible if *living labour capacity* itself appears as the property of the other side, hence as not engaged in exchange. (The fact that slavery

⁷Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1 (Moscow), 668-9.

⁸*Ibid.*, 166.

⁹Karl Marx, "The Civil War in the United States," (from *Die Presse*, 7 November 1861) in Richard Enmale, ed., *The Civil War in the United States*, by K. Marx and F. Engels (New York 1940), 81.

¹⁰Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England (1973), 512-3.

is possible at individual points within the bourgeois system of production does not contradict this. However, slavery is then possible there only because it does not exist at other points; and appears as an anomaly opposite the bourgeois system itself.)"¹¹

The real world is infinitely more complex than can be presented in an analysis, no matter how fundamental. In a world market dominated by capitalism there exist other societies whose products enter into that market. The American South and India were examples. The plantation owners behaved like capitalists. But they were an anomaly, an aberration, an accident, an exception. Their social system was a system based on slavery. Otherwise, the Civil War would not have been a conflict between two social systems and slavery and wage labour would have been interchangeable.

Why does this matter? Because from the beginning to the end of *Capital*, capitalism and the laws of capitalism are based on the existence of wage labour. Without wage labour there is no law of value, and, therefore, no law of surplus value. The consequences of those laws, so acutely laid out in *Capital*, the inevitable progression from free competition among relatively small capitalists to greater degrees of concentration, to trusts and, finally, to state control, the inevitability of recessions and depressions, all derive from the law of value. Without the assumption of wage labour, the conclusions are lucky guesses which can only be duplicated by accident.

What is gained by calling slaves proletarians is very little. What is lost is our ability to continue an objective analysis of a continually changing capitalist society. What is lost is a method of analysis that has sustained the socialist and labour movements for 150 years.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 464.