

## Marxism vs. the New Historians of Capitalism

James Miller, 2018

The "new historians of capitalism," a group of scholars sponsored by Cornell's "History of Capitalism Initiative," describes its goal as deepening the analysis of pre-Civil War U.S. history by placing a greater emphasis on the integration of the plantation slave system established in the South with the capitalist mode of production prevailing in the North.

<http://hoc.ilr.cornell.edu/>

The websites for the academicians criticized in this paper are as follows:

<https://research.cornell.edu/researchers/edward-e-baptist>

<https://history.fas.harvard.edu/people/sven-beckert>

<https://history.fas.harvard.edu/people/walter-johnson>

<http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/john-majewski/>

This essay is intended to draw out the contrast between the perspective on slavery and capitalism advanced by the "New Historians of Capitalism" (henceforth abbreviated "NHC,") and an opposed interpretation provided by Karl Marx, Frederick Engels and some of the historians influenced by them. The NHC is an academic political tendency which in certain respects departs from previously-developed schools of thought among historians over the social and political forces that determined the history of capitalism and slavery in the nineteenth century. We will explain the important differences between Marxism and the NHC, and how important it is for fighters for social change to understand these differences.

The book *Slavery's Capitalism*, a compilation of essays edited by Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman, provides a good survey of the themes treated in the perspective of the "new historians of capitalism."

<https://www.amazon.com/Slaverys-Capitalism-American-Economic-Development-ebook/dp/B01J0927QW>

The first essay is by Edward E. Baptist, which echoes some of the themes in his book *The Half that has Never Been Told*.

[https://www.amazon.com/s/?ie=UTF8&keywords=the+half+has+never+been+told&tag=googhydr-20&index=aps&hvadid=177135268772&hvpos=1t1&hvnetw=g&hvrand=507836080699201302&hvpone=&hvptwo=&hvqmt=e&hvdev=c&hvdvcmdl=&hvlocint=&hvlocphy=9033313&hvtargid=kwd-76922449407&ref=pd\\_sl\\_3q2k050vwk\\_e](https://www.amazon.com/s/?ie=UTF8&keywords=the+half+has+never+been+told&tag=googhydr-20&index=aps&hvadid=177135268772&hvpos=1t1&hvnetw=g&hvrand=507836080699201302&hvpone=&hvptwo=&hvqmt=e&hvdev=c&hvdvcmdl=&hvlocint=&hvlocphy=9033313&hvtargid=kwd-76922449407&ref=pd_sl_3q2k050vwk_e)

Another key entry in the NHC repertoire is Sven Beckert's *Empire of Cotton*.

[https://www.amazon.com/Empire-Cotton-Global-History/dp/B00PT3NL72/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1509830687&sr=1-1&keywords=Sven+beckert](https://www.amazon.com/Empire-Cotton-Global-History/dp/B00PT3NL72/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1509830687&sr=1-1&keywords=Sven+beckert)

Yet another notable entrant in the array of scholarly examinations of this theme is *River of Dark Dreams*, by Walter Johnson.

[https://www.amazon.com/River-Dark-Dreams-Slavery-Kingdom/dp/0674045556#reader\\_0674045556](https://www.amazon.com/River-Dark-Dreams-Slavery-Kingdom/dp/0674045556#reader_0674045556)

The quality of scholarship of Becker, Baptist, Johnson and their colleagues is commendable, given the relatively limited scope of the themes they undertake. They provide detailed revelations of the horrific abuses involved in the slave system, as well as the many ways in which capitalist institutions interacted and blended with those of the slave system. In this respect, they shed new light on some of the more obscure features of 19<sup>th</sup> century U. S. history. But their principal objective is to represent slavery and capitalism as amalgamated into a virtually undifferentiated unity.

### **Conflicting economic trajectories**

The conflict between free labor and slavery had developed since the early 17<sup>th</sup> century in the economies of the 13 colonies. The economic systems prevailing in the northern colonies were developing along trajectory different from that of the southern colonies. There were many similarities between the North Atlantic colonies and their European counterparts, apart from the fact that the English crown utilized its colonial power to prevent the colonies from developing self-sufficiency in the production of manufactured goods. But in terms of land-ownership, productive methods, forms of labor in agriculture and in manufacturing, there was little difference. And progress was being made in improving productive technology on both sides of the Atlantic.

The American Revolution, starting in 1775 and culminating in Washington's victory in 1781, gave the 13 colonies the opportunity to chart their own destiny. That revolution, spearheaded by the Sons of Liberty, and headed by Samuel Adams of Boston, was a reflection principally of the need for economic independence, strongly felt in the North. Particularly critical was the freedom from taxation levied upon the colonial products by the British without any representation of the colonists themselves in the British parliament. The goal of the British crown was to prevent the colonies from becoming rivals, and to continue to use them as a source of income for the ruling classes of Britain.

The most active and forward-looking elements of the colonial population in the North (mechanics, artisans, master craftsmen, farmers) gathered around the Sons of Liberty, and came to recognize the growing strength of the American colonies and increasingly absorbed the passion for justice that was necessary to motivate the revolution. The self-confidence necessary to sustain a rebellion was promoted by the most active colonists in the coastal urban centers. These active pro-independence elements also became a pole attraction for the most national-minded and forward-looking members of the planter aristocracy. The forces that could be relied upon to fight the British were generated by the growth of a population conditioned by the hardscrabble pioneer experience and the successes achieved in developing the resources of the new world. Upon winning independence from Great Britain, the leaders of the 13 colonies recognized that they were finally able to pursue their own course.

But the issue of the existence of slavery troubled the leaders of the newly-founded nation. The revolutionary leaders Jefferson, Washington, Madison, themselves slaveholders, had come to recognize the necessity and the possibility of liberating the American colonies from Britain. Although they owned slaves they felt that slavery was wrong and not fitting for a nation that had founded itself with the slogan, “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” They believed that the future belonged to free labor. Thomas Jefferson, a slave-owner, expressed his opposition to slavery on many occasions. In a letter to John Holmes dated April 22, 1820, he had this to say:

I can say, with conscious truth, that there is not a man on earth who would sacrifice more than I would to relieve us from this heavy reproach, in any practicable way. The cession of that kind of property, for so it is misnamed, is a bagatelle which would not cost me a second thought, if, in that way, a general emancipation and expatriation could be effected; and gradually, and with due sacrifices, I think it might be. But as it is, we have the wolf by the ears, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go.

It is Jefferson’s remark “we have the wolf by the ears,” that is most telling. We cannot live with slavery, but we cannot live without it either. Jefferson felt that the union’s existence depended on the mutual accommodation of the slave-owners with the free-labor economy. As the new nation developed further, the gap in national perspectives between the developing free-labor system in the North and the plantation-based slave system of the South became increasingly decisive in determining the course of the two sections of the new nation.

### **Why slavery in the new world?**

Slavery in the tropical and semitropical areas of the new world was a result of the availability of vast tracts of virgin land, the ability of European colonialists to seize them as sites of agricultural production, and the growing demand for the produce of these territories in Europe. The slave-plantation system rapidly developed in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries primarily in the Caribbean islands and in South America, and with a slight delay,

also grew rapidly in the Southern American states: Maryland, Virginia, and the Carolinas. The enslavement of Africans became the ideal form of labor for the new plantations, and thus developed the famous “triangular trade:” the shipping of the agricultural products of the American colonies (sugar, rum, tobacco, coffee, cotton, etc.) to Europe, the transport of manufactured goods to West Africa (often to trade for enslaved persons), and the shipping of slaves to the plantations of the Caribbean and South America. The economic development of the southern colonies gradually took on a different character as a result of their growing dependence on plantation slavery.

This trade promoted the development of capitalism in both Europe and North America, as it made use of captive labor on a massive scale in the production of wealth at an accelerated pace. It must be kept in mind that the capitalist mode of production in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was only in its formative stages and was characterized by the increasing production of commodities for sale, the advancing trade between nations, the growth of cities and towns, and the gradual differentiation between owners of property and wage laborers. But as capitalist growth accelerated throughout the eighteenth century, slave labor, resuscitated from pre-capitalist conditions, became solidly entrenched in the Southern states. It became an intractable bastion of captive labor, whose proponents could not see it for what it was: a temporary stopgap for rapid economic development as well as a vehicle for the enrichment of those with capital to invest. Slave labor on the Southern plantations, while initially developing the trade and wealth that was so essential for the development of capitalism, in the long run became an obstacle to the growth of capitalism in the American colonies.

More and more people grasped that the nation was composed of two opposed “sections,” although how these sections related to one another was perceived in different ways. John C. Calhoun, South Carolina cotton planter and 7<sup>th</sup> vice-president of the U.S., promoted the unity of the two sections as a foundation of stability. He argued, “The day that the balance between the two sections of the country—the slaveholding States and the non-slaveholding States—is destroyed is a day that will not be far removed from political

revolution, anarchy, civil war, and widespread disaster.” (*John C. Calhoun: Selected Writings and Speeches*, p. 636)

The fifth president of the U.S., John Quincy Adams, on the other hand, recognized that slavery was an obstacle for the further development of the country. As Fred Kaplan writes in the introduction to *John Quincy Adams: American Visionary*, “from his earliest years, Adams detested slavery; he was one of only two anti-slavery presidents between the founding of the country and the election of Lincoln. ... Slavery was an abomination that needed to be contained and ultimately eliminated ... All his life he feared the dissolution of the union. Slavery would destroy it, he believed, unless some future president would use the war powers inherent in the Constitution to end slavery. There would be rivers of blood. He both dreaded and hoped for the Civil War.”

## **Sectionalism**

“Sectionalism” became a sort of euphemism for the division of the country between free labor and slave labor. The NHC recognizes very well the basis of the “sectionalism.” But the problem is that the NHC rely upon a static conception of capitalism based on the observable features of economic life during a limited period of time when capitalists were involved in collaboration with the slave-masters and profiting from slavery itself. This conception tends to block their ability to recognize a system as a transitory arrangement, that in its early phase was a boost to economic development, but later turned into an obstacle.

They don’t recognize the historical transitions the capitalist system passed through as it developed its own social relations and overpowered the remaining precapitalist regimes in the world. Their impressions of the nature of capitalism remain limited to the more obvious outward appearances of economic phenomena, such as banking and finance, accounting, land property, purchase and sale, commodity prices and transport systems, in addition to narratives detailing the slaves’ experiences. They fail to perceive the logic of the economic forces that drove the development of capitalist society as it expanded in the new world. Plantation slavery became an important contributing factor to the growth of the

capitalist system in the Americas, but this did not mean that slavery was a component of capitalism or an alternate form of capitalism. Slavery was a transitory mode of production, brought about by the lack of an adequate supply of manual laborers in the new world for production work on large-scale agricultural estates. Slavery was bound to be overcome when the conditions that brought it into existence no longer prevailed.

The NHC writers have produced a range of sharp criticisms of the inhuman, profit-mad oppression of enslaved human beings in the Americas, and does a good job of cutting through the euphemisms and evasions often found in previous academic traditions which tried to whitewash or downplay slavery. But at the same time, they create confusion about the differences in origin and evolution of the two systems of production that became intertwined during a limited historical period. They ignore, or belittle, the economic contradictions that were working toward a rupture of national cohesion and propelled the nation into the slaughter of the Civil War. In this sense, they represent a step backward from the past Civil War historians, such as Kenneth Stampp, Eugene Genovese, Charles and Mary Beard, Phil Foner and W.E.B DuBois, as well as the historically-concurrent commentaries of Marx and Engels.

### **Essentials of capitalism**

At this point we should provide a thumbnail description of the basics of capitalism in order to clarify what is left out in the shallow version of antebellum capitalism offered by the NHC. Marx, Engels, and their followers analyzed capitalism as a system that arose historically in the course of the growth of commodity production (fabrication of products of labor for sale) in Europe. As commodity production became more extensive, the medieval guild system of masters, journeymen and apprentices gave way to larger production workshops with more journeymen and helpers. Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as technology and machinery improved, the system of factory production with machinery developed. The industrial revolution of the 1780s accelerated the process. This budding capitalism attracted the investments of bankers and merchants, enabling ever more rapid expansion of production.

The basic core of the capitalist mode of production took the form of the investment of capital in the means of production—the purchase of raw materials, productive machinery, tooling and accessory equipment—and the payment of wages for the workers hired to labor in factories, workshops and other worksites. Workers interacted with the means of production and produced commodities, which then became the property of the capitalist. The commodities were sold at a price which was determined, on average, by the time necessary to produce them. This selling price, on average, guaranteed a higher return to the capitalist than the amount invested. The profit was a result of the fact that the workers created more value in production than was represented by the wages they were paid. This unpaid labor value, which Marx called surplus value, once pocketed by the capitalist on the sale of the commodities, constituted the profit reaped by the capitalist. This profit was the prime motivation of the capitalist for investing in the production of commodities.

In building this analysis, Marx and Engels developed their materialist outlook, enabling them to view the entire sweep of historical change and the different social systems that humanity had developed throughout the millennia. Engels described this perspective as follows (preface to the first edition of *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, 1884):

According to the materialistic conception, the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of the immediate essentials of life. This, again, is of a twofold character. On the one side, the production of the means of existence, of articles of food and clothing, dwellings, and of the tools necessary for that production; on the other side, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species. The social organization under which the people of a particular historical epoch and a particular country live is determined by both kinds of production: by the stage of development of labor on the one hand and of the family on the other.

This places the evolution of capitalist production in the context of the previous social regimes that prepared the ground for it. At the heart of capitalism is a system of

extracting profit from the labor of wage workers. The tentacles of capitalist production reach out to all economic activities and draw them into its embrace. Capital gradually achieves control over banking and merchant trade; these monetary and credit relations had existed long before capitalism and are not essential to its definition.

Historically, it is trade that served as a handmaiden to the growth of capitalist production in Europe. International trade, and the growth of commodity production it facilitated in Europe, as well as the increasing quantities of loanable money that were attracted to productive investment, spurred the gradual emergence of a money-based economy in the centuries after the European crusades to the Middle East (Thirteenth Century). As for credit and banking, these economic phenomena had developed in the ancient world, whether to finance purchases of land or slaves, or to fund merchant ventures. All of these tendencies combined to form the early phase of the capitalist system in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Yet the NHC characterize capitalism as though it were synonymous with trade and finance. Generally, these economic categories do not define capitalism, but serve as historical precursors of the capitalist mode of production, and within capitalism serve as dependent sectors. With the growth of capitalist production, centered in the production and distribution of the bulk of the products of labor as commodities, trade and finance become subordinated to the needs and rhythms of this industrial production and its expansion.

In an appendix to Vol. III of *Capital*, “Law of Value and Rate of Profit,” Marx’s collaborator Frederick Engels explained the evolution of international and local exchange of commodities (products of labor made for sale), from their origins in the early years of ancient Middle Eastern and Mediterranean civilizations. Engels explained how this historical evolution paved the road for the emergence of capitalism once commodity production and exchange had gained sufficient economic weight and extension in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. The key feature of the capitalist mode of production was the conquest by private wealth of the ownership of the means of production and the purchase of labor power by these owners—the capitalists. The completion of this process registered the highest stage in the evolution of the exchange of commodities. It was the purchase and sale

of labor power that became the defining characteristic of capitalism, and its central form of exchange. The capitalist system proved to be the most dynamic method for the production of wealth that had come into existence, in a world-historic sense. It was the rapidly increasing generation of surplus-value by wage labor that enabled this system of production to become dominant throughout the world, overcoming the resistance of the feudal and slave-based powers. However, capital *did* make use of slave labor in circumstances that promised high returns in areas of the world where wage laborers did not exist.

### **Capital in the new world**

It is true that capitalism, in its conquest of the Americas, resurrected slave labor from the reserves of historical experience. This was by no means accidental, and in retrospect proved to be the fastest and most convenient way of implanting profitable agricultural enterprises in the tropical and subtropical areas of the New World. This happened in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, in a period of the advanced development of the mercantile systems of trade and navigation. The Spanish conquistadors, arriving in new lands teeming with great masses of primitive peoples, did what one would expect them to do. They enslaved these peoples and exterminated those who proved to be recalcitrant. The British soon followed suit, as did the European colonizers of Africa and Asia. Marx explained this in *Capital*, Vol. I, Chap. 31, as he dealt with the early phase of the conquest of the Americas:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalised the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation. On their heels treads the commercial war of the European nations, with the globe for a theatre. It begins with the revolt of the Netherlands from Spain, assumes giant dimensions in England's Anti-Jacobin War, and is still going on in the opium wars against China, &c. ... [C]apital comes dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt. <sup>[15]</sup>

Marx shows how capital, whenever it seizes upon a ready source of higher profits, as in the Southern U.S. with the rise of cash crops grown with slave labor, it jumps in without reservation, as he indicated in *Capital*, Vol. I, Chap. 10, Sec. 2:

But as soon as people, whose production still moves within the lower forms of slave-labour, corvée-labour, &c., are drawn into the whirlpool of an international market dominated by the capitalistic mode of production, the sale of their products for export becoming their principal interest, the civilised horrors of over-work are grafted on the barbaric horrors of slavery, serfdom, &c. Hence the negro labour in the Southern States of the American Union preserved something of a patriarchal character, so long as production was chiefly directed to immediate local consumption. But in proportion, as the export of cotton became of vital interest to these states, the over-working of the negro and sometimes the using up of his life in 7 years of labour became a factor in a calculated and calculating system. It was no longer a question of obtaining from him a certain quantity of useful products. It was now a question of production of surplus-labour itself.

Capitalist development, as it conquers one field of production after another, requires the availability a class of free wageworkers—free to learn new skills, free to move about in search of gainful employment of, free to organize their own family lives and raise their own children—laborers who have the potential to spring into action at the capitalists' bidding and to provide a new generation for the capitalists to exploit. Although in the antebellum period the capitalists were doing everything they could to squeeze the maximum possible quantity of labor value from them on a daily basis, the life of a typical wage worker in the U.S. back then was much more rewarding than the life of a slave. As hard as working life was for most wage workers in North America in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there always beckoned the prospect of advancing to higher positions within the company, or of striking out to become an independent farmer, craftsman or entrepreneur. Capitalist growth depended upon the ability of capitalists to build up professional and managerial layers in industry, infrastructure, education, the military and government—all the social elements necessary for securing the needs of a capitalist class with broad aspirations. The

availability of a flexible and mobile mass of legally free workers in city and countryside provided the basis for the expansion of these social layers. The wageworkers themselves constantly had before them the hope of a better way to live, especially in the growth phase of capitalism in North America. The development of free labor in the North was the antithesis of the soul-crushing misery of the slave that was emblematic of the South (see comments by Cairnes, below).

Engels noted the special features of capitalist development that existed in the period before the Civil War, and to a certain extent after it. Writing in a letter to Marx in an 1886 appendix to *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*:

There were two circumstances which for a long time prevented the unavoidable consequences of the Capitalist system from showing themselves in the full glare of day in America. These were the easy access to the ownership of cheap land, and the influx of immigration. They allowed, for many years, the great mass of the native American population to “retire” in early manhood from wage-labor and to become farmers, dealers, or employers of labor, while the hard work for wages, the position of a proletarian for life, mostly fell to the lot of immigrants. But America has outgrown this early stage.

Capitalist growth requires the utilization of the laboring population to constantly create new technologies, new industries, new infrastructure and new professions. As capitalism boomed in the United States, millions of immigrants were drawn into the expanding workplaces and farmlands. Throughout this process of capitalist expansion, the free laborers experienced firsthand the travails and penury of exploitation in factory and workshop. This was especially true of the immigrants who had no possibility of escaping from the drudgery of factory life in the early period of their residence in the new world. But at the same time the expansion of the western boundary of capital’s reach offered many of the bolder and better-prepared proletarians a chance for a better life. Capitalism had an expansive future before it in the vast new world, but to do so it needed to escape from the stranglehold of the “lords of the lash” (a designation applied to the slave-owner class by Congressman Charles Sumner, a Radical Republican).

## **Slavery as obstacle to development**

Slavery, on the other hand, no matter how thoroughly it became financially and commercially intertwined with capitalism, was unable to produce the kind of rapid industrial technological development that was characteristic of capitalism. Slave labor remained a form of production radically different from wage labor throughout all the varieties of the interactions with capitalism. This was a result of the slavocracy's interest in the maximization of profit from the slave plantations to the exclusion of other economic goals throughout the slave-owner dominated South. The slave plantation system, which became increasingly profitable in the North American colonies as well as in the Caribbean, during the three centuries before the Civil War, absorbed the bulk of the available funds for productive investment and stunted the opportunities for industrial development (factories, mines, infrastructure construction, etc.).

The South remained relatively backward compared to the North, not because slavery was necessarily "less productive" than free labor in the same industry, but because in the South there was not a rounded development of all the industrial sectors. The Northern capitalists devoted a growing share of the working population to industrial development: metallurgy, mechanics, machine-building, textile production, land and river transport, manufactures of tools and implements, and all the skills that these enterprises required. The South lagged behind in all these areas. As Eugene Genovese argued in *Political Economy of Slavery*, p. 50,

Negro slavery retarded technological progress in many ways: it prevented the growth of industrialism and urbanization; it retarded the division of labor, which might have spurred the creation of new techniques; it barred the labor force from that intelligent participation in production which has made possible the steady improvement of implements and machines; and it encouraged ways of thinking antithetical to the spirit of modern science. ...

Southern farmers suffered especially from technological backwardness, for the only way in which they might have compensated for the planters' advantage of

large-scale operation would have been to attain a much higher technological level. The social pressure to invest in slaves and the high cost of machinery in a region that had to import much of its equipment made such an adjustment difficult.

In order for capitalism to develop fully it needed to take control of all branches of production and become a truly all-embracing economic system—and this is true no matter where it developed, North or South, Europe or the Americas. The key to capitalist growth has been the constant revolution in productive technology, lowering the cost of production by the substitution of machinery for labor. Capitalist competition engenders a technical culture dominated by a constant quest for advanced techniques in engineering and machine production.

One of the leaders who promoted the independent development of the United States was Henry Clay, senator from Kentucky. In volume 9 of *The Papers of Henry Clay, the Whig Leader*, p. 699, Clay advocated the diversification of manufacturing and agriculture in the new nation, and the subordination of government trade policy to these goals. Clay argued (April 26, 1842):

Without a diversity in the occupations of society, if all are engaged in one common pursuit, there can be no subjects produced for mutual domestic exchanges, and consequently no home market, by far the best, most steady, in war and peace, and most valuable of all markets.

We shall not, I fear, rise from our embarrassed condition until we produce, within our own country, more of the supplies necessary to consumption, and depend less on foreign countries. ... One of the obvious modes of accomplishing that object is the regulation of our foreign trade by means of a properly adjusted tariff, stimulating production at home, and diminishing importations from abroad. And all experience has shown that, on whatever object our manufacturing industry has been successfully employed, its price to the consumer has been almost invariably reduced. This is the necessary effect of the law of competition.

But there was a brake on capitalist development in the Southern U.S. It is true that the plantocracy wanted to achieve an all-round economic development in the Southern states. They did make attempts to accelerate Southern development in many different fields: in transport infrastructure (especially railways and shipping), in coal, iron and steel production, in textile and garment production, and in manufacturing of machinery, weapons and tools. But their progress was substantially slower than that of the North, and they remained relatively economically underdeveloped. There was a desire to promote industrial development but the capital was lacking for initiatives of that kind. The production of cotton and other cash crops absorbed the bulk of the available investment funds (from investors both North and South) simply because that was the field that provided the highest rate of profit. There was little left for other economic pursuits.

In order to fortify their capacities to rapidly get their agricultural products to the markets of the world, Southern states accelerated the development of the infrastructure of commerce: more extensive rails, more steamships on the rivers, more ocean-going vessels. There were also efforts to build up a financial and banking colossus to rival New York. But these efforts, though effective in the near term, met with increasing obstacles over time, the major one being the irrepressible drive of the planter class to absorb the bulk of the loan capital available to purchase more slaves and land, to increase cotton production. Under optimal circumstances one could make more money from cotton-growing than any other pursuit. This left few resources to finance other projects. The Massachusetts abolitionist Joshua Leavitt attributed the panic of 1837, and similar economic downturns, to the mania for investments in slavery throughout the country. "Slavery absorbs the available capital of the North, and thus creates periodical revulsions, each one more severe than the last." And, "as long as northern capital drained into the south in the form of credit, it would be lost periodically and economic depressions would become for northerners 'as natural as the tides.'" (Quoted from John R. McKivigan's book, *Abolitionism and American Reform*, Garland Publishing, 1999.)

Gavin Wright's book, *Slavery and American Economic Development* (LSU Press), contains an extensive explanation of why the North developed industrially while the South languished. He asserts

...slavery retarded regional economic growth by absorbing the savings of slaveowners, "crowding out" investment in physical capital—including the forms of capital formation represented by improvements in the value of land. ... the average free southerner was 50 percent wealthier than the average northerner in 1850, 80 percent wealthier in 1860. But the accumulation of non-slave wealth by the southern economy was 40 to 45 percent below the northern standard. Slaveowners accumulated wealth in a form that had no counterpart in non-slave societies, a form that vanished when slavery was forcibly ended. Compared to an alternative scenario in which the South had been settled by free family farmers, the South was impoverished by slavery.

Gavin Wright continues a little further on:

Slaveholding planters were more "labor-lords" than "landlords." Hence the relative underdevelopment of transportation, towns, cities, and other forms of infrastructure in the South, not merely by "crowding out" other assets in wealth portfolios, but by channeling entrepreneurial and political energies in directions that matched the processes through which asset values were determined. The culmination was the emergence of a regional political coalition whose main priority was protection and enhancement of the huge store of wealth held as slave property.

As the divergence between North and South came closer to the breaking point, observers and commentators increasingly pointed to the weaknesses of chattel slavery for the long-term, all-round industrialization of the country. J.E. Cairnes (1823–1875), an Irish economist, studied the slave-labor system, and noted its deficiencies, as compared to free labor. In his book, *The Slave Power* (1862), he summarized,

... the economical defects of slave labour are very serious. They may be summed up under the three following heads: it is given reluctantly; it is unskillful; it

is wanting in versatility. ... The moment the master's eye is withdrawn, the slave relaxes his efforts. ... if the nature of the work requires that the workmen be dispersed over an extended area, the number of overseers, and therefore, the cost of the labour which requires this supervision, will be proportionately increased. ... fear is substituted for hope as the stimulus to exertion. ... "By displaying superior capacity, the slave would only raise the measure of his ordinary duties; by a work of supererogation he would only prepare punishment for himself. ... His ambition is the reverse of that of the freeman; he seeks to descend in the scale of industry, rather than to ascend." (Bentham)

On the question of the unskillfulness of the slave, Cairnes continues:

He is therefore unsuited for all branches of industry which require the slightest care, forethought or dexterity. He cannot be made to cooperate with machinery; he can only be trusted with the coarsest of instruments; he is incapable of all but the rudest forms of labor. ... Slave labor is eminently defective in point of versatility. ... If tobacco be cultivated, tobacco becomes the sole staple, and tobacco is produced whatever be the state of the market, and whatever be the condition of the soil.

There are those who would argue that the statements of Cairnes are too sweeping, and only apply in limited fields of work. Indeed, it is true that there were many noteworthy exceptions in the form of slave labor, but Cairnes' comments generally apply to the production of a single cash crop on large plantations: cotton, sugar, tobacco. We should keep in mind that these plantations were the economic core of the slave system, the source of its profits, and the root of its strength in America. Critics could point to the versatility and dexterity of slaves who were put to work in machine-assisted factory production, masonry, construction of buildings and railroads, etc. To one degree or another the South developed these areas of slave labor, but they were less successful in the South than in the North. Further, the variegated forms of slavery and slave-labor that prevailed in the large urban areas: St. Louis, Baltimore, New Orleans, demonstrated not just the skill and versatility of slaves, but also the coupling of education and versatility with the

emancipation process. The more versatile the slave became, the more feasible was manumission. This only reaffirms the judgment of Cairnes on the dependence of slave labor on the ignorance of the slaves. See, for example, *Scraping By*, by Seth Rockman and Cathy Matson.

[https://www.amazon.com/Scraping-Survival-Baltimore-American-Philadelphia/dp/0801890071/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1517771242&sr=8-1&keywords=seth+rockman+scraping+by](https://www.amazon.com/Scraping-Survival-Baltimore-American-Philadelphia/dp/0801890071/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1517771242&sr=8-1&keywords=seth+rockman+scraping+by)

Wealth invested in cotton lands and slaves to work them were only useful for money-making as long as the world cotton market kept growing, and as long as the cotton competitors in South America, Turkey, Egypt and India were unable to mount a stiff competition to the U.S. In Joshua Rothman's contribution to *Slavery's Capitalism*, "The Contours of Cotton Capitalism: Speculation, Slavery and Economic Panic in Mississippi, 1832–1841," there is a good description of the attraction of capital to a part of the South where land was easily had, and the climate was good for cotton cultivation: Mississippi. The rising price of cotton on the world market caused a feverish rush to invest in plantation development, and was accelerated by a major expansion of credit. Rothman writes:

The more slaves a man owned, the more land he could cultivate and the more cotton he could bring to market. It was no secret that slave labor made everything about the flush times possible. ... "To sell cotton in order to buy negroes—to make more cotton to buy more negroes, 'ad infinitum,' is the aim and direct tendency of all the operations of the thorough-going cotton planter; his whole soul is wrapped up in the pursuit ... Without slaves, there could be no cotton; without cotton no wealth.

Rothman does a good job of explaining the credit-fueled boom which led to the crash of 1837. But Rothman, unlike Wright, focuses primarily on the issue of the business cycle and the conditions of credit in the relationship between capitalism and slavery. It is this narrow perspective that shows his allegiance to the NHC. Wright, on the other hand, focuses on how slavery diverted wealth away from the industrial development of the Southern states, and towards investments in plantation-grown cotton. Rothman illustrates

the temporary and unstable alliance between the wealth generated by the property of the slave-owning class and the financial institutions that facilitated world capital flows. Wright looks deeper and shows the reason for the ultimate divergence of the two systems.

Slave production in the South, especially in the cotton-growing sector, gave a big boost to capitalist development in the North due to the colossal profits flowing back to the United States from overseas cotton sales. At the time, the system of wage labor was still going through its formative stages, developing an all-embracing system of independent American industry and agriculture, with infinite possibilities for further expansion, and in the course of this development the cotton profits reaped by Northern merchants, shippers and bankers helped to speed it up.

### **NHC radical, not Marxist**

The NHC have declared their independence from Marxism. In the introduction to the new book, *Capitalism's Slavery*, Rockman and Beckert say, "one distinguishing characteristic of the field [the 'new historians of capitalism'] has been its departure from Marxist theorizations that separate slavery and capitalism into antithetical modes of production..." They view themselves as "radical" interpreters of American history in the sense that they are advancing a stinging criticism of capitalism, an economic system condemned for its promotion of slavery and its extraction of profit from such an inhuman form of exploitation. They illustrate slavery's deep involvement not only with the vile persecution of human beings but also with the most vital elements of capitalist relations: primarily commerce and finance, but also insurance, accounting and technology. As Beckert and Rockman explain,

A scholarly revolution over the past two decades, which brought mainstream historical accounts into line with long-standing positions in Africana and Black Studies, has recognized slavery as the foundational American institution, organizing the nation's politics, legal structures and cultural practices with remarkable power to determine the life chances of those moving through society as black or white. ... Only in the past several years has scholarship on finance, accounting, management

and technology allowed us to understand America's economic development as "slavery's capitalism." ... To recognize slavery's national reach and to argue for its national economic importance is to challenge one of the most persistent myths in American history, namely, that slavery was merely a regional institution, surely indispensable for understanding the South, but a geographically confined system of negligible importance to the nation as a whole.

The NHC differentiate themselves from "Marxist theorizations that separate slavery and capitalism into antithetical modes of production." Marxists do indeed separate capitalism and slavery into antithetical modes of production, and it is critical for all those interested in issues of history and social change to recognize the underlying truth of this separation. If we don't see the divergence between these conflicting modes of production, we can't understand the necessity of the Civil War for the development of capitalism in the nineteenth century and up to the present time. Marx and Engels explained:

The progressive abuse of the Union by the slave power, working through its alliance with the Northern Democratic Party, is, so to say, the general formula of United States history since the beginning of this century. The successive compromise measures mark the successive degrees of the encroachment by which the Union became more and more transformed into the slave of the slave-owner. Each of these compromises denotes a new encroachment of the South, a new concession of the North. At the same time, none of the successive victories of the South was carried but after a hot contest with an antagonistic force in the North, appearing under different party names with different watchwords and under different colors. If the positive and final result of each single contest told in favor of the South, the attentive observer of history could not but see that every new advance of the slave power was a step forward to its ultimate defeat. (Marx, *The American Question in England*, *New-York Daily Tribune*, October 11, 1861.)

But when Marxists say that capitalism and slavery are antithetical modes of production, that's only true in the long run and in the final analysis. There are many historical conflicts that initially appear incidental or trivial, but whose subsequent

development proves, in the final analysis, to be decisive at the highest level. The analysis advanced by the NHC, due to its superficial approach to the definition of social classes, confuses what was superficial and temporary with what was fundamental and lasting. In the short term, when the demand for cotton on the world market was rapidly accelerating, there was a period of very fruitful synergy between capitalism and slavery—fruitful for the merchants and bankers of the North as well as for the lords of the lash. And the overall arc of this reciprocal relationship is well documented in *Slavery's Capitalism*.

But what Beckert & Co. leave unexplored is the deeply felt need of the planter aristocracy to dominate the national government and to extend and strengthen the slave system throughout the nation. And what choice did the enslavers have? If they were to be serious about the protection of their peculiar mode of production the enslavers were forced, willy-nilly, to demand that new states admitted to the union be slave states. The slavocracy understood that, were they to remain in the union, their only hope of survival lay in preserving their control over the Senate (they lacked sufficient voting strength to dominate the House of Representatives). This would give them decisive sway over the federal government. The slave power would do everything possible to maintain and expand its control over the federal authority. But the battle of “bleeding Kansas” in 1855 revealed the weakening position of the slave-masters—even under the presidency of the pro-slavery Democrat Franklin Pierce. “Bleeding Kansas” showed that the handwriting was already on the wall for the slave-holders. Both North and South were preparing themselves to draw the line then and there over the question of slavery.

### **The future of the U.S. belonged to capital with free labor**

The future belonged to free labor. History has demonstrated that truth. But to develop a class of free laborers is not only an economic question; it is a legal question as well. Throughout the many decades of growth of capitalism, the political and legal representatives of the rising bourgeois class fought to alter the legal and political framework in Europe and in America to accommodate their needs, including their need for an available pool of landless proletarians. But to be a free worker, one must be legally free to choose residence and employment. Would there be in the United States a law of the land

granting to every human being the rights of personhood, or citizenship? Workers would have to be free to develop their lives, personalities, skills and families in accordance with the opportunities and obstacles that they faced? Would they be free to seek, “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”? For the slave-owning class there was not, nor could there be, any such “law of the land,” or any law whatsoever that would prevail over *all* the states of the union (unless it were the “law of the lash”). In fact, the slave states denied the existence of the national “union” as a valid legal entity. They only recognized the federal government in so far as it would continue to protect their interests as slave-owners. It was critical for them, during the period between the revolution and the Civil War, to keep control of the federal government. They recognized the political representatives of Northern industry as their rivals for the state power.

The fatal flaw at the heart of the new “republic” was recognized at its founding. At the Philadelphia Constitutional Convention in 1787 difficulties emerged in efforts to define a sort of U. S. citizenship which would be valid in all the states. The delegates were unable to do so because of the existence of slavery. Were the slaves—considered as residents of the United States—persons or property? If they were to be classified as persons, then how could their status be defined in such a way as to exclude them from all citizenship rights? But if they were property, would they have any legal rights within states that did not allow slavery?

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was a part of the compromise of 1850 which authorized the admission to the Union of California as a free state while creating Utah and New Mexico territories as “slavery optional.” The Fugitive Slave Law provided for the oversight of authorities in Northern states in the capture and return of escaped slaves who had managed to reach the Northern states. With this law, the right of the enslavers to keep their chattel property was protected by the entire nation. Thus slaves, property in the South, remained property in the North.

The Dred Scott Supreme Court case, in 1857, was another instance involving the principle of slaves, as legal property in the South, being treated as equally legal in the North. The Supreme Court, dominated by judicial representatives of the slavocracy, ruled

that Dred Scott, a slave residing in the free state of Illinois and the free territory of Wisconsin, was the rightful property of his owner, claiming that the U.S. Constitution classified slaves as property. If this were taken as the “law of the land,” as “constitutionally authorized activity,” then legally it would be legally permissible for the slave-masters to set up innumerable slave plantations throughout New York, Pennsylvania and Ohio (not that this would be economically feasible).

Going back to the early years of the republic, on the hotly-debated question of proportional representation for the U.S. Congress from the slave states, the Constitutional Convention of 1787 considered that the slaves, lacking all rights, could not count as electors or voters (but the word “slaves” was not used, instead they were referred to as “all other persons,” in contrast to free persons). If slaves did not count at all for representation in Congress, the slave-owning class, a small minority of the population, would not have sufficient voters to achieve congressional representation for their interests. This conundrum resulted in the worrisome 3/5 compromise, whereby each slave was to be counted as 3/5 of a person for the purpose of representation to the U.S. Congress. They were not just “property,” then, but a form of property that could play a role in the political “law of the land” in the new “republic.” This clause was a major concession to the representatives of the slave states at the Constitutional Convention. It allowed the slave states a better than even chance at dominating the U.S. Congress and the federal government. But it had nothing to do with democracy. The new republic was maimed at birth—a wound that could not be healed. As David Brion Davis explained in his book, *Inhuman Bondage* (Oxford University Press, 2006),

Yet the entire structure of national politics had been designed to prevent any faction from directly threatening Southern slaveholders and thereby common national interests. ... It is therefore not surprising that before 1819 slavery never became a truly central issue in national politics, except for the brief but furious Southern response in the First Congress of 1790 to two moderate antislavery petitions. Slavery was thus an issue that sat like an inactivated bomb in the minds of the foremost political leaders.

As Jefferson said, “But as it is, we have the wolf by the ears, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go.” (If we were to let him go the beast would be upon us in a flash, jaws snapping and ripping. If we were to just hold on, the beast might never be tamed. So, as it is, we keep holding on.)

In the enslaver-dominated South free laborers, white or Black, could not be secure in their freedom while the real power resided in the power structure of the slave states and as long as the constitutions of these states took precedence over the U.S. Constitution and U.S. laws, and elevated the slave-owning class to the position of the final arbiter. In these states, free African-Americans were considered as a contradiction in their very existence, a violation of the principle that Black = slave. Thus, the freed former slaves constituted a nuisance and a slap in the face to “public morals,” and had to face a wide variety of public dangers as well as the prospect of kidnapping and re-enslavement. Their legal rights were often transgressed in respect to their ownership of property, their right to work alongside whites in factories and shops, and their right to appear in court as witnesses or jurors.

### **Development of anti-slavery political forces**

As national development proceeded in the nineteenth century, political opposition to slavery developed within the Whig Party, formed in 1834. The Whigs wished to create more political support for economic modernization and protectionism for the development of U.S. manufacturers, but in the long run were weakened by their inclusion of both Northern capitalists and Southern planters. In many ways, the evolution of the antagonism between pro-slavery and anti-slavery Whigs foreshadowed the crisis that culminated in the Civil War. As the slavery issue moved to the fore in the party politics of the 1850s, the split in the Whig Party created the conditions that produced the formation of the Republican Party in 1856.

Lincoln, a Whig, fought against the right to own slaves in the states newly admitted to the union. He spoke in Peoria, Illinois, October 16, 1854, against the Kansas-Nebraska bill (a bill that would allow the state to decide the question of the right to own slaves), and left no doubt as to the harm that would be done to the nation by the extension of slavery to

the new states. Although not an abolitionist, but rather a democratic-minded politician, Lincoln represented the crying need for the nation to break free from the stranglehold of the enslavers, who were in reality the enemies of national self-government and democracy. Lincoln exclaimed,

Again, is not Nebraska, while a territory, a part of us? Do we not own the country? And if we surrender the control of it, do we not surrender the right of self-government? It is part of ourselves. If you say we shall not control it because it is ONLY part, the same is true of every other part; and when all the parts are gone, what has become of the whole? What is then left of us? What use for the general government, when there is nothing left for it [to] govern?

In answering those who supported the right of persons to own slaves in the new states of Kansas and Nebraska, Lincoln declared:

But if it is a sacred right for the people of Nebraska to take and hold slaves there, it is equally their sacred right to buy them where they can buy them cheapest; and that undoubtedly will be on the coast of Africa; provided you will consent to not hang them for going there to buy them. You must remove this restriction too, from the sacred right of self-government. I am aware you say that taking slaves from the States of Nebraska, does not make slaves of freemen; but the African slave-trader can say just as much. He does not catch free negroes and bring them here. He finds them already slaves in the hands of their black captors, and he honestly buys them at the rate of about a red cotton handkerchief a head. This is very cheap, and it is a great abridgement of the sacred right of self-government to hang men for engaging in this profitable trade!

Lincoln genuinely hated slavery, and would have eagerly joined the abolitionists were it not for his belief that, in order to fight against it, he would need to find a place for fighters such as himself within the national government. Lincoln and his allies in the Whig Party saw the slave-holder dominated governments in Washington granting more and more and more privileges and opportunities to the slave states, and their opposition grew

apace. Lincoln believed in the honesty, creativity, hard work and initiative of common people as the key to the future of the young republic.

The slave-owners thought that it was unjust to deny enterprising western settlers the right to own slaves. To the Southern aristocracy, and to many capitalists North and South, it was apparent that slaves were the main engine of wealth in the new world—not only in plantation-grown cotton and sugar, but also for the merchants and banks of New York. Indeed, that was the reality from 1800 to 1860. For this slave-owning class, it seemed senseless that the people of Pennsylvania, Massachusetts and New York should raise objections to what was the most profitable enterprise in America, slave-grown cotton.

Upon responding to this sentiment, Lincoln declared in his inaugural address, March, 4, 1861, "One section of our country believes slavery is *right* and ought to be extended while the other believes it is *wrong* and ought not to be extended." But he insisted that the rule of law must be defended as it pertained to both sections, and that neither had the right to transgress against the other. He conceived of the rule of law as a single law applying to all the states of the union. He spoke against the Southern threats of secession, saying, "We cannot remove our respective sections from each other nor build an impassible wall between them." Confident of the ultimate victory of the system of free labor, Lincoln was willing to wait for a political solution. He asked, "why should there not be a patient confidence in the ultimate justice of the people? Is there any better or equal hope in the world?" In a final recognition of the decisive significance of the impending struggle, Lincoln added,

If the Almighty Ruler of Nations, with His eternal truth and justice, be on your side of the North, or on yours of the South, that truth and that justice will surely prevail by the judgment of this great tribunal of the American People. ... In *your* hands, my dissatisfied fellow-countrymen, and not in *mine*, is the momentous issue of civil war. The government will not assail *you*.

Lincoln viewed the matter as so essential it required the action of the people as a whole, and not just the politicians acting on behalf of the people. Lincoln's offer of peace

was met with the guns of Fort Sumter, the secessionists having finally recognized that further compromise could not gain them anything.

### **Antagonistic modes of production**

George Novack, the revolutionary Marxist who based his analysis, in large measure, on the writings of and Marx and Engels, wrote (“Marx and Engels on the Civil War,” *New Internationalist* magazine, Feb. 1938):

The political contest which resulted in civil war was but the expression of profound economic antagonisms between the slave and free states. According to Marx, the most important of these was the struggle over the possession of the territories necessary for the expansion of their respective systems of production. In a striking phrase Marx states that “the territorial contest which opened this dire epopee was to decide whether the virgin soil of immense tracts should be wedded to the labor of the immigrant or prostituted to the tramp of the slave-driver.” The Western lands were the rock on which the Union was shipwrecked.

The Civil War was produced as a clash between fundamentally antagonistic modes of production. We recognize the commercial and financial symbiosis between capitalism and slavery which had emerged in the decades leading up to 1860. The riches generated by slave production accelerated the growth of industry, trade, credit and private property in both sections of the country. Slavery served as the handmaiden for the rapid evolution of capitalism in the U.S. and the world. But the capitalist system of the North had to jettison—abolish—the slave system in order to take full command of the economic resources and population that were growing in the country.

One of the contributors to *Slavery's Capitalism*, John Majewski, devotes his essay to the relatively more industrially developed regions of Virginia and the border states Kentucky and Tennessee, referred to as the “limestone South.” He shows how similar these regions were in terms of soil and climate to areas of Ohio and Illinois. He avows that he does not understand why slavery could not have spread to Illinois or Ohio. Rather than

seeing slavery as a product of a course of unregulated economic evolution at a specific time and place, he views it as a political choice. He argues,

That slavery was a political choice brings us back to Lincoln and the Republicans. Lincoln was well aware that slavery flourished in the Kentucky Bluegrass region, with soils and a climate similar to Ohio's. Speaking in Cincinnati, Lincoln asked why Ohio was free of slavery while Kentucky was "entirely covered" with it. Was it climate? "No!" Lincoln emphatically answered. "A portion of Kentucky was further north than this portion of Ohio." How about soils? "No. There is nothing in the soil of one more favorable to slave labor than the other."

In other words, Lincoln, as well as Majewski, puts politics above economics, but with a different idea in mind. For Majewski it is as if arbitrary decisions could be made by politicians to implant slavery in Northern areas, if they were to choose to do so. But for Lincoln it was a call to the nation to recognize that the present rulers of the nation were attempting to extend slavery as far as they could. For those who would fight for the best interests of the nation, opposition to slavery was a political question. Northern pro-capitalist politicians (Whigs, later Republicans), like Lincoln, drew their inspiration and political orientation from the reality of the economic progress being made under the free labor system. It became their obligation to defend politically the gains that had been achieved so far, and to do everything possible in the political realm to protect the foundations of this progress and to extend them into the future. The North was taking great strides forward in the development of industry, technology, agriculture, and the expansion of the transportation and communication infrastructure. Lincoln could see that the North was rapidly outstripping the South in many critical areas of development, and that the rule of the nation by the planter aristocracy was an anomaly and an obstacle that could be overcome. But he saw more and more clearly that it would not be achieved without a fight.

Majewski loses sight of the weakening of the regime of slave plantation labor and slave production that was occurring in Kentucky—that slavery was already giving way to free labor in the border states. As the plantation cultivation of tobacco and hemp declined in Kentucky, Maryland and Virginia, slaves were sold to enslavers who operated

plantations further south, in Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana. Majewski does not mention that slave plantations in Kentucky during the antebellum decades were gradually being replaced by small family farms that cultivated a variety of subsistence and cash crops, and that utilized methods of production that did not require slaves. This course of economic evolution was not dictated by politicians—in fact the politicians in these states generally supported slavery. But for these farmers, the maintenance of slaves became more of a burden than a boon, and this was an economic fact that the slavocracy could not expunge by any political method.

In the border states, Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland and Missouri, slavery showed a tendency to deteriorate and cede ground to independent free farming in the decades leading up to the Civil War. Arkansas, Tennessee and Virginia experienced some of the same tendencies throughout this period. The more cotton became the dominant crop in Georgia, Alabama and westward, the more the prices of slaves needed for increased cotton production rose, and the more the heartland of plantation slave labor moved south and west. In the border states the practice of breeding slaves for sale to cotton planters became the main focus of chattel slavery. At the same time, agricultural pursuits for the nation as a whole were more and more dominated by independent free farmers without slaves.

The election of Lincoln signified an imminent crisis for the Southern slave-based production system. The outcome of the 1860 election was recognized by the slaveholder class as a signal that the time had come to make a stand. If Lincoln were to successfully carry through his pledge to block any more slave states from being admitted to the union, then slavery would be doomed. As Novack explains,

The dissolution of the Union and the formation of the Confederacy were only the first steps in the slaveholders' program. After consolidating their power, the slavocracy must inevitably strive to conquer the North and to extend its dominion over the tropics where cotton could be cultivated. 'The South was not a country... but a battle cry'; the war of the Southern Confederacy 'a war of conquest for the extension and perpetuation of slavery'. *The slave-owners aimed to reorganize the Union on the basis of slavery.* [emphasis added] This would entail the subjugation of

North America, the nullification of the free institutions of the Northern states, the perpetuation of an obsolete and barbaric method of production at the expense of a higher economic order. The triumph of the backward South over the progressive North would deal an irreparable blow to human progress (Ibid).

### **Slave power doomed by its own system**

The slave-owning class saw itself condemned to a slow death if they failed to respond. So, they abandoned their political strategies. They seceded and the war began. This is a good example of Clausewitz's dictum: "War is the continuation of politics by other means."

In *The Half Has Never Been Told*, Edward E. Baptist paints a chilling portrait of the reign of terror perpetrated against the slaves, and shows that the slaveholders were proud of their accomplishments. He remarks (p. 346),

But enslavers did not see their own system as something antique, destined to fall before the onrushing future. Instead, they saw themselves as modern people who were running a highly successful, innovative sector of a world economy that was growing faster than ever before. ... Slavery's entrepreneurs kept making more money. The only question was, which fork in the road would the South choose? The one that kept it in the United States by securing a deeper national commitment to the expansion of slavery? Or the one in which the region as a whole seceded in order to gain control of expansion for themselves?

But by the time of the 1860 election results, the choice of remaining in the United States no longer held any promise. So, it was not a question of choosing a "fork in the road," but of mobilizing the resources of the slave power against an opposing power that they could no longer control by political means.

By their insurrection, the slave-drivers were gambling on the perpetuation of a narrow cotton monoculture and a system of labor that imposed monotonous and painful misery on millions. The secession in the spring of 1861 was living proof that the most

decisive sectors of the plantation aristocracy had concluded that they must fight or expect a slow strangulation. Slavery had become increasingly mired in its own social and economic rigidity, a result of its need to implement severe methods to control the recalcitrant and discontented human labor force under its command.

The slave-owners found themselves trapped within a system that had no long-range growth potential. This was due to the fact that they would not, and could not, promote or guarantee an all-encompassing program for the extension of capitalism and the development of the resources of the vast western lands. The growth and improvement of the "United States" was something they were incapable of conceiving. Although awash in uncounted bales of cotton, *they were not even able to develop their own cotton spinning and weaving operations to any significant degree.* The cotton that didn't go to Europe went to Massachusetts instead.

All they could do was cling to the social and political conditions that served as the source of their wealth—cotton (and sugar, tobacco, and rice) production on slave plantations, and the export of raw cotton to other parts of the world. All their money and land were committed to these narrowly limited occupations which, although they continued to experience a boom in the 1850s, could not serve as a foundation for the broad, multifaceted industrial diversification that was already on the making big strides in the North. As the further evolution of world-wide cotton production demonstrated (in India, Egypt and the trans-Caucasian republics), other nations were eager to step up cotton growing and export. The dominion of U.S. cotton was already doomed at the moment they gambled everything to save it. This process is fully described in Beckert's book, *Empire of Cotton.*

An important topic raised in Baptist's book is that of the confidence felt by the slave-owners in the future of their system during the decade of the 1850s. Referring to the more profitable of the planters, Baptist says, "Cameron, Caldwell, Ballard, and other megaplanters, already among the wealthiest Americans, got wealthier still as their reinvigorated investments began to pay off. They invested so much more in captive human beings in the 1850s, in fact, that one can put aside any belief that men like Cameron or

Caldwell truly feared, much less hoped for, an end to the enslavement of African-Americans. They seemed instead increasingly confident in slavery's future."

Having made that point, Baptist steps back to examine the growing realization among planters and farmers that "to at least some extent the success of the richest also came at the expense of other whites—and not just by pushing subsistence farmers off land made marketable by the railroad, but also by raising barriers to entry in larger-scale cotton production through increased prices for hands, high-quality land, and credit." He then points to the growing fears of Southerners, and all those whose lives depended directly or indirectly on slave-grown cotton that, as more wealth in land and slaves became concentrated in the hands of the richest planters, and as both land prices and slave prices increased, opportunities for material improvement became scarcer for middling and lower level enslavers, not to mention for independent farmers.

### **Growing weakness of slave production**

The South as a whole faced a crisis, and it must be kept in mind that, according to the census of 1860, of the white population of the slave states of over 8 million, only 384,000 (or 21%) owned slaves. And of these 384,000 slave-owners, only 108,000 owned more than 10 slaves. So, the class of genuinely prosperous enslavers consisted of a relatively small fraction of the Southern population. Joseph C. G. Kennedy, *The Eighth Census*, under the direction of the Secretary of the Interior, first published 1864 by the Government Printing Office.)

There were many sources of worry for the slave-owners, many of whom had to deal with a fractious and discontented population, whose loyalties to the system of chattel slavery could not be trusted. In the first instance, one had to take into account the slaves themselves. It was not as if the enslaved human beings lacked interest in the difference between freedom and slavery. As Kenneth Stampp argues, "They had only to observe their masters and the other free men about them to obtain a very distinct idea of the meaning and advantages of freedom. All knew that some Negroes had been emancipated: they knew that freedom was a *possible* condition for any of them." (Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution*,

Vintage, 1956, p. 89). In those times, the apologists for slavery argued that only slaves with cruel masters longed for relief. But Frederick Douglass had this to say on that topic: "Beat and cuff your slave, keep him hungry and spiritless, and he will follow the chain of his master like a dog; but feed and clothe him well, —work him moderately—surround him with physical comfort, —and dreams of freedom intrude. Give him a *bad* master, and he aspires to a *good* master; give him a good master and he wishes to become his *own* master" (cited by Stamp, *ibid*, p. 89).

There was discontent on the plantations and in the households of the planter elite, and there was resistance. Herbert Aptheker has produced voluminous written evidence of slave resistance, escapes and rebellions in the antebellum South. He quotes Frederick Law Olmsted, a keen observer of social conditions, as saying (1860) that he had found: "no part of the South where the slave population is felt to be quite safe from a contagion of insurrectionary incitement." (Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, International Publishers, p. 52). Perhaps this says more about the fears of the enslavers than of actual threats of slave rebellion. But threats there were, and more. Aptheker cites evidence of rebellions, escapes, insurrectionary moods and outbreaks that punctuated life on the slave estates for many decades. The constant corporal punishment, bestial persecution and forcible confinement of the slaves, especially as the cotton kingdom grew in extent and economic weight, is a confirmation of the slave-owners' fears. As to the horrors of slavery, Baptist himself provides a wealth of evidence.

But apart from the slaves themselves there was unhappiness among the overseers involved in plantation production. Eugene Genovese, in his book *Roll Jordan Roll* (Vintage, 1976), the chapter on "Farmers, Planters and Overseers," devoted considerable space to the analysis of the relations between overseers and slave-owners, on the one side, and overseers and slaves, on the other. The slaves' incessant yearning for a better life conflicted with the master's ardent drive to maximize the production squeezed out of them. In the larger plantations overseers were necessary to translate the slavemasters' desires into effective results. Thus, there arose a constant friction not only between overseer and slave, but also between overseer and master. The overseer could never do enough to satisfy his

master, but if he overused the whip he ran into the danger of damaging or demoralizing his master's property. And if he slackened his brutal tactics, the slaves would sense greater latitude for slowing the pace. What is more, the slaves learned how to play the master in order to get back at the overseer—with a little word to the master at the right time. Genovese maintains, "overseers deserved their reputation for brutality toward slaves, and yet, as if to prove that impish paradox rules the world, they were, for all their bravado, pathetically aware of their dependence upon the good will of those whom they whipped with impunity. ... But no master wanted his overseer to get too close to the slaves, and so, they argued that overseers should treat all slaves alike and show no favoritism. No wonder the weaker overseers took to drink and the stronger did as they pleased on the principle that the devil might take the hindmost (P. 17)."

Edward E. Baptist, in the above-cited book, recognizes these anxieties besetting the planter elite, and points to the discussions that took place among the planters around suggested remedies for the maladies engendered by the peculiar institution. The extension of slavery further south—to Cuba or Mexico—was a perennial dream of the plantocracy. There are many episodes surrounding this dream, such as the Ostend Manifesto (a proposal to buy Cuba from Spain) and the filibustering expedition to Cuba of Narciso Lopez (an attempt to provoke U.S. military intervention in Cuba). But apart from the hopes to expand slavery's frontier southward, there were various schemes to facilitate the diversification of the Southern economy, so as not to rely so much on clothing, machinery, hardware, weapons, tools and equipment manufactured in the North.

### **NHC denies the need for Southern secession**

Baptist, in the aforementioned book, makes many acute observations on these themes, but he fails to draw the conclusion that the slavocracy was left with no recourse but secession in 1861. The NHC do their utmost to deny the growing unavoidability of a clash of arms to resolve the fundamental incompatibility of slavery and capitalism—although they do so mainly by evasion. The coming of the Civil War, in effect, was an indispensable confirmation of this incompatibility, yet it is not out of the question that the NHC might examine the possibilities that might have existed for a peaceful resolution of the

differences with the establishment of a long-term compromise. But they don't venture in that direction either.

Sven Beckert, in his *Empire of Cotton*, discusses the boost given to capitalist development in the New World, as well as in Europe, by the commercial and financial integration of the two modes of production which—together with the rapidly accelerating demand for cotton in Europe—provided the base for the explosive growth of the global cotton industry. He quotes Marx about bourgeois civilization and barbarity having been joined at the hip. But having been joined in such a way, how was it that they managed to come apart? Marx (in an 1861 article for the Vienna *Die Presse*, November, 1861) stated that:

The present struggle between the South and North is, therefore, nothing but a struggle between two social systems, between the system of slavery and the system of free labor. The struggle has broken out because the two systems can no longer live peacefully side by side on the North American continent. It can only be ended by the victory of one system or the other.

For his part, having emphasized the symbiotic interdependency of slavery and capitalism in the U.S., Beckert feels it necessary to acknowledge the truth of the disharmonious friction that more and more intruded upon the honeymoon of wealth. "Most important," he states, "slavery itself seemed potentially hazardous to stability—a 'treacherous foundation,' as the Manchester Cotton Supply Association put it—not just because of the sectional tensions it generated in the United States, but also because slaves could resist and even rebel." Further, quoting the *Westminster Review* in 1850, he continues, "this mistrust arises from a shrewd calculation of the dangers, in both a moral and physical sense, which hang over a state of society whose foundations are laid in injustice and violence."

Beckert adds, "American slavery had begun to threaten the very prosperity it produced, as the distinctive political economy of the cotton South collided with the incipient political economy of the North. In addition, the violent expansion of both these

economies westward brought crisis after crisis to their nascent national institutions." But why is the Northern economy only "incipient"? In fact, the Northern economy was more technologically and economically advanced than that of the South. And why does Beckert characterize the Southern economy as merely "distinctive"? If the expansion westward brought crisis, then why? Were North and South, in some way, involved in a dispute? Of course, Beckert knows they were—and admits it—but instead of attempting to explain it, or trace its history, he employs evasive and ambiguous terminology that leaves unclear the basis of the conflict between North and South.

Beckert goes on, "ample supplies of fertile land and bonded labor had made the South into Lancashire's plantation, but by 1860 large numbers of Americans, especially in the northern states, protested such semicolonial dependence." These protests were very real and it's true that the Northern textile mills demanded protection against the British exports of textiles and garments. The North favored high tariffs against British imports so as to promote the development of U.S. domestic production. The tariff of 1828, under John Quincy Adams, satisfied the demands of the Northern manufacturers. The planter-loving Democrats in Congress strenuously objected, calling it the "tariff of abominations." They got their way in 1832 with a lowering of tariffs in 1832 and 1833 under the pro-slavery president Andrew Jackson. Under John Tyler import tariffs were raised again for a relatively brief period before slaveholder interests forced them down again. From that time until the Civil War import tariffs remained low, and generally favored the Lancashire mill-owners at the expense of their rivals in Massachusetts. It was the policies of the slave-drivers in the federal government that favored the export of raw cotton to Britain, instead of the rapid development of an American textile and garment industry, whether in the North or in the South.

Beckert continues, "they [the protests in the North], in time, sparked a second American revolution." Is this Beckert's way of attributing the cause of the Civil War to the demands of the North? Demands linked to the cotton trade with Britain? How else can this be interpreted? But surely Beckert recognizes that the North promoted the industrial development of the U.S.—its independent technological, commercial and industrial growth.

The tariff dispute showed that it was the North that pushed for economic independence and self-sufficiency instead of remaining in a semicolonial relationship with British capital based on the cotton trade. Wasn't it true then, that the South, through its undemocratic control of the policies of the U.S. government, retarded the development of the nation in favor of a special relationship between the cotton fields of Mississippi and the mills of Lancashire? Beckert lays out the relationship clearly enough, but fails to draw the conclusions. No, he says, it was the protests emanating from the North that sparked the war; therefore, it was not the anti-national, anti-capitalist abominations of the South.

In truth, it was the secession of the rebel enslavers, and the raising of their gray-clad armies, that forced the North to carry through the abolition of slavery, which, in effect, was the completion of the American Revolution. The Republicans of the North, in their efforts to preserve the union of the United States under the rule of constitutional law, recognized the necessity of defending the union against the military challenge of those who fought for the right to enslave human beings. They understood that the defeat of the slaveholders' rebellion was essential for the growth and prosperity of agriculture and industry under a free-labor regime. And the Confederacy, if it had defeated the North in that war, would indubitably have declared slavery the law of the land, thus delaying or terminating the prospect of a powerful capitalist nation.

### **Responsibility for war falls to the South**

As for which "section" should bear the responsibility for precipitating the mass slaughter, Marx observed ("The North American Civil War," *Die Presse*, October 25, 1861):

It is above all to be remembered that the war did not originate with the North, but with the South. The North finds itself on the defensive.

For months, it had quietly looked on while the secessionists appropriated the Union's forts, arsenals, shipyards, customs houses, pay offices, ships and supplies of arms, insulted its flag and took prisoner bodies of its troops. Finally, the secessionists resolved to force the Union government out of its passive attitude by a

blatant act of war, and solely for this reason proceeded to the bombardment of Fort Sumter near Charleston.

Beckert goes on, "continued territorial expansion of slavery was vital to secure both its economic, and even more so its political viability, which was threatened as never before by an alarmingly sectional Republican Party." This is true, but why did the unfolding of history rule out that option for the slave-owners? Of course, the Republican Party appeared "sectional" in the eyes of the enslavers. But which section was it that strove to defend the nation as a whole? And which section took it upon itself to break away from the union in order to defend and expand the reign of the whip? The accusation of "sectionalism" was hurled at the party of Lincoln by the enslavers, and here Beckert seems to echo their complaint.

Beckert is right to say that the slaveholders needed and demanded "continued territorial expansion." They had done as much as they could to guarantee the right to own slaves in the new states admitted to the union. Plentiful fertile land for the expansion of slave plantations was the most convenient way for the slaveholders to maximize their profits. But what was result of the expansion that they managed to achieve? As George Novack explains (ibid.):

Owing to its superficial, rapacious and improvident methods of cultivation, the slave plantation system required a steady supply of new, cheap, and fertile semitropical soil. In their triumphant progress the cotton planters laid waste the land like an invading army. "Even in Texas, before it had even been ten years under cotton cultivation," reported [Frederick Law] Olmsted, "the spectacle that was so familiar in the older slave states was frequently seen by the traveler—an abandoned plantation of 'worn-out' fields with its little village of dwellings, now only a home for wolves and vultures."

In the same vein, Ulrich Bonnell Phillips writes in his book, *American Negro Slavery*,

C. C. Clay, Senator from Alabama, said in 1855 of his native county of Madison which lay on the Tennessee border, "I can show you ... the sad memorials of the

artless and exhausting culture of cotton. Our small planters, after taking the cream off their lands, unable to restore them by rest, manures, or otherwise, are going further west and south in search of other virgin lands which they may and will despoil and impoverish in like manner. ... In traversing that county one will discover numerous farmhouses, once the abode of intelligent and industrious freemen, now occupied by slaves, or tenantless, deserted and dilapidated. ... Indeed, a country in its infancy, where fifty years ago scarce a forest tree had been felled by the axe of the pioneer, is already exhibiting the signs of senility and decay apparent in Virginia and the Carolinas; the freshness of its agricultural glory is gone, the vigor of its youth is extinct, and the spirit of desolations seems brooding over it."

[https://www.amazon.com/American-Slavery-Employment-Determined-Plantation-ebook/dp/B00848LQA8/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1510022566&sr=1-1&keywords=ulrich+bonnell+phillips\)](https://www.amazon.com/American-Slavery-Employment-Determined-Plantation-ebook/dp/B00848LQA8/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1510022566&sr=1-1&keywords=ulrich+bonnell+phillips)

Eric Williams, in this book, *Capitalism and Slavery*, Capricorn Books, 1966, approaches the question of slavery and soil exhaustion more generally:

From the standpoint of the grower, the greatest defect of slavery lies in the fact that it quickly exhausts the soil. The labor supply of low social status, docile and cheap, can be maintained in subjection only by systematic degradation and by deliberate efforts to suppress its intelligence. Rotation of crops and scientific farming are therefore alien to slave societies. As Jefferson wrote of Virginia, "we can buy an acre of new land cheaper than we can manure an old one." ... This serious defect of slavery can be counterbalanced and postponed for a time if fertile soil is practically unlimited. Expansion is a necessity of slave societies; the slave power requires ever fresh conquests.

Finally, Beckert quotes John Marshman in March 1863 (p. 246) as saying, "it may be said that the prosperity of the South has been based on the gigantic crime of holding three or four millions of human beings in a state of slavery, and it is difficult to divest the mind of

the conviction that the day of reckoning from the throne of the Eternal has come." Would that the Eternal had taken upon Himself to do something about it. Beckert simply responds, "the day of reckoning arrived on April 12, 1861. ... the American struggle marked the world's first truly global raw materials crisis, and proved midwife to the emergence of new global networks of labor, capital and state power." It's certainly undeniable that "new global networks" emerged under the dynamic expansion of capitalism. But Beckert stops short of recognizing that the burgeoning capitalist system in North America and Europe could realize its full potential only by casting off the stranglehold of the perfumed and polished tyrants of the lash, and emerging free to refashion society in accordance with the genuine interests of the ruling capitalist classes of these nations.

In the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 Marx and Engels pointed to the sweeping historical movement that heralded the expansion of these "new global networks":

The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilisation. The cheap prices of commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians' intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image.

Marx concluded, in the *Die Presse* article mentioned above,

The whole movement was and is based, as one sees, on the slave question. Not in the sense of whether the slaves within the existing slave states should be emancipated outright or not, but whether the twenty million free men of the North should submit any longer to an oligarchy of three hundred thousand slaveholders; whether the vast Territories of the republic should be nurseries for free states or for slavery; finally, whether the national policy of the Union should take armed spreading of slavery in Mexico, Central and South America as its device.

## **NHC swimming with the academic tide**

The NHC as a tendency within academia is very attractive to many younger people, especially on college campuses, who are interested in critical explanations of historical events. For the most part, it is a tendency that, as pointed out above, rejects Marxism. As the introduction to *Slavery's Capitalism* states, "one distinguishing characteristic of the field [the NHC] has been its departure from Marxist theorizations that separate slavery and capitalism into antithetical modes of production...".

This anti-Marxist orientation is clearly represented throughout most of their discussions of economic relations, which incorporate bourgeois approaches to capitalist economic institutions and relations, shared by capitalist academics, politicians and corporate chieftains alike. They do not attempt to give a fundamental definition of capitalism, nor do they attempt to explain how and why it evolved as a system of economic and social relations. Instead they proceed as if everybody already knows what capitalism is: supposedly it's a system of economic institutions in which the land and the productive facilities are privately owned, people generally get along by buying and selling goods and services, and borrow as needed to finance their business-related or personal purchases. Thus banks, merchant companies, factories, farms and workshops—and even slave plantations—are part of the system.

These ideas are propagated by teachers, politicians, journalists and academics who do not question the perpetual supremacy of the capitalist class in society, and avoid themes that are likely to cause embarrassment for these "titans of industry." The principles that supposedly sum up the nature of capitalist institutions and activity are not scientific, but rather traditional, superficial, impressionistic and subservient to the ruling powers. Marx regarded the uncritical and ahistorical approach to economic theory by the mainstream economists of the day as "apologetics" or "vulgar economy." In *Capital*, Vol. III, (the chapter on The Trinity Formula) he commented:

Vulgar economy actually does no more than interpret, systematise and defend in doctrinaire fashion the conceptions of the agents of bourgeois production

who are entrapped in bourgeois production relations. It should not astonish us, then, that vulgar economy feels particularly at home in the estranged outward appearances of economic relations in which these prima facie absurd and perfect contradictions appear and that these relations seem the more self-evident the more their internal relationships are concealed from it, although they are understandable to the popular mind. But all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided.

Given the bourgeois outlook of the NHC, it's explicable why they decided to entitle their recent book *Slavery's Capitalism*; in their view slavery becomes a subcategory of the capitalist system. As Beckert and Rockman say in the previously cited introduction,

Interregional commerce not only offered New England localities the opportunity to profit from slavery, but also provided plantation regimes with access to low-cost provisions and new technologies to boost the returns from coerced labor. Such analysis makes it difficult to determine where the slave economy ended and the so-called free economy began. (intro, 20)

Here in the 21<sup>st</sup> century little has changed among the ranks of the bourgeois economists or historians. But to analyze history and economics scientifically, it requires a disciplined effort to sort through the historical facts, find the threads that connect them, and come up with a general explanation that corresponds to the actual evolution of economic relations. In the view of those who have studied Marx, this work has already been accomplished in its fundamental aspects. The mainstream economists of capitalist society, on the other hand, have consigned Marx and Marxism to the junk-pile and have fallen into the modes of thinking that correspond to how the capitalists themselves understand their role in the world. Basing themselves on that foundation, the economists contrive their theories in such a way as to justify the existence of capitalist rule for the indefinite future while striving to give the appearance of scientific objectivity. A big part of their objective is to demonstrate that workers and capitalists share common interests: capital provides the jobs that workers need.

Generally, for most educators working in the ideological fields that typify the university humanities, this view of capitalism is ubiquitous. After all, the university system was created in the first place to be a bulwark of intellectual support for the ruling capitalist class (and, in their day, the ruling slavocracy as well). So, in this sense the NHC don't distinguish themselves from the established assumptions and methods of bourgeois economics or sociology. They view capitalism as a system embracing private property, buying and selling of goods and services, national and international trade, financial operations conducted by banks or bank-like institutions, markets for stocks and bonds, etc. Further, they don't view the political conflicts of today, nor those of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as having a basis in conflicting class interests. They ignore the class basis of the evolution of the political party conflicts in the antebellum U.S. They leave unexamined the historical threads that trace how the family farmers, merchants, factory owners and industrial workers sought to use whatever political resources were available to them to make the legal system and the economic institutions function in their own interests. For those who wish to base their thinking on a scientific foundation, it's important to trace the history of political party conflicts during the antebellum period in order to recognize what social forces were represented in them. In this way, one can gain insight into the evolution of the antagonism between free labor and slavery, and a better understanding of why the Civil War came onto the agenda of historical development.

### **Burgeoning racial oppression under capitalist rule**

By creating confusion over the nature and evolution of capitalism they fail to recognize that it is the exploitative nature of capitalism that, after the Civil war, was solely responsible for the termination of the progressive measures of Radical Reconstruction. The capitalist power, with its main stronghold in the North, opened the door for the reign of Ku Klux Klan terror over African-American workers and farmers and their allies. Having defeated the South and abolished slavery, capitalism was free to develop in accordance with its own inner potentials. But capitalism does not promote the needs of the masses of workers and farmers. It is in the nature of the capitalist class to make use of every existing regressive tradition to weaken and divide the workers and farmers movements, to keep

down wages, block the self-organization of the workers, and maximize the rate of exploitation in production.

Racism served the capitalists' needs by dividing the working class against itself so that workers would remain in a weakened condition and be less able to unify with one another to fight for higher wages and better working conditions. The capitalists promoted policies that would preserve the rightless status of women and their restriction to low-paid jobs. They supported the establishment of the Jim Crow system of segregation and superexploitation of African-American wage workers and sharecroppers in the South. This oppressive order, which prevailed throughout the states of the old Confederacy, was ratified by the Compromise of 1877, which provided for the withdrawal of the Union troops from the South. The Jim Crow practices remained in effect until the rise of the civil rights movement in the 1950s. At the height of Jim Crow racism in the U.S., president Woodrow Wilson screened the crude, racist film *Birth of a Nation* in the White House. The PBS network reported on this as follows:

On the evening of March 21, 1915, President Woodrow Wilson attended a special screening at the White House of *The Birth of a Nation*, a film directed by D.W. Griffith and based on *The Clansman*, a novel written by Wilson's good friend Thomas Dixon. The film presented a distorted portrait of the South after the Civil War, glorifying the Ku Klux Klan and denigrating blacks. It falsified the period of Reconstruction by presenting blacks as dominating Southern whites (almost all of whom are noble in the film) and sexually forcing themselves upon white women. The Klan was portrayed as the South's savior from this alleged tyranny. Not only was this portrayal untrue, it was the opposite of what actually happened. During Reconstruction, whites dominated blacks and assaulted black women. The Klan was primarily a white terrorist organization that carried out hundreds of murders. After seeing the film, an enthusiastic Wilson reportedly remarked: "It is like writing history with lightning, and my only regret is that it is all so terribly true."

Up until the civil rights movement of the 1950s, the capitalist ruling class continued to fortify racial segregation and the vicious bigotry that buttressed it. This was evident in

the federal government's support for the Jim Crow system in the South, with its brutal suppression of democratic rights. As for the NHC, they focus on the evils of capitalism only in the context of the alliance between the enslavers and the Northern capitalists, but they don't explain how or why capitalism produced its own racial evils.

The NHC are very much in harmony with ideological trends in the humanities in the current period. For them question of "race" carries more social and historical weight than "class." They fashion an image of 19<sup>th</sup> century history and politics that places the greatest emphasis on the sharp division of the races involved in the development and functioning of Southern plantation slavery, Caucasians on one side, Black persons on the other. As they see it, the collaboration of the Northern capitalists with the slavocracy created a bastion of Caucasian power standing over the oppressed Black population. The bulk of the population, free workers and farmers, are left out of the equation. This line of thinking puts the NHC very much in the company of popular writers such as Michelle Alexander (*The New Jim Crow*), Ta-Nehisi Coates (*Between the World and Me*) and Carol Anderson (*White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide*). These writers uphold the supposition that the primary source of the oppression inflicted upon the Black population is the deeply rooted racism within the white population of the United States.

It is true that racial bias and chauvinism were widespread in the attitudes and behavior of the Caucasian population in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but that was a function of the strong influence of the slave power in the national culture, and the slave-owners vigorously promoted white-supremacist ideas. As it turned out, the defeat of slavery gave an impetus to the development of egalitarian alliances between farmers and workers of both races, which tended to break down divisive racial attitudes. But then, as the Republican-dominated federal government withdrew its support for the Reconstruction policies that had been initiated in the immediate aftermath of the war, racism was reinforced as the Jim Crow system became entrenched. Racism spread not only in the segregated South, but in the North as well. This process benefitted only the capitalists, North and South, who knew how to manipulate and derive advantage from intensified racial conflicts among the laboring masses.

## **NHC race analysis vs. Marxist class analysis**

The promotion of race-based and gender-based division at the expense of class analysis is typical of the ideological currents that have emerged on the college campuses of the United States throughout the 1990s, and even more so in recent years. This political shift in attitudes has become evident through a range of political initiatives and activities that are often referred to as “identity politics,” “multiculturalism” or cultural identity. The emphasis is generally on the suffering of certain oppressed sections of the population: women, African Americans, Latinos, Asians, gays, lesbians and trans-gender persons. These social categories become victims of malevolent social forces, and the objective of politics is to protect them from discrimination, transgressions, insults, offenses, or terminology that does them harm.

Most of the adherents of the NHC, as university-based members of a liberal-bourgeois social stratum betray a strong tendency to cater to the needs of the ruling class and to defend its interests during a period of growing discontent among the workers and youth. But this must be done in such a way that demonstrates that they are the ones who know the best way to defend the needs of the most oppressed sectors of society (not the Marxists).

The specific features of this liberal, race-based world view did not emerge suddenly from nowhere, but evolved on the basis of the gains of the civil rights movement, the women’s movement and the related struggles of Latinos, Native Americans, and gays and lesbians in the United States. These movements, beginning with the civil rights movement in the 1950s, all represented a striving for equal rights which had a profound impact on the social and political culture in the United States. These post-WW II battles came on the heels of the victories of the trade union movement of the 1930s and 1940s which had already shown a determined mass struggle could make substantial gains in wages and working conditions, as well as showing how workers of all races and nationalities could win by uniting in struggle.

The civil rights movement—a movement based in the needs and aspirations of working people who are Black—transformed social attitudes and reflected gains made by all workers in what could be achieved by a unified fight. In particular Caucasian workers, by recognizing their common class interest with Black workers, and acting on that reality, made huge progress in their opposition to racism, and helped to decisively strengthen many trade unions in the decades following the civil rights movement. The progress is still with us today and bodes well for the future of the working class.

The NHC has renounced Marxism as irrelevant and misguided. At the same time, they have no answers whatsoever to the millions of workers, Black, Latino or Caucasian, who feel the effects of the ongoing economic crisis, and who seek some way to redress their grievances and regain some lost ground in democratic rights, wages and working conditions. For the working people who feel the ruinous effects of the long-term stagnation of production and trade, the only answer is to reject the mythologies promoted by the different wings of the ruling-class ideologists, and their political parties as well. The way forward for these exploited millions is to organize themselves as a fighting movement, rebuild the labor movement, break out of the political grip of the Republicans and Democrats, form their own independent political movement, and defend their class interests as a unified force regardless of race, gender, ethnicity or nationality. This is the path towards a socialist revolution.

As for “present-day economic inequalities” Beckert and Rothman not only avoid any analysis of the multiple offensives of present-day capitalism against the mass of the working people, which not only drive down the standard of living of the majority of workers, but widen the income gap between workers who are Caucasian and African American workers. The contemporary economic inequality is the outcome of the evolution of capitalist exploitation, which has produced deepening crisis conditions. This capitalist evolution was facilitated in the first place on the victory over British colonialism, and in the second place on the victory over the enslavers’ Confederacy in 1865. In this way, Beckert & co. do a disservice to all those who seek justice and equality in today’s world. We cannot expect to find answers to the acute economic and political problems of today unless we

examine and confront the domination of the capitalist ruling classes over the mass of the working population.