

SLAVERY IN THE FRENCH CARIBBEAN, 1625-1715 A Marxist Analysis

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The exact relationship between the emergence of the Caribbean plantation slave economy and nascent capitalism is still not clear to many (see, for example, Meillassoux, 1975; 19). The Caribbean plantation colonies were based on African slave labor. They were the creation mostly of the seventeenth century. Capitalism was born from the womb of the feudal mode of production that still dominated most of Europe in the seventeenth century. The problem of the connection between slavery and nascent capitalism complicates the understanding of that stage of the transition from feudalism to capitalism that extends at least to the Peace of Utrecht in 1713, when the English seized the *asiento* slave-delivery contract from the French. Feudal relations of production then still held sway almost everywhere in Europe, including the powerful absolutist France of Louis XIV (1643-1715)—a rising competitor in the Atlantic slave trade and a rapacious exploiter in the Caribbean of African slave labor. At that juncture, capitalist relations of production predominated *only* in the Netherlands, and perhaps in England after 1689. Nowhere else in the world

did the capitalist mode of production reign supreme, but the future definitely belonged to it, not to feudalism.

Anomalously, the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European conquest for capitalism of North and South America with its Caribbean midriff involved the transfer to the colonial New World of *feudal* modes of exploitation. Feudal exploitation surfaced everywhere from Quebec to the Carolinas to South America, but sank roots deepest in the southern tier from Mexico and the Caribbean to Tierra del Fuego. Yet the very basis for the exploitation of the New World by feudo-capitalist Europe and by white colonialists was the capture in West Africa and deportation of Africans en masse, coupled with the revival of slavery—an ancient form of exploitation of labor that was not only precapitalist but even prefeudal. Although seemingly archaic, slave relations of production became indispensable for the capitalist exploitation and integration of the New World, as well as for the eventual triumph of the capitalist mode of production on a world scale. To many this seems a paradox.

Historical materialism can help us unravel the puzzle of feudalism-capitalism Black slavery. I will attempt to accomplish this for the Caribbean through the example of French colonialism in its initial phase, that is 1625-1715. But let us first briefly distinguish between slave, feudal, and capitalist relations of production in terms of their basic economic laws.

The basic economic law of slavery—the oldest form of exploitation known to man—is the production of surplus product for the class of slaveholders by the forced labor of the class of slaves. The permanent malaise of this system is extremely low productivity of labor. Under feudalism the basic economic law is the production of surplus product for the class of feudal lords in the form of labor rent, rent in kind, or money rent. In this mode of production direct producers are still subject to noneconomic compulsion, but are not outright chattels, and usually possess means of production in their own right. The economic law of motion of the capitalist mode of

production is the law of surplus value. It is well known that the creation of surplus value, its transformation into profit, and the latter's appropriation by capitalists are the be-all and end-all of capitalist production.

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Capitalism matured for a long time in the womb of feudalism, nourished unwittingly by feudal rulers who had nothing but contempt for the bourgeoisie. The latter inherited and refined their feudal mentors' talent for exploiting labor. Capitalism remained under the feudal umbrella long enough to pass through its initial stage of development—*simple capitalist cooperation* (1350 - 1500)—and nearly long enough to complete its second stage—*manufactory*—which combined simple cooperation with division of labor inside the workshop (1500 -1766). Capitalism was still the ward of feudalism when two monstrous crimes against humanity were committed—"primary accumulation," and the establishment of Europe's "sea-borne empire." There does not appear to be as clear a date separating the first stage of development, that is, simple capitalist cooperation, from the second stage, that is, manufactory capitalism, as there is between manufactory capitalism and the third stage, that is, *large scale machine industry* (about 1766).

In the light of Caribbean happenings from 1492 to the beginning of the nineteenth century, it is difficult not to conclude that Black slavery was the actual *mode of transition* from feudalism to capitalism. Although it may seem a paradox, slavery—in the specific form of exploitation of transplanted African slave-labor power—was the contingent requirement for the emergence of real, nascent capitalism in its concrete New World form. In fact, Black slavery was just about coterminous with the manufactory stage of capitalism. Viewed from this perspective, we thus oppose actually existing early capitalism to an imaginary "pure" capitalism, to capitalism in

principle, which, being imaginary, is free from contingency.

However, feudalism also was party to this process of transition. Its own inherent contradictions gave sanguinary birth to the capitalist mode of exploitation. But in order to breach the feudal womb, capital required the midwifery of a revived slave mode of exploitation. For the first 200 years the colonization of the Americas, the carving out of plantations, and delivery of captive Africans to them, was undertaken mainly by Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, England, France, and Denmark. Yet of these realms Holland was the sole capitalist society until after 1700. Feudal relations prevailed in all the others. So African slavery began as the collective enterprise of a Europe that was still mainly feudal. True, this grim business was financed by commercial capital. It is also a fact that profits of the slave trade and plantation slavery slipped from the hands of the feudal aristocracy into the coffers of the bourgeoisies of England, Holland, and France—lands where capitalism developed fastest in breadth and depth.

There was no conscious agreement between the feudal aristocracy and the greedy, but diffident, merchant bourgeoisie in putting out the "second edition" of slavery, or even awareness of historical cooperation. But joint action is plain historical fact. The reason is capitalism's tendency to assume different forms or types in the course of historical evolution, and for the earliest forms of capital—merchants' and usurers' capital—to fit snugly under feudalism's skirts. These earliest forms were particularly adapted to feudal methods of extracting surplus labor from direct producers. The big capitalist trader of the seventeenth century really did not feel that there was any more reliable way of exploiting labor than the whip, sword, and pike of the great feudal lord. Raw force and violence were legacies from feudalism that early capitalism greatly intensified in the form of New World slavery. But still it was an inheritance; noneconomic coercion was not an original creation of capitalism (Ponomarev, 1980: 56).¹

Preindustrial capital, in its merchant and usurer forms, was extremely conservative, even reactionary in circumstances.

Merchant and usurer's capital grew concurrently with the capital that developed the manufactory and was a major source for the latter's accumulation. But for a long time preindustrial capital sheltered complacently in the feudal hierarchy. "In the precapitalist stages of society, commerce ruled industry. In modern society the reverse is true," observed Marx (1959: 325). It was long-standing tradition for rich merchants and money lenders to feudalize money capital, investing in seigniories and other landholdings yielding feudal rents. In the *Communist Manifesto* Marx paid tribute to the revolutionary role of industrial capital (Marx and Engels, 1976). The merchant and usurer's capital of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries shared little of that revolutionary vocation, however, neither in political affairs nor in production technology. The only notable exceptions appear to have been the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Dutch commercial bourgeoisie and its seventeenth-century English counterpart. Preindustrial capital coexisted more or less harmoniously with feudal modes of exploitation. In fact, when faced historically with the choice of means to profit from the colonial conquest of the Americas, its feudal genesis predisposed it to select the hoary slave mode of exploiting labor power. The form and the purpose of the colonial regimes first established in the New World between 1492 and 1600 bore the stamp of feudalism. Yet the funds to begin the slave trade and set up the early slave plantations came from the bourgeoisie. Merchant and usurer's capital was already feudalized in large part in conservative landholding. The portion of the remainder that was exported maximized profits through reactionary slaveholding.

Marx (1959: 327-328) proved conclusively that the history of merchant capital is inseparable from colonial conquest and Black slavery. Following in his footsteps, V. I. Lenin carefully noted the existence of different types of capitalism, with different functions and different methods of exploitation, identifying, for instance, nineteenth- and twentieth-century bourgeois-landlord capitalism and Russian Black-Hundred-Octobrist capitalism of the era of the 1905 Revolution, as being

very unlike populist *Narodnik* capitalism in late nineteenth-century Russia that Lenin (1966: 438) termed "realistic, democratic, full of activity" capitalism. Taking account of the origins, evolution, and the nature of the entrepreneurial activity of Caribbean capitalism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this Marxist-Leninist methodology justifies our designating the latter as *bourgeois-slaveholder capitalism*, or even as *semislave capitalism with a large graft of feudalism*. This type resulted in the seventeenth-century Caribbean in social formations more integral than merely a kind of mixed economy combining a feudo-capitalist sector (or feudal and capitalist sectors) with a slave sector. Instead, semifeudal capital spawned the semislave capital that took the initiative in reviving the slave mode of production.

The difference between the two is not merely semantic. The functions and methods of exploitation of Europe-centered semifeudal capital differed from the functions and methods of the semislave capital that oiled the Atlantic slave trade and ran the Caribbean plantations. Lenin explained that semifeudal capitalism developed in such a way in a sector of the economy as to be particularly adapted to precapitalist methods of exploitation and residual privileges based on extraeconomic coercion (Lenin, 1968: 377). The two main forms of semifeudal capitalism were merchant and usurer capital—at that stage in history the most reactionary types of capital (See *World Marxist Review*, 1981, vol. 24, no. 12: 49). When it encompassed the Caribbean and adjacent regions of America, the capitalist evolution ignited there by the merchant's and usurer's form became so reactionary it resulted in outright slavery. On the West African coast and in the Americas, semifeudal capital metamorphosed into bourgeois-slaveholder capital. As one scholar puts it, it was feudal commercial "primitive accumulation," meaning plunder and slavery, which cleared the ground for the rise of capitalism proper, that is, capitalism subject to its own internal laws of motion (Nabudere, 1978: vii-viii).

By the latter half of the seventeenth century it was clear that capitalist relations of production distinct from their feudal

trammels had become the trend setter of social progress. By then, feudalism, crisis ridden, was on the wane. Nevertheless, only in Holland was capitalism the dominant mode of production. Elsewhere in western Europe, mainly in England, capitalist manufactories and capitalist-type systems of farming were proliferating, but the bulk of the European population still labored under feudal relations of production (Shemyatenkov, 1981: 18-19).

These conditions determined events in the French West Indies from the first seizure of territory by French slaveholding planters during the reign of Louis XIII (1610-1643) to the loss, by France, of the *asiento* in 1713, and the death of the "Sun King" Louis XIV shortly thereafter (1715). France's Caribbean colonial system was the joint creation of the feudal absolutist regime and commercial capital. French aristocrats and bourgeois worked hand in glove in the course of the seventeenth century to make semislave capitalism serve their historically divergent purposes. The aristocracy hoped to strengthen the political-economic and naval power of the absolute monarchy and thus solve the crisis of feudalism in the interest of the feudal ruling class. The French merchant and shipowning bourgeoisie used the return on capital invested in slave trading and slave labor as one of the means of negating feudalism and effecting the transition to capitalist society, culminating in the cataclysmic bourgeois revolution of 1789. Thus we have the coexistence of several forms of exploitation in one emerging frühbürgerliche "world market."

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French Caribbean bourgeois-slaveholder society was thus a very concrete colonial social formation, with its own distinctive features. The theoretical framework outlined above provides the tools for the analysis of the political economy of this system. I have elected to concentrate on the emergence of the French West Indian social formation during roughly the 100

years ending in 1715. The spotlight will remain on the role of African slaves in the class structure in close conjunction with a typology of the forms of their class struggle.

Semicapitalist exploitation of slaves was accomplished through the agency of an increasingly absolutist (after 1664) feudal monarchical regime. Slavery, feudalism, and rising capitalism were all featured in the French Caribbean colonies, a situation that entailed multiple forms of relations of production. This in turn dictated the existence of various social classes corresponding to these forms. Yet there was a fundamental class antagonism in the French-ruled islands between two hostile classes that at any moment in the period under review determined the society in relation to the dominant mode of production.

Marxist scholar Zelin (1975: 58-59) sets three conditions for the existence of a slave mode of production. First, slave production must be expanding. Second, the slaves must more and more acquire the character of a distinct social class in the Leninist sense of class (see Lenin, 1965: 421). Third, the slaveholding relation must become the dominant one in the totality of socioeconomic relations. The situation in the French West Indies where Black slaves were put to work in a mass way in actual production meets these conditions exactly. There slaves rapidly came to occupy a more crucial role in social production than free men or white *engagés* (indentured servants). Slaves were therefore one of the two basic classes in the society, hostile to the other basic class of slaveowning planters who oppressed and exploited them. The *hybrid* nature of the mode of production was due to the heavy feudal input, and to the fact that the planter class was recruited both from the feudal aristocracy and the bourgeoisie. In the seventeenth century and long afterwards, captive African peasants with their long experience with tropical agriculture made up the chief productive force of the Caribbean plantation.

The plantation system, characterized by savage methods of forced labor and primitive tools, was designed to raise

industrial and food crops for export, such as sugar cane, tobacco, coffee, cacao, rice, indigo, and cotton. The first plantations to enslave Africans were established as early as the late fifteenth century by the Portuguese on islands off the coast of West Africa (Cape Verde Islands, São Tomé, Príncipe, Azores, Madeira). They raised sugar cane. The system made the journey westward across the Atlantic with the Spaniards to the island of Hispaniola in the early sixteenth century. From there it spread during the next three centuries throughout the Caribbean and to South and North America, particularly to Brazil and the British southern mainland colonies. In lockstep with the plantation system grew the African slave trade.

In 1624 or 1625 Belain d'Esnambuc founded France's first Caribbean colony, a tiny settlement on the shores of St. Christopher (now St. Kitts),² and he found some African slaves already living there, the property of English slaveholders encamped in the middle portions of the island (Mims, 1912: 283). He also encountered some compatriots who, having arrived earlier, already had gotten hold of their own slaves, either captured from Spaniards or purchased (Peytravd, 1897: 5-6). By the time of his departure from the island shortly thereafter, the new colony held about 40 Africans in bondage (de la Roncière, 1910:649-650). They were the first slaves owned by the French in the West Indies. In 1635, the French began the colonization of Martinique and its sister island, Guadeloupe. The native Carib Indians were annihilated and African slaves imported to grow tobacco and cotton and, toward the end of the century, sugar cane and coffee. By 1664, the French had added Grenada, St. Lucia, Mariegalante, part of St. Martin, St. Eustatius, St. Bartholomew, and St. Croix. Beginning in 1629-1630, or in 1638, French buccaneers squatted on the tiny islet of Tortuga, a few miles windward of Hispaniola. From there they encroached on the larger island, wresting wide stretches from the Spaniards, so that late in the seventeenth century the western part of Hispaniola fell under the French crown and was renamed St. Domingue. The

foundation was laid in St. Domingue for the vast system of plantations that in the eighteenth century produced sugar, coffee, cocoa, indigo, rum, and molasses, consuming the lives of hundred of thousands of African slaves. From 1669 to 1714, Martinique was the capital of the entire French Caribbean empire.

The slave was the main agent of production and the victim of oppression and exploitation. Every moment of his life was controlled by the plantation system. Yet slaves were not the only persons to have their existence determined by the system. The planter class of slaveholders too was directly conditioned by slavery. Every aspect of the planter's social existence was tied to the specific slave-type and slave form of surplus product. This is abundantly clear in respect of political power and the state. It is equally clear in respect of the French planter's early ideological rationalization of slavery in the doctrine of the inherent supremacy of white-skinned Europeans and the inherited inferiority of Black-skinned Africans who, in being enslaved, were reaping just deserts.

In this modern "second edition" of slavery, state power in the islands was controlled by a combination of groups—a ruling bloc. Changeover from the overlordship of individual seigneurs or trading companies to royal authority merely brought new faces and shifts in the balance of power within the bloc. The chief element remained a clique of resident big slaveholders who were also owners of large plantations. They shared power with the big commercial bourgeoisie and with representatives of rich absentee slaveholding planters. Until the monarchy took over in 1674, royal patents conferred huge feudal seigniories on certain big slaveholding planters, entrusting them with the whole panoply of feudal rights, regalian rights, and social privileges. At that point in time the exercise of state power was a function of seigniorial rights. After the crown assumed direct control, the ruling bloc came to include high royal administrative officials (governors and intendants), top naval and military officers, ecclesiastical lords,

money lenders, and island representatives of French-based slave trading capital, that is, the agents of shareholders in the seaborne slave delivery companies that were granted monopoly rights by the monarchy to supply the French West Indies with Africans. An elaborate bureaucracy of feudal-absolutist officials became an integral part of the bloc-in-power. Moot is the question of how successful these officials were up to 1715 in using government office to accumulate wealth.³ Capital funds formed in this way were invested in private slaveholding and in private slave trading entrepreneurship. Enough to justify our designating this colonial phenomenon as *bureaucratic bourgeois-slaveholder capital* and its perpetrators as a *bureaucratic bourgeois-slaveholding elite*.

As in every class society, here too the oppressors armed themselves primarily against the oppressed. Their weapons were only secondarily used against European rivals. The French troop detachments stationed in the islands and the local militia were used mainly by the slaveholding minority to coerce the exploited Black majority.

Still this was not merely a two class society. The French slaveholding Caribbean, like other exploitative social formations, also included *nonfundamental* classes, strata, and groups rooted in the more or less hothouse growth of nonproductive spheres—administration, government bureaucracy, legal personnel, army, and *gendarmerie* (see Bouvier-Ajam et al., 1975; 119-120).

Numbered also among the intermediate strata were white small proprietors who lived by their own labor—or by their own wits—in addition to a motley crew of more or less ruined and more or less skilled, white handicraftsmen, colonial clerks, and other supernumeraries. Particularly in St. Domingue, the number of medium-sized or small plantations cultivated by few slaves rapidly decreased in favor of large units toiled by whole gangs of slaves. Still the white petty bourgeoisie grew over time, although it decreased relative to the slave population. The free “colored” population of Blacks and mulattoes also got

larger, the outcome of escape, manumission, and miscegenation. However, permitted no social or political rights, the free "coloreds" were a negligible factor in the class-power equation of the country until long after 1715.

Absent in the French Caribbean, during these decades, was an intelligentsia as a distinct stratum. But there were sundry quasi-intellectuals, even if only dry-docked slave-ship sawbones, priests, and monks, quack physicians, and pharmacists who were semisorcerers. The impoverished French gentry, the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie, the urban plebians, and the peasantry all provided recruits for the island's expatriate quasi-intellectuals. Not only were their class roots heterogeneous, they were all steeped in racial prejudice, feudal pseudoscience, and superstition.

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However, it was *slavery* and slavery along that put the real stamp on the New World's plantation economy and on the West Indies in particular. It ruled social life because it dominated social production. The Marxist notion of fundamental classes directs our attention to that which is essential in bourgeois-slaveholder society—struggle between the slaveholders and the slaves. All social phenomena in the West Indies must be viewed from this angle. Africans were compacted in a large slave labor force with a specific relation to the means of production. Their sphere was plantation agriculture and handicraft production. Members of the group shared the same portion of the whole social product. The exception, made in this respect, for slaves who drove other slaves (drivers, whippers, executioners, and so on and for other slaveowners' henchmen had no effect on the overall slave portion of the whole social product. This portion and the common relation to the means of production were what made the slaves a *class-in-itself*. The great tragedy of their existence—with rare exceptions a tragedy unavoidable for all slaves throughout history

—was the inability of the slave class-in-itself in the Americas to rise to the higher level of a *class-for-itself*, that is, to the condition that entails consciousness of social being and consequent political action. Not until the Haitian revolution (1791-1804) did an entire class of Black slaves enter history as a full-fledged class-for-itself, and when it did it drowned St. Domingue's slavers in a revolutionary storm.

History has recorded many instances when slaves were put to nonproductive purposes—slaves performed as concubines and eunuchs, bodyguards and warriors, as domestic servants and wet nurses, and in similar capacities. Yet under American bourgeois-slaveholder capitalism, the essence of Black slavery was the *economic* relation. The black slave who performed productive labor was at once a direct producer and—as the property of another person—a means of production. This fundamental economic relation was mirrored in the *legal* relation in which the captive African was an alienable chattel who could be sold as a commodity, that is, a human producer stripped of all human rights. In strictly legal terms, what defined his relation to the means of production was precisely the nonexistence of this relation. In real *physical* terms, the share of the whole social product allocated to the class of slaves always tended to hover just below the bare vital minimum required for the mere reproduction of individual labor power. In fact, it often sank well below this level. Hungering slaves were the determining factor in West Indian relations of production. Seventeenth and eighteenth century planters knew full well, as historical documents show,⁴ that their Black slaves were the *sole* agents of production. They were convinced that Blacks constituted the “wealth” of the Caribbean, not white indentured servants, or white free laborers. The entire colonial plantation “civilization” existed only because of the slaves.

The captive Africans fought back by keeping the productivity of their labor as low as possible. They also systematically destroyed instruments of production (tools) as well as objects of labor (livestock, arable, and so on). This fact of life

determined the calibre of Caribbean "civilization." In all the array of resistance forms, low labor productivity was the most universal and unbroken form of class struggle by Black slaves. Surely it was the most secular economic damage. Without being adept in political economy, slaves instinctively tried to reduce the rate of surplus product to a minimum. The slaveholders countered by constantly stepping up the number of slaves exploited, hoping in this manner to swell the absolute mass of surplus product. From 1625, decade after decade, French planters also intensified the labor of their slaves to the utmost. The aim was to increase surplus labor time. Allowing for seasonal variations, the working day was prolonged to its daylight limits and much beyond in the sugar cane mills and boiling houses.

Surplus labor time, in this context, was the time it took a slave to produce anything more than the equivalent of that which he and his dependents were permitted to consume. Surplus slave labor time expressed the difference for slaveholders between the cost of slaves and value yielded by slave labor. The slaveholder's profit was a transmuted form of surplus product. The quantum of surplus labor time directly determined the magnitude and value of the surplus product. To increase this product *necessary* labor time, that is, the time required to produce the means to sustain life, was shortened to the point where there was not enough time left for the slave to produce the physical minimum required for survival. Robust young slaves were used up in an average of seven years.

These procedures became institutionalized in the terrible swift working-to-death of Africans on West Indian plantations. The steady drain of runaways and the destruction involved in the frequent slave uprisings added to the loss. In turn, this fuelled an insatiable demand for replacements and additional captives from the communities of West Africa. Slaveholders expected slave labor to be relatively cheap depending on two circumstances. One circumstance was more or less within their own control—rock bottom outlay for the subsistence of slaves.

The other, the purchase price of slaves, was at the mercy of extraneous factors like European wars and naval conflicts, the availability of slave shipping tonnage and the condition of slave markets in Africa. Planters were forever wailing that not enough slaves were arriving and that those who were being imported were too dear. The number of slaves sometimes dropped off because the planters did not have the money or crops to pay for them and were not regarded as worthy of credit. However, despite the ups and downs of transoceanic supply, the vicious circle was kept closed by the irrepressible growth of the Atlantic slave traffic in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

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Enslavement of growing numbers of transported Africans was the dynamic force in Caribbean insular development in the century ending in 1715. The plantation system was still in its formative states. The details of the regime imposed on the slaves of each *habitation* (i.e., plantation)—working and living conditions for the slaves, the degree to which institutionalized terrorism became the main vehicle of slave control, social customs governing the familial and marital status of bondsmen, religious pressures on the same, and more—all exerted strong influence on the development of the productive forces.

The planters tried to stimulate the growth of the productive forces with improved methods of production. Frustrated by stubborn slave resistance, however, they could not count on the normal growth of workers' skills and experience. So slaveholders tried to raise productivity indirectly by insisting on improved methods of crop cultivation—especially of sugar cane—discarding less profitable for more profitable crops and devising better care for farm animals. Above all they imposed ever more specialization of labor in their plantations. Owners discovered that the key to increasing the yield of slave labor was to combine specialization with the simple cooperation of

producers. It was hoped that this would result ultimately in better skilled slaves. The hitch was that this regime could be imposed only by the most savage and unremitting physical terrorism. With this in mind slaveholders created a stratum of white plantation stewards and overseers who managed and supervised. They also tried to estrange slaves from one another, to repress their spontaneity and individuality. As a class, the slaveholders were very wily. They maneuvered to arouse the self-interest of a minority among slaves, to bind them somehow to the big house, even if through no more than scraps from the owner's table, or spurious religious comradery, or sex play with female domestic servants. But sometimes the bribe was more substantial—usufruct of a small individual husbandry, accumulation of paltry personal property, or even freedom purchased with savings earned from extra work. Not that the ploy of paternalism—tried here and everywhere in America—ever made the majority of slaves docile and obedient. After all, as Marx (1967: 618) aptly noted, better food, clothing, treatment, of larger peculium (i.e., petty property) put at the disposal of a slave, in no way ended his exploitation.

The Black slave masses were the driving force in the early development of the Caribbean. The history of the region from 1500 to final abolition in the nineteenth century must be *their* history; it must be the history of the slaves themselves, and primarily of the field hands, not of the planter class, nor the colonial administration. In fact, there is no need even to name individual slaveholders, for it is now their turn to appear on the stage of history in their essential guise—that is, as nameless members of the class of slaveholders. Unfortunately, libraries are jammed with minute studies of the latter, works revelling in the identity and individuality of slaveholders with nary a thought to the personality and humanity of the African bondsmen—the true makers of history. Historical materialism has shown how the history of the nameless but not faceless slaves is possible. The task of progressive historians is to realize that history in practice.

In a constant and burdensome act of creation, slaves in the French West Indies produced the material values that sustained the life of the ruling class and all others on the island. It was a measure of the supreme inhumanity of the system that the only people whose lives were all too often *not* sustained by the productive efforts of the slaves were the slaves themselves. The laws of Caribbean history were realized through the creative activity of the slave population. Stated in other terms, the massive, cumbersome movement of the slaves, predicated on tremendous inertia, made up the movement of history in this region.

Yet for generations most West Indian slaves made this history at random. Their own evolution stood counterposed to them as an inscrutable, extraneous force, something inaccessible, inescapable, and malevolent. "The point is that the dissociation and estrangement of individuals, determined by their relations in the sphere of material production, inevitably separated men from their own real connections and put these above them as an independent force."⁵ Ultimately this alienation conditioned the social consciousness of slaves; it put limitations on their economic programs and sociopolitical demands, and it determined (or "overdetermined")⁶ the course and fate of slave revolts—the highest form of slave class struggle.

Class struggle is an objective, necessary social movement inherent in class societies. It springs from mutual antagonism between classes whose interests are diametrically opposed. From the moment of its inception, the French West Indies was a society in which the planters enslaved, oppressed, and appropriated the labor of captive Africans. Bitter combat between white slaveholders and Black slaves was the inevitable law of the society. What has misled some to regard the struggle as fortuitous and therefore avoidable, or, in the minds of stubbornly racist historians, as even nonexistent and totally imaginary, was the at times concealed, peaceful, nonsensational character of the struggle of the Black exploited against the white exploiters. The class struggle became obvious only

when it burst into the open, for instance in the form of rebellion or mass escape. Nevertheless, despite its many different forms, the class struggle of the slaves embraced every aspect of life—economic, political, and ideological. The typology of the struggle of French West Indian slaves must range from individual refusal to full-scale strikes, from malingering to work sabotage, from self-injury to deliberate contraception, from riot, revolt, insurrection, and armed struggle all the way to revolution (1791-1804 in St. Domingue)—the supreme moment in the history of the French Caribbean.

Features unique and peculiar to this specific bourgeois-slaveholder social formation conditioned and limited the forms of slave class struggle. We find frequent mention of escape, sabotage, servile insurrection, cabals, and so on—methods that had been suited to slave resistance for thousands of years. We do not find, or should we expect to find, the disciplined, large-scale organization of laborers and regular strikes characteristic of an industrial proletariat. Or should we expect to find the peasant *jacqueries* and the egalitarian socio-political utopias typical of feudalism. All the same, the class struggle of the slaves of Martinique, Guadeloupe, St. Domingue, and the other French-held isles was aggravated on an ascending scale throughout the period under scrutiny.

In countless semidomestic dramas, slaves killed their owners and destroyed their property, usually by setting fire to everything. Slaves stabbed their oppressors, shot them, strangled them, poisoned them. Slaves killing slaveholders was so common in the French colonies that whenever a member of the slaveholding class—male or female, child or adult—or an agent of the owner, died in equivocal circumstances, slaves were automatically suspected of murder. Slavers were fearful to the point of hysteria that the slaves would poison them and their farm animals as well. Diabolic ken of poisonous flora was the one skill slaveholders were certain Africans had managed to bring with them to the New World intact.

The ability of the slaves to become *fully* class-conscious was quite limited, however. This was reflected in social attitudes that were often contradictory. Lenin wrote that a slave who is not cognizant of his condition, who remains mute and dumbly obedient, is nothing but a slave. Slaves who become so degraded they actually enjoy their slavish existence are toadies and hangers-on. Slaveholders doted on these. But, said Lenin (1962: 53), the slave who is conscious of his position and rebels against it is no longer a slave—given the proper historical conditions he may even elevate himself to the status of a revolutionary. These contradictory attitudes along with hesitant, ambiguous responses to slavery were all well represented on seventeenth-century plantations. One and the same plantation often contained slaves drawn from different African tribal, ethnic, and linguistic origins. The hammer of common oppression made the plantation the melting cauldron of African peoples. However, the presence of different nationality or ethnic-cultural elements also limited, conditioned, and slowed down the growing awareness of membership in a new collective. It made it easier for slaveholders to isolate individuals and avoid any regroupment of slaves by tribe or ethnic group in order to prevent rebellion. Another powerful drag on the development of class consciousness among slaves was the, at first, haphazard, but after 1685 more concerted conversion of Blacks to Christianity by the Catholic authorities.

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In the light of historical materialism, these are some of the theoretical considerations that are emerging in the empirical study of slavery in the French Caribbean, 1625-1715.

NOTES

1. For a discussion of how selected features may be transmitted from an earlier to a later mode of production because they suit the needs of the new, see Clarence J.

Munford, "Ideology, Racist Mystification and America," Volume 17/18 (Amsterdam, 1976), pp. 57-85.

2. See Archives Nationales de France (hereafter AN), Serie Colonies, (hereafter Col.), C^{8B1}, *Relation des Isles de l'Amerique Antilles en l'Etat qu'elles estoient L'Année 1660*, and Nellis M. Crouse, *The French Struggle for the West Indies, 1665-1713* (London 1943, 1966), p. 2.

3. For example, see AN, Col., C^{8A}-7-F^o 116-13, January 1692.

4. See the following series of unpublished colonial manuscripts in AN, COL.: C^{8A} (Martinique), C^{9A} (St. Domingue) and C^{7A} (Guadeloupe). These series contain many thousands of papers.

5. See the Editors of *Kommunist* (Moscow), "J. V. Stalin and the Individual in History" in *Political Affairs*, Vol. LIX, No. 7 (New York, July 1980), p. 28.

6. For a provocative if controversial interpretation of "overdetermination" of apparently simple contradictions, see Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (translation) Harmondsworth, 1969, pp. 101-108.

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