

The Slave Trade and Development

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When Captain Binger traveled the Niger bend between 1887 and 1889, he saw numerous villages that had been drained of their lifeblood or left in ruins by violent conflicts that had left their mark in the form of fortifications.¹ Above all he was struck by the region's depopulation, which threatened to compromise the potential for colonial exploitation of the country. But these conditions did not prevail throughout the entire area. Prosperous towns were engaged in trade, war parties were living in ostentation, and rulers were collecting taxes from their subjects. The misery of the peasants' lives contrasted with the opulent luxury of the courts and caravansaries. The black slave trade, and slavery itself, did not exert a uniform effect upon all of Africa.

The Mediterranean slave trade, followed by the Atlantic trade, spurred the formation of pillaging bands, predatory states, and market towns. These structures for waging war and commerce, established to supply slaves and to export them to distant lands, contributed to the propagation of slavery on African soil and engendered huge disparities in wealth. While the slave trade devastated the peasant populations, who saw their children, especially their daughters, abducted by brigands or armed troops and sold to dealers in human chattel, it brought great wealth to rapacious kings, *caboceiros*², and merchants in the market towns, as well as to aristocrats, mercenaries, and sycophants of the royal courts. Through a perversion of memory, the sumptuous trappings of the predatory kings and their go-betweens left behind a dazzling image of the slave trade as a prestigious undertaking, while the peasants who fell victim to it remained mired in wretched poverty and anonymity.

The captives³ were bound for one of two destinations: the majority of them, especially the men, who were in greater demand

across the Atlantic, were sold to European traders; other captives, in increasing numbers, were put to work in Africa. Among the latter group, many young women were pressed into domestic service while young boys were trained to carry out further slave raids.

The local effects of slavery were nefarious and cumulative, causing an overall drop in the levels of food production. Slavery raided peasant communities of a sizable portion of the young adults of working age, whose productive toil where they were enslaved would free the slave-owning classes from agricultural labor. The transfer of individuals from their home communities to local slave-owning societies thus led to an overall reduction in the number of workers engaged in the production of foodstuffs and, consequently, to a drop in population growth. Moreover, for those communities that were not completely wiped out by the slave raids or set back yet again by another wave of pillage and capture, it took more than one generation to replace their diminished numbers. The disappearance of young women led to a drop in demographic reproduction. Even those women who had escaped from slavery were not necessarily able to find the means to provide for their children's survival; the drop in food production due to the loss of adult producers had repercussions for the following generation, which suffered from a proportional shortage of productive laborers.

The mass of slaves exploited in Africa left behind virtually no traces of their existence. The fate of the great majority was to disappear without posterity: this was the objective condition of their optimal exploitation. Captured as adolescents by means of *camisados*⁴, raids or wars of abduction, they would, when past their prime and sapped of their strength, be replaced by other young captives who had in their turn been abducted from the villages where they were born and raised. With all of their vital substance absorbed, vampirized by a class of foreign masters, these captives were forever lost to their kin.

In most slave-owning societies, however, a small minority of slaves, the *vernacles*, were authorized to mate and live together in a precarious household. They were denied the right to accumulate wealth, except for the sum required to purchase manumission from their masters. These vernacles made up a varying fraction of

the larger group of slaves who reproduced within slave-owning society; they formed a particular category that most slave-owning societies considered distinct and designated in terms such as "homeborn." The French term *vénaclé*, which once fulfilled this function and has now fallen into disuse, was derived from the Latin word *varna*, equivalent to the Greek *oikethes* (from *oikos* or house). This is an important but contradictory notion, for though it includes a mode of reproduction similar to that of a serf, the legal status of the vernacle remained that of a slave.

Let us recall the fundamental distinction between slavery and serfdom, two notions that are often confused. In slavery, the supply of slaves is replenished by the continually renewed process of confiscating the demographic increase of foreign populations, that is, by transferring individuals from the milieu that has nurtured them until they reach working age to a new milieu where they are exploited. In serfdom, on the other hand, the serfs' reproduction and support takes place within the society that exploits them, through the natural increase of a population that is subjugated but demographically constituted. The continually repeated process of raiding laborers who have already been nurtured and trained in foreign societies makes it possible to appropriate *all of the surplus labor (and therefore all of the surplus product)*⁵ during the slave's productive years, without assuming his cost of reproduction, since the slave will be replaced by another slave nourished and raised in his native community. Serfdom, on the other hand, allows the masters to keep only a "labor-rent" diminished by the portion of production necessary to maintain the serf and his offspring from the time of birth; moreover serfdom requires the maintenance of a population that is demographically balanced and large enough to engender the number of productive workers needed to replace the entire servile class. In my estimate, the replacement of a population held in serfdom would require a level of food production that is 40 percent higher than the level required in a slave-based society, and would therefore require a proportionately higher amount of arable land area.

In contrast, a population subjected to slavery can maintain its level of productive workers, without regard to maintaining balance in gender make-up, at half the level of a population subjected to serfdom.

The slave, who is displaced by forcible capture and acquisition, is the ultimate foreigner. As a result, he is utterly without rights or social state.⁶ This being said, the state of slavery could encompass a considerable range of individual conditions, to the extent that a slave might enjoy relative privileges (always subject to revocation) or be placed in a position of high trust – even in preference to members of the slave-owner’s family, whose rights and status as “free” men always meant that they represented potential rivals. A vernacle, preferably chosen by his master to occupy such a position, sometimes acquired certain precarious privileges (not rights), among which were those of land⁷ and a house⁸, of living quasi-conjugally and raising his female partner’s children, who would normally belong not to the mother’s partner but to her master. Vernacles might also enjoy the privilege of accumulating savings to buy their own freedom, as well as certain other possibilities of material acquisition. If these advantages were apt to bind vernacles to their masters, they also contributed to making them an auxiliary social body that was better educated and more firmly rooted in society, liable to supervise those who were slaves in the strictest sense of the word, but also more likely to make demands and, possibly, to revolt.⁹

It is clear, then, that the economic limitations on slavery were determined less by productive relations – which were often similar to those endured by serfs – than by reproductive relations.

When slaves were bought from captors or intermediaries, the counterpart was not returned to the true “producers” of the slaves. The goods traded to the captors or merchants in return for the slaves (alcohol, weapons, luxury goods) had nothing in common with what made possible the birth and growth of human beings. These goods, completely detached from the necessities of human reproduction, were merely material and could be made by just about anyone. The demand for slaves was totally independent of the reproductive nature of what was offered in exchange. By offering the captors inert goods in exchange for living captives who had been abducted, the slave market could exert a demand that was disproportionate to the capacity for demographic reproduction of the raided populations, and could thus condemn these populations to extinction.

It is true that slavery allowed the exploiting classes to increase and diversify production and exchange, to participate in international commercial trends, to open up trade routes, and to create markets where not only slaves but a broadening array of commodities were sold. Consequently, the effects of the slave trade were not uniformly experienced throughout the continent. The slave-owning economy, built upon the plunder of human beings, was not demographically autonomous in terms of reproduction. Whereas demographic reproduction normally depends on a class of women of child-bearing age and on the population's capacity to feed a new generation of children until they reach maturity, the reproduction of slaves depended on the military success of plunderers, on their economic requirements, and on the buyers' ability to come up with the strictly material goods that the captors demanded in exchange. Once introduced into the slave-owning economy, slaves were reproduced at the rate of their production of the goods for which they were exchanged. A slave could thus produce his own commercial value in a few short years. The demand for slaves was further multiplied by the fact that anyone able to manufacture, or have made, the goods that were traded for slaves was in a position to appropriate life without having given birth to it, and to increase his holdings of human livestock independently of the laws of demography. A population that can replenish itself by purchasing a slave population is utterly different in social and sexual terms from one that reproduces by giving birth. Slaves were born of the production of commodities and became objects themselves. As soon as the commodities produced by slaves were disposed of on the market, the demand for slaves rose unremittingly. The capture of slaves became a continuous enterprise as the hunting grounds receded to distances often several months' travel away from the pillaging states that invaded them.

Despite the wealth acquired by local slave-trade profiteers, the process of accumulation rarely went beyond the stage of hoarding. Noble warrior classes did indeed reinvest in weapons and horses, but became profligate consumers of finery and barrels or bottles (*ancre*s and *rodome*s) of brandy or other forms of alcohol.¹⁰ Merchants and nobles wore sumptuous imported fabrics,¹¹ some from the Indies.¹² Mulatresses married to Europeans¹³, court favorites,

and the wives of rich merchants sported a variety of baubles and trinkets such as imitation pearls and glass beads.¹⁴ Evaluated in a host of local currencies,¹⁵ measured in “ounce-trade,”¹⁶ these forms of wealth were the ostentatious and ephemeral treasures of what remained by and large a mercantile economy. They were not conducive to investment in an expanding economy of production. Only the slavery practiced on plantations showed some similarity with the for-profit slavery of the Americas, which was itself transitory and supplanted by the capitalist wage system.

A decisive limit to slavery was to be reached with the demographic exhaustion of the raided populations, requiring expeditions to travel ever further and reducing their profits. The shift towards serfdom in early Medieval Europe, and towards wage-slavery in contemporary America, heralded the end of slavery as a system of exploitation, in favor of other forms of servitude or alienation.

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The slave trade made absolutely no contribution to the development of Africa, whether in demographic terms (it radically impoverished the peasant population) or in economic terms (it enriched a class of self-serving local entrepreneurs). The slave trade decimated the rural working population; it polarized the local economy over mercantilist rather than productive activities. Still worse, since this mercantilist economy had been founded upon the violent extraction of young adults – the continent’s most valuable resource – from their native societies, and on their deportation overseas by the millions, the precious labor power of these men and women was used as a low-cost means of launching a budding capitalist economy whose later imperialism, in its colonial form, was to make further inroads on their descendants. At the same time as the black slave trade fed the expansion and hegemony of the Euro-American economy by selling off the children of Africa, it sowed the seeds of future suffering in the African economy.

Translated from the French by Jennifer Curtiss Gage.

Notes

1. Capitaine Binger, *Du Niger au golfe de Guinée* (Paris, 1892).
2. Variouslly *Cabessaire*, *Cabecherre*, *Capchère*, etc. (from the Portuguese *caboceiro*, in the *Crónica de Guiné*, ca. 1452, *cabecera*): a person serving as middleman in transactions with European merchants. R. Mauny, *Glossaire des expressions et termes locaux employés dans l'Ouest africain* (Dakar, 1952).
3. In the context of the slave trade, the term "captive" refers to those individuals who had been captured but not yet sold to a master whom they would serve as slaves. Exported captives were also known as "pieces of India."
4. *Camisado*: An armed attack carried out at night or dawn in order to take the enemy by surprise.
5. *Surplus product*: the product available above and beyond the quantity necessary for the producer's subsistence; *surplus labor*: the labor available above and beyond that which is necessary to maintain the worker.
6. I use the term "state," rather than "status," to designate this legal and social void in which the slave is suspended.
7. A vernacle had precarious access to a small plot of land, which he worked to produce all or part of his own food.
8. A vernacle was authorized to reside in a small dwelling with a woman and possibly with her offspring.
9. In this regard, we might wonder whether in North America, where by 1750 the demographic reproduction of slaves had reached a higher ratio than in many other slave-owning countries, vernacles did not make up the majority of the servile population. Although their masters treated them as inferior and dependent beings, the insurgent men and women referred to as "slaves" - who were often literate and educated - would seem to belong rather to the category of venacles.
10. Mauny's *Glossaire des expressions et termes locaux employés dans l'Ouest africain* (see note 2) defines an *ancre* as a small barrel with a capacity of approximately 50 liters; a *rodomie* is a pint bottle of brandy (1685).
11. Ibid. Mauny's list of terms for these fabrics includes *platilles*, *acrocs*, *anabas*, *bretagnes*, *siamoises*, *sucretons*, and *guinéés*.
12. Ibid. These included *caladary*, *Bajutapeaux*, *birampot*, *zingua*, *neganepaux*, *salapoury*.
13. Ibid. *Signare* (from the Portuguese *senhora* meaning lady): "An unmarried mulatress, living conjugally with a European."
14. Mauny's *Glossaire* supplies the French terms for some of these adornments: *tacou*, *olivettes*, *verrots et bevises*, *conte carbé*, *galets*, *margriette et pesans*.
15. For a list of currencies, see Mauny, *Glossaire*.
16. K. Polanyi, *Primitive, Archaic and Modern Economies* (New York, 1968), pp. 261-279.