The rise to prominence of analyses of racial capitalism, building in particular on Cedric Robinson’s *Black Marxism*, along with the work of earlier figures such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Oliver Cromwell Cox, represents a breakthrough in Marxian theory. This has necessarily been accompanied by a critique of previous Marxian analyses, which all too often ignored or minimized the relation of slavery to capitalism. In recent years, however, these criticisms of orthodox Marxist treatments of slavery have been extended, much more problematically, to the work of Karl Marx himself, who is sometimes said to have systematically circumvented and downplayed the question of the significance of slave labor for capitalist development, seeing the issue of slavery as largely confined to the mercantilist era of “so-called primitive accumulation” and the height of the transatlantic slave trade. Slavery continued to exist, it is suggested, but Marx excised it from his analysis of capital itself.

Thus, historian Stephanie Smallwood, author of *Saltwater Slavery*, has written that “we have long since dismissed Marx’s misunderstanding of slavery” as a historical “error,” which led him “to hold New World slavery apart from capitalism.” Likewise, Walter Johnson, historian of U.S. slavery and author of *River of Dark Dreams*, contends in his influential article “The Pedestal and the Veil: Rethinking the Capitalism/Slavery Question” that Marx “simply evaded” the whole “question of slavery” in his critique of capital, adhering to the “foundational exclusion of the fact of slavery from the framing of political economy” that characterized the work of classical-liberal economics.

Yet, Marx is not easily set aside in any serious attempt to develop an analysis of racial capitalism. Thus, after arguing that Marx had largely excluded the question of slavery in *Capital*, Johnson indicates that we still “have an enormous amount to learn from what Marx had to tell us about the work of capitalists as we try to diagram the historical interconnections and daily practices of the global economy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.” But this admission on his part raises the question

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of what a much more comprehensive look at Marx’s work as a whole, informed by his entire historical-materialist frame of analysis and the underlying structure of his critique of political economy, would reveal. Such a method entails going beyond singling out a few select passages in the first volume of *Capital* and placing them in a much wider and deeper context. Indeed, we argue in what follows that Marx still has a great deal to offer in the analysis of slavery, and especially of “slavery’s capitalism.”

It is worth noting that Marx’s treatment of slavery or slave labor systems is wide-ranging and profound, encompassing, in varying detail, such elements as ancient Greek and Roman slavery; the question of the slave mode of production; debt slavery; the enslavement of Native Americans; child slavery; domestic slavery; slavery in England under Edward VI; slavery in the Dutch East Indies; the transatlantic slave trade; the rise of slavery as a “second type of colonialism”; torture under slavery; slavery as the basis of the Industrial Revolution; slave rebellions; the Haitian Revolution; the “Slave Power” in the U.S. South; the Dred Scott decision; the Kansas-Missouri border war of 1854–56; John Brown; Harriet Beecher Stowe; abolitionism; the revolutionary struggle of freed Black soldiers in the Civil War; and the complex historical relations between slave labor and wage labor. Marx’s analysis of slaveowner capitalism in the antebellum South examined the capitalization of the anticipated surplus value generated by slave labor as the basis of a distinctive system of accumulation, including its role in the development of capitalist management. He explored the ecological destruction and expansionism built into the very nature of the “peculiar institution.”

In his political organization within the British labor movement, Marx played a key role, as witnessed by Henry Adams, in mobilizing workers to prevent the country from entering into the U.S. Civil War on the side of the Confederacy. As the leading figure in the International Working Men’s Association, he corresponded with presidents Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Johnson. In his role as the correspondent for the *New York Daily Tribune* and later *Die Presse* in Vienna, he supported the revolutionary abolitionist movement in the United States and the North in its war with the Slave South, writing more than forty published newspaper articles on slavery and the U.S. Civil War in 1861 and 1862 (along with numerous others that were not published and are not extant). No other major thinker of his time wrote so variously on slavery when his whole body of work is taken into account, and perhaps none, except Frederick Douglass, commented so profoundly on U.S. slavery. As Roger Ransom and Richard Sutch observed in the opening sentence of their classic article “Capitalists Without Capital,” “Karl Marx recognized the capitalist nature of American slavery long before American historians.”

Although Marx never wrote a treatise on slavery, the issue of slave labor was woven into his analysis of social formations, both ancient and modern, and was inextricably intertwined with his treatment of wage labor. Marx’s studies of slavery under capitalism came to a head in the late 1850s and early ’60s when he was simultaneously considering slavery, often on a daily basis, engaging with the issue politically (including helping organize meetings of the British working class in support of the North in the U.S. Civil War), and writing the manuscripts (*The Economic Manuscript of 1861–1863* and the *Economic Manuscript of 1864–1865*) that would be the basis of *Capital*. Marx began the actual drafting of volume one of *Capital* in January–February 1866, after the slave power in the United States had already been defeated, a victory over slavery that is celebrated in the preface to that work.

The result was the formation in Marx’s work of a unique understanding of slaveowner capitalism as a variant of capitalism and colonialism. In fact, he understood slaveowner capitalism as the product of a second colonialism, rooted in the plantation economy. This second colonialism, he recognized, had immense implications for capitalist development. In relation to the antebellum South, Marx wrote, “where the capitalist conception prevails, as on American plantations,” slavery takes the form of the production of “surplus value…conceived as profit” on the backs of the slaves.

Marx of course was aware that these fundamental issues did not automatically come to an end when the slave power in the United States was finally defeated. As Du Bois declared in *Black Reconstruction*: “In 1865, September, another address [this time to the American people as a whole] over the signature of Marx declared boldly: ‘Injustice against a fraction of your people having been followed by such dire consequences, put an end to it. Declare your fellow citizens from this day forth free and equal, without any reserve. If you refuse them citizens’ rights while you exact
from them citizens’ duties, you will sooner or later face a new struggle which will once more drench your country in blood.”

The Pedestal and the Veil

Perhaps the most incisive criticism of Marx on slavery in the last couple of decades is Johnson’s “The Pedestal and the Veil,” in which it is pointed out that in most accounts “slavery serves as an un-theorized historical backdrop to the history of capitalism, an un-thought (even when present) past to the inevitable emergence of the present.” According to Johnson, Marx was particularly to blame in steering the critique of slavery in the wrong direction in this respect. In his treatment of slavery in his chapter on “The Genesis of the Industrial Capitalist” in volume one of *Capital*, Marx pronounced, “In fact the veiled slavery of the wage-labourers in Europe needed the unqualified slavery of the New World as its pedestal.” Most readers of the pedestal and veil passage, as Johnson indicates, would undoubtedly have seen it as a statement on the historical importance of slavery for the development of capitalism. Turning this on its head, however, Johnson insists that the real meaning of Marx’s metaphor was structural and spatial: that naked, unqualified slavery in his analysis was significant only insofar as it pointed to the “veiled slavery” of wage labor, which then attained supreme importance.

The notion that Marx might have created a dialectical metaphor designed to highlight the historical significance of direct slavery as a crucial element in capitalist development, while also pointing, after the U.S. Civil War had concluded, to the continuing indirect slavery of wage labor, is simply not considered in Johnson’s account. Yet, Marx’s actual focus on slavery in and of itself is abundantly clear when the passage is read in context. Thus, Marx footnoted the pedestal and veil statement with a citation to Brougham’s *An Inquiry into the Colonial Policy of the European Powers*, indicating that “in 1790 there were in the English West Indies ten slaves to one free man, in the French fourteen to one, and in the Dutch twenty three to one.” On the same page, Marx indicated that the direct dependence of the British Industrial Revolution on New World slavery could be seen in the growth in the number of slave ships: “In 1730 Liverpool employed 15 ships in the slave trade; in 1751, 53; in 1760, 74; in 1770, 96; and in 1792, 132.” In the dozen pages preceding this in the same chapter, he referred to “the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population” of the Americas, “the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blacksins,” slavery in the Dutch East Indies and in the West Indies, and the commercialization of slavery in the United States.
Given the depth with which he approached the issue of the slave trade here as well as elsewhere in his analysis, Marx could hardly be said to be referring to slavery, as Johnson contends, simply for “rhetorical effect” in a critique of wage labor.19 A statement that literally and figuratively emphasized how the capitalism of wage labor rested on the capitalism of slave labor is turned, in Johnson’s interpretation, on its veiled head. It is as if the pedestal itself was meant to stand, in Marx’s eyes, for a mere pedestal and not for material relations. Johnson’s “The Pedestal and the Veil” has subsequently been cited by other scholars in the analysis of racial capitalism as evidence that Marx downgraded the reality of New World slavery.20

Given the importance of these issues, it is worthwhile to consider the classical origins of the pedestal and veil metaphor. Marx, who was a leading scholar in ancient Greek and Roman thought, knew the work of Plutarch backward and forward, including Plutarch’s *Moralia*, which he referred to in his dissertation. He was therefore well acquainted with Plutarch’s description of the statue of Isis, goddess of nature, that the ancient Greek philosopher saw in Sais, Egypt, with the famous, enigmatic inscription on its pedestal: “I am all that has been, and is, and shall be, and my robe [often translated as veil] no mortal has yet uncovered.”21 In the Enlightenment, it became customary to depict a statue of a veiled Isis on a pedestal, with the rendering of the veil constituting a symbol of enlightenment itself and the discovery of material nature. G. W. F. Hegel commenced his *Philosophy of Nature* by referring to the inscription on the pedestal of the veiled Isis, arguing against the notion of the inscrutable noumena that the veil could be torn aside to uncover the sensuous reality and true meaning of nature necessary for the development of the absolute idea.22

In referring to the pedestal and veil metaphor, Marx was therefore transforming a metaphor known to all educated persons in his time, using it to reassert the materialist critique and emphasize that all “civilization” (or class society), including its latest form under capitalism, had been built on slavery. Wage labor under capitalism, or “veiled slavery,” symbolized by the African goddess Isis, came into being materially and was dependent for its material foundations on the naked slavery formed by the transatlantic slave trade. None of this downplayed the horrors of slavery or its historical importance in the development of capitalism. More than simply a “rhetorical effect” or an attempt to discount the significance of slavery proper, by relegating it to a pedestal, Marx was emphasizing that slavery constituted the material form upon which the industrial proletariat itself had emerged, and that the legacy of slavery would persist through a long era of reconstruction and class struggle. It was thus foundational to the critique of capital, which was about the whip as well as wages, the plantation as well as the factory.23
Marx’s analysis of slavery evolved in definite stages from the 1840s to the 1860s, moving from a consideration in the 1840s of capitalism’s dependency on slavery, to a notion of slaveowner capitalism in the 1850s, and to a mature political economy of slavery in the 1860s in the years of the U.S. Civil War. Nevertheless, his emphasis on what he conceived of as the second colonialism associated with the plantation economy, which he stressed was an integral part of the historical development of capitalism, is continuous throughout his analysis. As he wrote as early as 1847 in *The Poverty of Philosophy*: “Direct slavery is just as much the pivot of bourgeois industry as machinery, credits, etc. Without slavery you have no cotton; without cotton you have no modern industry. It is slavery that gave the colonies their value; it is the colonies that created world trade, and it is world trade that is the pre-condition of large-scale industry. Thus, slavery is an economic category of the greatest importance.”

Central to Marx’s treatment of modern slavery was the recognition of the absolutely horrific nature of slaveowner capitalism, which made it worse than all other forms of slavery known in history. The “lash” and the “barter of human flesh” were especially integral parts of New World capitalist exploitation. Marx explained that the history of civilization took its most “frightful” forms where slavery was combined with commercialism (for example, in the ancient mines for precious metals described by Diodorus Siculus). This was particularly the case where slave labor was embedded within “a situation of capitalist production; thus, for example, the southern states of the American Union.”

A crucial concern was the high mortality rates of slave labor under the capitalist plantation system. Slavery by its very nature, for Marx, took the form of continual violence and the perpetual fear of torture and premature death. Slaves were both capital assets and labor. The rules of profit maximization in the slave economy, when there was an active slave trade capable of very rapid replacement of human chattel, led to the frequent application of a seven years rule, viewed by the planters as the average life of their slaves, on which their computations of value were based. Slaves were so overworked in Jamaica and other British colonies that their lives were generally consumed in seven years. For the slave-owning capitalist, it was of relatively little significance if the turnover of slaves through premature exhaustion of their working lives and existence took place as long as they were easily replaceable. Furthermore, under slave production, it was possible to work slaves more intensively, superexploiting them, than in the case of wage labor.

As Marx exclaimed, “If the overwork extends over a long period the worker will perhaps only preserve himself and therefore his labour ca-
pacity for 7 years instead of the 20 or 30 years for which he might otherwise have preserved it.” In the case of slave labor, such conditions were prevalent, as opposed to even the most extreme forms of free wage labor. “The slaves in the southern states of North America had to perform to separate the cotton wool from its seed, after they had worked in the fields for 12 hours, [which] reduced their average life expectancy to 7 years.”

He quoted an article condemning the Virginia and Carolina planters from the Daily Telegraph in 1860, in which it was asked: “What can be thought of a town which holds a public meeting to petition that the period of labour for men [slaves] shall be diminished to 18 hours a day?”

In a similar condemnation of the disregard for human lives, Marx remarked that the shipment of so-called Chinese “coolies” to the Chincha islands off the coast of Peru to dig guano in the 1850s was a condition even “worse than slavery.” While their contracts generally specified eight years of labor, 100 percent of the guano diggers failed to live to the end of their contracts. As the Times of London reported in 1882, “The horrors to which the Chinese coolies were formerly exposed were worse than the worst excesses of American slavery. In 1860 it was believed that not one of...the four thousand Chinese coolies who had been shipped to those islands since the trade began, in 1844, had survived, all those who had not died of exhaustion had put themselves voluntarily to death.”

Such conditions of overwork, and grossly reduced life expectancy, prevailed in the West Indies prior to the elimination of the slave trade, and later in the slave plantations of the U.S. South when incorporated in a major way into the world capitalist economy with the development of the cotton industry and the Industrial Revolution in Britain. As Marx put it, referring to both the U.S. South and the West Indies,

Considerations of economy...once trading in slaves is practiced, become reasons for racking to the uttermost the toil of the slave; for, when his place can at once be supplied from foreign preserves, the duration of his life becomes a matter of less moment than its productiveness while it lasts. It is accordingly a maxim of slave management, in slave importing countries [such as the antebellum United States – legally before 1808, illegally after], that the most effective economy is that which takes out of the human chattel in the shortest space of time the utmost amount of exertion it is capable of putting forth. It is in tropical culture, where annual profits often equal the whole capital of plantations, that negro life is most recklessly sacrificed. It is the agriculture of the West Indies, which has been for centuries prolific of fabulous wealth, that has engulfed millions of the African race. It is Cuba, at this day, whose revenues are reckoned by millions, and whose planters are princes, that we see in the servile class, the coarsest fare, the most exhausting and unremitting toil, and even the absolute destruction of a portion of its numbers every year.
In this sense, slavery under capitalism was far more brutal, in Marx’s view, than anything ever seen before in human history. As “the export of cotton became of vital interest to those states [the Southern United States], the over-working of the Negro, and sometimes the consumption of his life in seven 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 [as in earlier more patriarchal forms of slavery], but rather of the production of surplus-value itself.”

Marx studied Carey’s *The Slave Trade, Domestic and Foreign*, which, after providing detailed statistics on the importation of slaves in the various British West Indian colonies, and their birth and death rates, had declared that “we...find ourselves forced to the conclusion that slavery was here attended with a destruction of life almost without a parallel in the history of any civilized nation.” As Marx noted, the mortality rate of slaves in the West Indies was so high that the slave population actually declined in many areas despite the massive importation of slaves, of which as many as “two-thirds of the number annually imported perished.”

Not only was such “absolute destruction” of the slaves, as Marx put it, a consequence of slavery, in the West Indies and in parts of Latin America, but it was accompanied by the most inhuman tortures on top of the “whip of the slave driver.” Thus, he referred to the use of the “spanso bocko—one of the most cruel forms of punishment...used by the colonists in Surinam,” as depicted in John Gabriel Stedman’s *Narrative of a Five Years’ Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* and recounted by Comte in his *Traité de législation*. In Marx’s words, a slave was “trussed up in the spanso bocko torture of Surinam, unable to move hand or foot, or any other of his limbs, and has to put up with everything done to him.” Here he cited Comte on the defiance of slaves under such torture, pointing to how they “scoff at their torturers” and “jeer at the latter’s impotence even to force them to humble themselves, and they suppress every ‘groan’ and every sigh, as long as the physical pain permits them to do so.” In various parts of his work, Marx alluded to the slave revolts and revolutions in Suriname, Haiti, and the United States, and the existence of runaways who banded together, determined to resist the “barbaric horrors of slavery.” Marx also took note of the post-slavery revolts and colonial brutality in Jamaica. Commenting on Howitt’s discussion of the barbarities of settler colonialism and Comte’s accounts of torture under West Indian slavery, Marx observed in *Capital*: “This stuff ought to be studied in detail, to see what the bourgeois makes of himself and of the world when he can model the world according to his own image without interreference” as under colonialism and slavery.
It was the rapid “consumption” of the slave—as it was referred to by political economists at the time—that, in Marx’s view, made the perpetuation of the world slave trade necessary for as long as possible, if the capitalist slave system was to persist. Through his reading of Buxton’s *The African Slave and Its Remedy* and Cairnes’s *The Slave Power*, Marx was well aware that the transatlantic slave trade continued illegally even with the British abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and the U.S. banning of the trade in 1808. He quoted Stephen Douglas as saying in 1859, “During the last year more Negroes have been imported from Africa than ever before in any single year, even at the time the slave trade was still legal.” Moreover, in the United States, Marx stressed, another solution had also come into being: the active breeding of slaves in the border states such as Virginia and Kentucky, providing the slave labor for the remainder of the South. As a result, well into the 1860s, the absolute *expropriation* of human beings through slavery remained the pedestal of the system, the basis on which arose the veiled *exploitation* of wage labor.

**The Political Economy of Slaveowner Capitalism**

It was not until the late 1850s in the *Grundrisse* and the 1860s in his *Economic Manuscript of 1861–1863* and *Capital* that Marx, as a result of his studies of political economy, was able to develop a full critique of the exploitation of slave labor under modern capitalism. It was in this period that he solidified his view of slaveowner capitalism as a particular form of capitalism, resulting from a “second type” of colonialism. For Marx, and for classical political economists in general, colonialism proper (in Spanish *colono/a* means settler), insofar as it pertained to labor, was usually associated with the violent occupation of land by free laborers and peasant proprietors engaged primarily in local and subsistence production. But a second colonialism, not to be confused with colonialism proper, also emerged, equally bathed in blood, in the form of the slave-plantation economy. As he put it in *Theories of Surplus Value*:

In the second type of colonies—plantations—where commercial speculations figure from the start and production is intended for the world market, the capitalist mode of production exists, although only in a formal sense, since the slavery of Negroes precludes free wage-labour, which is the basis of capitalist production [as a whole]. But the business in which slaves are used is conducted by capitalists. The method of production which they introduce has not arisen out of slavery but is grafted on it. In this case, the same person is capitalist and landowner.

New World plantation slavery, Marx specified, was capitalist in form and carried out by capitalists connected to the world economy, but it was not
the primary form of capitalism, which was necessarily based on the expropriation of wage labor, on which the entire value structure of capitalism was erected. “Slavery,” he wrote in the Grundrisse, “is possible at individual points within the bourgeois system of production...only because it does not exist at other points; and appears as an anomaly opposite the bourgeois system itself.... The fact that we now not only call the plantation owners in America capitalists, but they are capitalists, is based on their existence as anomalies within a world market based on free labour.”

Marx’s position in this respect was similar to that provided by Orlando Patterson, who explained: “Capitalism, which is exclusively a product of the modern world, has two major variants: the ‘free variant’ characterized by the sale of the worker’s labour on the labour market; and the slave variant found in the Americas up to the closing decades of the 19th century, in the...Dutch East Indies between the late 17th and mid-19th centuries, and in the Indian Ocean slave colonies of the 18th and 19th centuries.” Capitalism based on wage labor, Patterson stated, was “admittedly the most advanced” of these two forms. Indeed, in Marx’s view, the slave variant of capitalism existed only insofar as it was an integral part of a larger world capitalist system, rooted in wage labor. Yet, as Patterson indicated, in line with Marx, “the capitalist is often (though not always) able to extract a higher level of surplus value from the slave by forcing him to produce more than he would were he free, and by reducing his costs of reproduction.”

To understand the nature of Marx’s critique here, it is necessary to recognize that the law of value of capitalism underlying classical political economy was dependent on a conception of equal exchange and formally free labor and could not have slavery as its basis. Aristotle’s brilliant analysis of the commensurate value underlying the commodity in his Nicomachean Ethics fell short, Marx argued, because, living in a society “founded on the labour of slaves,” he was unable to grasp the basis of commodity-value in labor, which depended on a conception of “equal human labour and therefore...labour of equal quality.” It is only with capitalism that the concept of abstract labor based on a notion of the equality of labor comes to the fore. This is not a minor matter because all bourgeois political economy, along with the entire logic of capitalist valorization, required wage labor as its basis.

For this reason, although slaveowner capitalism clearly existed and had definite historical importance, in Marx’s view, it could not constitute the laws of motion of capital as a whole, but rather could only fully develop and prosper on capitalist terms in a context in which wage labor was the predominant form. The expropriation of human beings associated
with slavery was thus connected to capitalist wage labor in the form of a “struggle of enemy brothers.” In the case of slaveowner capitalism, there was no pretense of equal exchange. Rather, it rested on sheer power, or, as Sven Beckert calls it, “war capitalism.”

In Marx’s day, slaveowner capitalism represented a conflict at the barbaric heart of the capitalist system itself. In January 1860, Marx wrote to Frederick Engels: “In my opinion, the most momentous thing happening in the world today is the slave movement — on the one hand, in America, started by the death of [John] Brown, and in Russia, on the other [with regard to serfs]…. I have just seen in the [New York] Tribune that there’s been another slave revolt in Missouri, which was put down, needless to say. But the signal has now been given.” Marx therefore engaged in an intensive study of the political economy of the slave question in the context of writing articles for the New York Tribune and later Die Presse, as well as in his economic notebooks, that were to be the basis of Capital. Here Marx relied on a wide number of works, but the single most important treatise on which he drew for his analysis of the system of accumulation in the U.S. slave South was J. E. Cairnes’s The Slave Power, delivered as a series of lectures in 1861 and published as a book in 1862.

Key to Marx’s whole understanding of slave-based accumulation in the U.S. South was his notion that, under slaveowner capitalism in its most developed form on “American plantations,” the “entire surplus-value” produced by the slaves “is conceived as profit…. [As] the price that is paid for the slave is no more than the anticipated and capitalized surplus-value or profit that is to be extracted from him” over his working life. Unlike the “free wage worker” who has “no value” (as opposed to the value of the worker’s labor power), the “slave…has exchange value, a value” and represents a future stream of value, “a piece of capital.” The economics of this meant that the working of slave labor was regulated, as in machinery, in terms of capital consumption, its “wear and tear,” its availability, and the cost of replacements. Nevertheless, the slave, whose initial price was based on a working life of twenty years, was often “overworked,” that is, consumed as a working instrument in seven years, as opposed to twenty, in order to maximize the slave’s production of surplus value in the shortest time. It was also common in this system, Marx emphasized, for slave owners to borrow money upon their slaves as capital assets, hence securities on which to obtain, and to rent them to other capitalists. “What Marx…understood,” as Ransom and Sutch pointed out, was that the slave holding existed to make a profit for the owner. The entire labor product of the slave and family, above whatever provision for
food and other necessities the owner cared to make was expropriated. That residual was the owner’s profit and the expectation of a continued flow of such returns made slave property an earning asset. The price paid for a slave reflected the consensus of the buyer and seller concerning the potential value of the continuous stream of profits that could be extracted from the slave and, in the case of a female, from her descendants as well.56

Marx’s analysis thus led him to differ from other political economists and critics of slavery in his time, such as Adam Smith, who argued that slave labor was uneconomic and unable to compete with wage labor.57 In contrast, Marx pointed to the vast surplus labor expropriated from slaves, and the fact that the slaves themselves were a form of capital asset, forming the basis of fictitious or speculative capital.58 Therefore, there seemed to be little doubt, in his estimation, that the plantation economy of the antebellum South was, as far as economic concerns alone were considered, enormously profitable, including the market for the breeding of slaves. As Engels indicated in Anti-Dühring, the reason that only force could remove slavery from the slave breeding and slave consuming states of the South was that production on this basis paid, and thus it would not simply die of its own accord on economic grounds.59

In order to be profitable on a capitalist basis, slave production required a form of production suitable for slave labor.60 Marx explained that the essential element of slave labor was that it was based on force and required continuous external compulsion, requiring the whip of the overseer. Slavery was characterized first of all for Marx by what he called “a relation of domination.” As Patterson has commented in this respect, “Marx not only shows clearly that he understands that slavery, on an institutional level, is first and foremost a ‘relation of domination,’ but identifies the element of direct force which distinguishes it.”61 Because it was directly forced labor, Marx indicated, slaves were engaged in a constant, if not active, resistance. Their laboring conditions lacked their consent; more so under capitalist production where they were forced to work intensively and for inordinate hours, threatening their own corporeal existence. “Forced labour,” Marx wrote, “can never create general industriousness.”62 The resistance of slaves evident in all of their actions, extending at times to slave revolts, and the fear this engendered in their masters, were the primary reasons that it was prohibited to educate slaves, particularly in the South, which meant that they remained almost entirely unskilled labor.

These conditions combined to limit the forms in which slaves could profitably be employed, in comparison to wage labor. Wage labor, Marx argued, was distinguished from slave labor in its flexibility and versatility. Slave labor, in contrast, because continuous force was required, could only be effectively employed in certain forms of production.63 The key
limit here, as Marx argued, following Cairnes, had to do with the costs of superintendence. “The greater this [class] opposition” and the greater the degree to which labor has to be forced, Marx wrote, “the greater the role that this work of supervision plays. It reaches its high point in the slave system” under capitalism. Indeed, “the overseer with his whip was necessary to production…on the basis of slavery.”64 Slave labor was uneconomical if dispersed in any way, due to the level of slave resistance, since it would be removed from direct coercion and the whip of the overseer. Nevertheless, slave labor was especially suitable to centralized large-scale production in gangs on monocultural plantations where the costs of the labor of superintendence could be kept down, and where only forced labor could be employed on that scale and with that physical intensity.

Marx thus considered the supervision of plantation labor under slaveowner capitalism as the representation of a more developed form of capitalist management, anticipating practices that would arise within large-scale industry. Consequently, he marked the passages in his copy of Cairnes’s Slave Power addressing this issue and frequently referred to them. As Cairnes wrote, “the economic advantages of slavery are easily stated: they are all comprised in the fact that the employer of slaves has absolute power over his workmen, and enjoys the disposal of the whole fruits of their labour. Slave labour, therefore, admits of the most complete organization, that is to say, it may be combined on an extensive scale, and directed by a controlling mind to a single end, and its cost can never rise above that which is necessary to maintain the slave in health and strength.” In agriculture, the slave system organized on the basis of capitalist plantation agriculture was economically superior to peasant proprietorship geared primarily to subsistence production: “Peasant proprietorship…does not admit of combination and classification of labour in the same degree as that of slavery,” though superior in respect to individual industry.65 In many ways, as both Cairnes and Marx recognized, plantation slavery, therefore, was highly competitive with other forms of production under capitalism, insofar as it took the form of large-scale, combined production on plantations, including the extreme intensity that could be imposed on slave labor in these circumstances.

If there was little doubt for Marx that slave-based accumulation in plantation capitalism was effective economically, it clearly remained a labor-intensive form of industry and was less conducive to industrialization, because capital was invested in slaves rather than physical capital, while slave production was not conducive to factory work. It also had the effect, as in all slave societies, of casting aspersions on manual labor. The slave economy in the United States around 1860 consisted, as Cairnes and Marx in-
dicated, of three hundred thousand slave owners, four million slaves, and another five million free white laborers, mostly engaged in subsistence production. Industrial growth in the South was much less than the North, as could be seen in the rise of railroad capital primarily in the latter.66

More important in undermining Southern slavery, however, was the rapid ecological degradation that its monocultural plantation agriculture represented. In the work of such thinkers as Merivale, Cairnes, Olmsted, Carey, Johnston, and Marx himself, a major critique of the political economy of slavery in the South was an ecological one: the slave plantation system rapidly exhausted the soil, as a consequence of the metabolic rift in the soil nutrient cycle, requiring new lands to maintain production and profits.67 This led to a violent westward and (southward) movement driven principally by the slave power’s need to expand slaveowner capitalism, encompassing the Trail of Tears, the three Seminole Wars, the seizure of Texas, and the Mexican-American War.68

The foremost thinker in presenting this ecological analysis was the agricultural chemist Johnston, a member of the Royal Society. Johnston in his Notes on North America, which Marx studied in depth, emphasized that Virginia had exhausted its soil through slave plantation agriculture and had become dependent on breeding slaves for the slave consuming states of the South. The general trend in the South (as distinct from the North) was from richer soils that had been exhausted to poorer soils to the West, creating an almost desperate need for new soils and an attempt to obtain new lands for slavery as far west as California.69 Cairnes pointed to the destructive nature of monocrop agriculture practiced on the slave plantations, with, therefore, no “rotation of crops”:

The soil is tasked again and again to yield the same product, and the inevitable result follows. After a short series of years its fertility is completely exhausted, the planter abandons the ground which he has rendered worthless, and passes on to seek new soils for that fertility under which alone the agencies at his disposal can be profitably employed. Even in Texas, before it had yet been ten years under the dominion of this devastating [slave] system, Mr. Olmsted tells us that the spectacle so familiar and so melancholy in all the older Slave States was already not unfrequently seen by the traveler—an abandoned plantation of ‘worn out’ fields with its little village of dwellings, now a home only for wolves and vultures.”

Slave cultivation, therefore, precluding the conditions of rotation of crops or skillful [soil] management, tends inevitably to exhaust the land of a country, and consequently requires for its permanent success not merely a fertile soil but a practically unlimited extent of it.70

For Marx himself, who had been developing his theory of metabolic rift at this time together with his critique of slavery, there was absolutely no
The question of the material flaw that generated the crisis for the slavocracy in the United States, leading to the Civil War. As he wrote in “The North American Civil War” in October 1861,

The cultivation of the Southern export articles, cotton, tobacco, sugar, etc., carried on by slaves, is only remunerative as long as it is conducted with large gangs of slaves, on a mass scale and on wide expanses of a naturally fertile soil, which requires only simple labor. Intensive cultivation, which depends less on the fertility of the soil than the investment of capital, intelligence and energy of labor, is contrary to the nature of slavery. Hence the rapid transformation of states like Maryland and Virginia, which formerly employed slaves on the production of export articles, into states which raised slaves in order to export these slaves into the deep South. Even in South Carolina, where the slaves form four-sevenths of the population, the cultivation of cotton has been almost completely stationary for years due to the exhaustion of the soil. Indeed, by force of circumstances South Carolina has already been transformed in part into a slave-raising state, since it already sells slaves to the sum of four million dollars yearly to the states of the extreme South and Southwest. As soon as this point is reached, the acquisition of new territories becomes necessary, so that one section of the slaveholders may occupy new, fertile lands and that a new market for slave-raising, therefore for the sale of slaves, may be created for the remaining section.71

The reality was that “a strict confinement of slavery within its old terrain…was bound according to economic law to lead to its gradual extinction,” whether by exhaustion of land, diminishing power in the U.S. government, instability among its own “poor white” population, and not least of all revolts by the slaves.72 As Johnson insightfully wrote in *Rivers of Dark Dreams*, “The hegemony of this single plant over the landscape of the Cotton Kingdom produced both a radical simplification of nature and a radical simplification of human being…. Cotton mono-cropping stripped the land of vegetation [and] leached out its fertility.”73 The ecological crisis of slave cotton plantation production explained, Marx suggested, the desperate aggression displayed by the South in the Kansas-Missouri border war (also known as the Bloody Kansas conflict) and in the attempts to send bands of Texans into New Mexico to seize that territory for the South.74 For Eugene Genovese in *The Political Economy of Slavery*, it was not so much the economic failure of the slave system that was its undoing but rather its “exhaustion of the soil,” leading to what Marx, following William Henry Seward, had called an “irrepressible conflict.”75

**Marx, the U.S. Civil War, and Black Reconstruction**

As Robin Blackburn has observed in *An Unfinished Revolution: Karl Marx and Abraham Lincoln*, Marx, at the time of the U.S. Civil War, “was focused
on destroying true chattel slavery, which he knew to be a critical component of the reigning capitalist order.” He viewed the conflict between the North and South at the time of the U.S. Civil War as a contest between “two species of capitalism—one allowing slavery the other not.” Marx played a key role in organizing the English working-class movement against the British government’s moves to intervene on the side of the Confederacy in the U.S. Civil War. His participation in the antislavery struggle was thus fully integrated with his overall critique of political economy. The extensive economic manuscripts that were to form the basis of *Capital* were written during the years of the U.S. Civil War. Marx commenced the drafting of the manuscript for volume one of *Capital* just as the slavocracy was defeated.

Marx’s numerous analyses of U.S. slavery and the U.S. Civil War were unique in seeing it as a revolutionary struggle that could only be won by revolutionary means, including the freeing of the slaves and the initiation of a “people’s war” against the slave power. According to Tom Jean-not in “Marx, Capitalism, and Race,”

Anticipating the “irrepressible conflict” (with William Seward), the trail Marx blazes leads from “the Kansas war” (1854–1856) to the raid on Harper’s Ferry (October 1859), to [the] Black revolt in Bolivar, Missouri (December 1859).... Against the standing temptation to trivialize or ignore the self-activity of Black slaves themselves, or else cast them as passive bystanders to the process of their own emancipation, Marx foresaw, in an obscure, little-noticed event in Missouri before the war began, the key to the future course of world events. Once the war was underway, he wrote to Engels, “A single Negro regiment would have a remarkable effect on Southern nerves” (August 1862).... In the same letter to Engels just quoted [August 7, 1862], Marx returns to a related point that governs his thinking about the progress and outcome of the Civil War as a whole: “The long and short of the story seems to me to be that a war of this kind must be conducted on revolutionary lines.”

Marx did not simply write about the war on slavery, but he also engaged directly in the political struggle. Although the U.S. Civil War coincided with the intense period in which he drafted the *Economic Manuscript of 1861–1863* and *Economic Manuscript of 1864–1865*, prior to drafting *Capital*, volume one, Marx, as Du Bois emphasized in “Karl Marx and the Negro,” played a role in the organization of the “monster mass meetings” late in 1862 and 1863 aimed at preventing Britain’s intervention on behalf of the slave South. On March 26, 1863, the biggest and most influential meeting of British workers was held in support of Union forces in the U.S. Civil War. The meeting packed James Hall in London with as many as three thousand workers attending. Henry Adams, who attended the meeting in
place of his father Charles Francis Adams, the U.S. ambassador, credited both Marx and Edward Beesly, a leading positivist, professor of history, and later sympathizer of the International Working Men’s Association, for organizing the meeting. The principal speaker was John Bright, a Quaker, free trader, and mill owner, who was a fervent opponent of slavery and had considerable admiration for Marx’s articles in the *New York Tribune*, and for whom Marx had some respect as an orator and a thinker. This and other massive working-class protests were credited by Marx, Charles Francis Adams, and many others with having put a stop to the British government’s plans to go to war.79

The political organization of the British workers in the antislavery struggle led to the development of the International Working Men’s Association under Marx’s leadership. In his “Inaugural Address” to the First International in September 1864, Marx heralded the international solidarity of the working class in England with the slave laborers in the U.S. South and with the North in the Civil War. He indicated that despite the Cotton Crisis emanating from the war, the workers had allied themselves, against their own direct interests, with the antislavery struggle and thus had “saved the west of Europe from plunging headlong into an infamous crusade for the perpetuation and propagation of slavery on the other side of the Atlantic.”80 In November 1864, Marx drafted the First International’s famous letter to Abraham Lincoln, congratulating him for his reelection and for the “matchless struggle for the rescue of an enchained race and the reconstruction of a social world,” putting a final end to the Confederacy’s cynical attempt to maintain “slavery to be ‘a beneficent institution,’ indeed the only solution of the great problem of ‘the relation of labor to capital.’” Lincoln was to reply favorably via Charles Francis Adams in a letter that created a stir in the British press.81

In May 1865, following Lincoln’s assassination and Andrew Johnson’s rise to the presidency, Marx drafted a letter from the International to Johnson, referring to the defeat of “the demon of the ‘peculiar institution,’” “the arduous task of political reconstruction,” and the “emancipation of labor.”82 This was followed in October 1865 with a letter from the First International over the signature of Marx and others addressed to the people of the United States, which in Du Bois’s view represented Marx’s deep concern over Reconstruction, and issued a grave warning: “Declare your fellow citizens [former slaves] from this day forth free and equal without reserve” or “a new struggle…will once more drench your country in blood.”83 Marx, however, soon realized the reactionary dangers that Johnson posed to Reconstruction. As Du Bois explains, Marx “stood with the Abolitionist democracy led by [Charles] Sumner and [Thaddeus] Stevens.”
Marx, following the radical Republican Benjamin Franklin Wade, declared that “the abolition of slavery” required “a radical change in the relation of capital and property in land” in the former slave states. Nevertheless, “the reaction,” he wrote to Engels in 1865, “has already begun in America.”

Faced with these reactionary tendencies, Marx continually looked for objective forces that would bring together Black and white workers. In a deservedly famous statement in *Capital* in 1867, Marx evoked the need for a broad labor alliance transcending race, now possible with the emancipation of the slaves: “Labour in a white skin can’t emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin…. A new life immediately arose with the death of slavery.” He still hoped for “a radical transformation in the existing relations of capital and landed property” in the South during Reconstruction. A decade later, troubled by the end of Reconstruction, along with the power of railway capital, Marx nevertheless wrote to Engels in 1877 of the possibility of a broad Black/white, peasant farmer/industrial worker alliance: “The policy of the new president [Rutherford B. Hayes] will turn the negroes, just as the big expropriations of land (EXACTLY OF FERTILE LAND) for the benefit of the RAILWAY, MINING, etc. companies will turn the peasants of the west—whose grumbling is already plainly audible—into militant allies of the [industrial] workers. So there’s a pretty fair storm brewing over there.”

Marx, however, did not manage to address further the new developments with respect to racial capitalism in the United States associated with Jim Crow. Thus, Du Bois wrote:

It was a great loss to American Negroes that the great mind of Marx and his extraordinary insight into industrial conditions could not have been brought to bear at first hand upon the history of the American Negro between 1876 and the World War. Whatever he said and did concerning the uplift of the working class must, therefore, be modified so far as Negroes are concerned by the fact that he had not studied at first hand their peculiar race problem here in America. Nevertheless, he did know the plight of the working class in England, France and Germany, and American Negroes must understand what his panacea was for those folk if they would see their way clearly in the future.

The “panacea” was of course socialism, which Du Bois, along with Marx, believed was a necessary part of the answer to the oppressions of race and class.

**The Veiled Face**

Both Marx and Du Bois were fascinated with Isis, and the imagery of the pedestal and the veil. Marx clearly saw the veiled Isis as an African
goddess, with the historical reality of the slave trade and the endless struggle for human freedom revealed in a lifting of her veil. For Du Bois, in “The Damnation of Women” in Darkwater, “Isis, the mother, is still titular goddess, in thought if not in name, of the dark continent,” whose veiled face is high above her pedestal. In his poem “Children of the Moon,” accompanying the chapter on “The Damnation of Women,” the veiled African Isis stood for “the blood-built way,” the struggle for Black freedom through the horrors of slavery:

Up! Up! The blood-built way;  
(Shadow grow vaster!  
Terror come faster!)  
Up! Up! to the blazing blackness  
Of one veiled face....

I rose upon the Mountain of the Moon  
I felt the blazing glory of the Sun;  
I heard the Song of Children crying, “Free!”  
I saw the Face of Freedom—  
And I died.

The secret of Isis, for Du Bois, like Marx, was the struggle for freedom beyond slavery, beyond “the damnation of women,” beyond wage labor, beyond racial capitalism—a struggle so great that it required permanent revolution.

Notes
2. The association of Marxism with the view that slavery and capitalism in the New World represented “two [economic] systems” and the view that this was the orthodox Marxian position was almost entirely due to the influential Marxian historian of the slave South Eugene Genovese. See Eugene Genovese, The Political Economy of Slavery (New York: Vintage, 1965); 17; Eugene D. Genovese and Elizabeth Fox Genovese, “The Slave Economies in Political Perspective,” Journal of American History 66, no. 1 (June 1979): 22. This same emphasis on two economic systems or modes of production in the nineteenth-century United States, “plantation slavery and capitalism,” can still be found in some analyses. For example, Nick Nesbitt, “The Slave Machine,” Six Archipelagos, July 9, 2019, 11–12. Yet, as John Clegg notes, “prior to Genovese most Marxists and Marxist-influenced writers followed Marx in viewing slave plantations as capitalist.” John Clegg, A Theory of Capitalist Slavery, Journal of Historical Sociology 33, no. 1 (2020): 76.
enslavement of Native Americans, see
_Capital_, vol. 1, 897, 915.

9. Philip Foner, _British Labor and the
American Civil War_ (New York: Holmes and

10. Roger Ransom and Richard Sutch,
"Capitalists without Capital: The Burden of
Slavery and the Impact of Emancipation,"
_Agricultural History_ 62, no. 3

11. Henry Brougham, _An Inquiry into the
Colonial Policy of the European Powers_
(Edinburgh: E. Balfour, Manners and
Miller, and Archibald Constable, 1803);
Thomas Stamford Raffles, _History of Java_
(London: John Murray, 1817); Thomas
Powell Buxton, _The African Slave Trade and Its
Remedy_ (London: John Murray, 1840);
Herman Merivale, _Lectures on
Colonization and Colonies_ (London:
Muston Co., 1841); Henry C. Carey, _The Slave
Trade, Domestic and Foreign_ (Philadelphia:
A. Hart, 1853); J. E. Cairnes, _The Slave
Power_ (New York: Follet Foster and Co., 1862);
François-Charles-Louis Comte, _Traité de législation, ou
exposition des lois générales suivant lesquelles les peuples prospèrent, déperissent ou restent stationnaire_, 3rd ed.
(1827; repr. Brussels: Hauman, Cattot et Comp, 1837). There are also
indications that Marx may have had some
familiarity with John Gabriel Stedman's
eighteenth-century bestseller _Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition Against the
Revolted Negroes of Surinam_ (1796,
engraved by William Blake) to which
Comte referred. See also David Mercer
Hart, _Class, Slavery, and the Industrial
Theory of History in French Liberal
Thought, 1814–1830: The Contribution of
Charles Comte and Charles Dunoyer_
(PhD dissertation, King's College, Cam-
bridge, June 1993).

12. Marx, _Capital_, vol. 1, 93; Hal Draper,
_The Marx-Engels Chronicle_ (New York:
Schocken, 1985), 130–31, 295; Karl
Marx, _Marx's Economic Manuscript of
1864–1865_ (Boston: Brill, 2015). In March
1865, as he was beginning to
draft volume one of _Capital_, Marx wrote
to Engels: "It seems all up with Confed-
eracy." Marx and Engels, _The Civil War in the
United States_, 158.

13. Marx, _Capital_, vol. 3 (London: Pen-

in America, 1860–1880_ (New York:
Athenaeum, 1992), 354. Note this was
Du Bois's own translation, which differs
slightly from the standard translation. See also W. E. B. Du Bois, "Karl Marx and
the Negro," in Marx and Fredrick Engels,
_Capital in the United States_, 218 (reprinted from _Crisis_ 40, no. 3 [March
1933]: 55–56).


16. Johnson, "The Pedestal and the Veil," 306. See the similar argument in
Dale Tomich, _Through the Prism of Slav-
ery_ (New York: Rowman and Littlefield,
2004), 23–24.

17. Marx, _Capital_, vol. 1, 925.


20. See Smallwood, "What Slavery Tells Us About Marx": J. Lorand Matory,
_The Fetish Revisited_ (Durham, NC: Duke
University Press, 2018), 61; Sara-Mia
History_ 96 (2019): 17. Johnson sought
to back up his argument that the ped-
estal and veil metaphor was all about
the evasion of the reality of capitalism and
slavery by pointing out that Marx
had used the metaphor of linen as a use
value, comparing it to the use value of
a coat. He claimed that this was another
example of Marx's evasion of slavery,
since cotton was thereby displaced from
the argument. Yet, men's frock coats
were often made of linen at the time, and
Marx's purpose here was to com-
pare the use value of the final coat to the
use value of the cloth out of which it
was made. He may have been thinking
of his own linen coat when he wrote
the passage. Marx can hardly be said to
have ignored cotton in the first volume
drafting the view of bourgeois economists
does he become a slave." Eric Williams,
_Capitalism and Slavery_ (New York: Cap-
ricorn, 1966), 7; Karl Marx, "Wage-La-

25. "The Lace Trade in Nottingham,"
_Daily Telegraph_, January 17, 1860, quot-
ed in Marx and Engels, _Collected Works_,
vol. 30, 217.


27. Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, _Col-
lected Works_, vol. 30 (New York: Interna-
tional Publishers, 1975), 197.

28. Robin Blackburn, _The Making of
New World Slavery_ (London: Verso,

29. Marx and Engels, _Collected Works_,
vol. 30, 183–85; Marx, _Capital_, vol. 1,
344–45; Casey Cep, "The Long War
Against Slavery," _New Yorker_, January

30. Marx and Engels, _Collected Works_,
vol. 30, 215.


34. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 345.


41. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 916.


47. Patterson, "On Slavery and Slave Formations," 55.

48. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 151–52. Marx's comment here on the concept of equality, exchange, and the concept of abstract labor/value insists that such notions were inconceivable in a society that relies predominantly on slave labor, as in Athens at the time of Aristotle. This notion applies quite apart from the specific use on occasion by both Marx and Engels, particularly in their earlier writings, of the notion of a slave mode of production. As Eric Hobsbawm has pointed out, the concept of the slave mode of production was utilized as a broad guide and never fully developed by Marx. He frequently referred to the ancient communal mode of production (which, however, did not preclude slavery, primarily through war). See Eric J. Hobsbawm, introduction to Karl Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations* (New York: International Publishers, 1964), 18–22. For classic works building directly on Marx's notions of ancient slavery, see G. M. E. de Ste Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (London: Duckworth, 1981) and Perry Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (London: Verso, 1975).


53. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3 (London: Penguin, 1981), 940–945. The contention of Nesbitt that Marx himself viewed slaves in the U.S. South as mere "constant capital" unable "to produce the essential and defining element of capitalism—incremental increases in surplus value," or surplus product, is here contradicted by Marx's analysis in *Capital*, vol. 3, which points to the surplus value produced by slave labor. What was different in the case of slave labor, as Marx also stated, was that "the price that is paid here for the slave is... capitalized surplus-value or profit that is to be extracted from him." See Nesbitt, "The Slave Machine," 13; Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, 945.


If resistance to the Slave Power was the reserved watchword of your first election, the triumphant warcry of your re-election is Death to Slavery.

—Karl Marx, on behalf of the International Working Men’s Association, to President Abraham Lincoln, November 22, 1864.