

The American Civil War and Karl Marx: An Examination of *Capital*

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The American Civil War had a profound impact on Karl Marx that resulted in his amended view of capitalist modes of production presented in the 1867 publication of *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*.¹ In 1861 Karl Marx was living in London, England; and, setting aside his work on *Capital*, he became deeply interested in the U.S. Civil War.² His reflections on the war can be found in the seven articles for the *New York Daily Tribune* and thirty-five articles for *The Vienna Presse (Die Presse)*, and in personal correspondence.³ Leaving his work on *Grundrisse* unfinished in 1858, Marx soon after published *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* in 1859. These two works formed the basis of *Capital*.⁴ An examination of these primary works, will illuminate instances when the American Civil War affected Marx's political and economic philosophies.

Karl Marx was a foundational philosopher, economist, sociologist, journalist, and revolutionary. His work is a combination of political economy, German classical critical philosophy, and utopian socialist tradition. Blending these traditions, Marx produced a dialectical treatise on political economy that has been used to support and defend statements and actions sometimes parallel and sometimes contrary to Marx's ideas – contemporary Marxist analysis. Additionally, Marx had a dynamic writing style, rich in metaphor and allegory that allows for a number of interpretations. His work has subsequently been the basis for several modern political and philosophical disciplines, including critical theory and critical sociology. The influence Marx continues to have

¹ Karl Marx and Ben Fowkes, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).

² This essay deals primarily with the Civil War in America. For the remainder of the essay, unless stated otherwise, all references to war, civil or otherwise, will concern the American Civil War.

³ Gerald Runkle, "Karl Marx and the American Civil War," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 6, no. 02 (1964), 117.

⁴ Marx, *Capital*, 89.

underscored my motivation for a renewed examination Marx, his work, and an examination of events central to Marx's thinking.

The argument in *Capital* is not linear. No individual section or group of sections, can function without the others. The tendency to see an item discussed first as more important than subsequent items makes the need to deconstruct *Capital*, discuss the material in a linear fashion, and provide equal significance to each section a difficult obstacle to overcome. But, setting aside the dialectical argument, when considered in its entirety *Capital* can be deconstructed into five basic segments of production. For organizational purposes, this examination will be performed in the order of capital operations both in the introduction and in the body of the essay – with the understanding that these features are equal in every respect.

According to Marx, a capitalist converts money into both labor power and the means of production to produce a commodity. When the produced commodity is sold, and converted back into money, the capitalist obtains his original monetary output plus surplus, called capital growth or profit. The capitalist in consumption spends a portion of this surplus. The remaining portion, added to the original monetary output, is again converted into labor and means of production, a process that results in a larger requisite source of both labor and means of production. This coercive law of competition drives the capitalist onward not in search of, but helpless to resist, constant growth.⁵ This interconnected relationship drawn in a linear style results in the primary segments of a capitalist mode of production – money, labor, production, technology and nature. A number of questions arise from this examination, and Marx addresses them all to varying degrees in

⁵ Ibid.,381.

Capital. Considering these segments of capitalist production in order, this essay will identify instances where Marx used the events of the American Civil War to answer many of the questions posited in *Capital*.

There have been numerous studies of the American Civil War examining the events through the lens of Marxist philosophy. Most of these studies have been derivative examinations of the war itself, using modern interpretations of Marx as a way of interpreting the war. Much of this scholarship has developed into various fields of postmodernist critical theory and critical sociology and has been based on singular aspects of Marx. An example of this is the formation of the Frankfurt School, particularly the work of Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Herbert Marcuse, in the early twentieth century, which drew primarily from section four of the first chapter of *Capital* on the fetishism of commodities. While this is important work in a philosophical context, concerning theories of mass consumption and their relation to capitalist modes of production, the postmodernist concepts have entrenched theoretical scholarship in word play leading to the creation of an entirely new set of terms - useless outside the small circle of philosophers who invented them for personal use.

J.E. Ford provides a perfunctory example of the postmodernist application of Marxist theory to the Civil War. Ford argues for the “necessity of the slave to *Capital*” and demonstrates how this aspect changes “some key concepts in *Capital*.”⁶ Ford specifically looks at wording in the footnotes and appendices for nuanced forms of slave representation,⁷ and draws from the post structuralism of Jacques Derrida for assistance in

⁶ James Edward Ford, "From Being to Unrest, from Objectivity to Motion: The Slave in Marx's *Capital*," *Rethinking Marxism* 23, no. 1 (2011): 22-30.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

deconstructing the terminology behind the concept of the slave as a “speaking implement.”⁸ While his examination does argue convincingly for the inclusion of the slaves “agency” in *Capital*,⁹ Ford’s initial step jumps past the first six chapters of the text to explore a footnote comparing the semi-mute instrument and the mute instrument found at the bottom of page 303 – in Latin.¹⁰ The essay is informative for one particular aspect of *Capital*: the Marxist understanding of wage laborer and slave laborer quite literally sharing the same position in capitalism. Additionally, in his evaluation, Ford attempts to expose the agency of slave laborers and their participation in the challenge to conditions of labor.¹¹ This attempt is successful, and a further evaluation of Ford’s idea will make up a portion of this analysis.

Using Marxist philosophy, N. Davidson argues that the American Civil War was a bourgeois revolution. Davidson explores “the balance between the objective limits and subjective possibilities present in” the revolutionary situation of the Civil War.¹² His use of terms here indicates a Hegelian influence in the foundation of Davidson’s essay. Davidson first establishes his set of terms and the definitions, as they will be understood in his analysis. While he does not reinvent the definition of revolution, he does narrow the focus of the term to an examination of outcome. First, he questions the actuality of a revolution based on whether or not the outcome would have been “more radical” than the one the revolution itself achieved; second, he questions whether the outcome would have been the same if the “revolution had not taken place.”¹³

⁸ Ibid, 23.

⁹ Ibid, 22.

¹⁰ Ibid, 23.

¹¹ Ford, 29.

¹² Neil Davidson, “The American Civil War Considered as a Bourgeois Revolution,” *Historical Materialism* 19, no. 4 (2011): 45-91.

¹³ Ibid., 45.

As with most scholarship regarding the understanding of the American Civil War as a bourgeois revolution, Davidson uses Marxist philosophy to scrutinize particular aspects of the war testing “whether it can be empirically demonstrated that a particular sequence of events (‘a bourgeois revolution’) led directly to an outcome.”¹⁴ Central to his thesis is the addition of the post war years and Reconstruction. Davidson includes this period to 1877 in order to introduce the “form taken by the US as a capitalist nation-state” and provides evidence to support the bourgeois revolution theory using Marx’s own method of selecting a classic case for use as comparison.¹⁵ In this way Davidson observes that, in addition to the spark, post conflict analysis can also be used to define a revolution. The transition from a feudal system to a capitalist mode of production did occur, making it possible to classify the Civil War a bourgeois revolution when examining the war in its entirety, and including the Reconstruction period. Davidson positions himself as a proponent of the bourgeois revolution calling the war, “a major part of the global process of bourgeois revolution as it unfolded within the US”¹⁶ and devotes the bulk of his essay to an explanation of why this was the case. Davidson’s essay is successful in its efforts, but his focus on events that took place after the initial publication of *Capital* draws from various sources, offsetting the impact of *Capital* itself.

A.H. Nimtz addresses Marx’s perceptive interpretation on the Civil War.¹⁷ He addresses Marx’s ability to predict various events in advance using the materialist conception of history developed by Marx and his long time friend and collaborator,

¹⁴ Davidson, 53.

¹⁵ Ibid., 51. In the “Preface to the First Addition” Marx states that “the complete body is easier to study than the cell,” and uses England as “the main illustration of theoretical developments” in *Capital*. Marx, *Capital*, 90. Davidson simulates Marx’s method.

¹⁶ Davidson, 49.

¹⁷ August H. Nimtz, “Marx and Engels on the US Civil War: The ‘Materialist Conception of History’ in Action,” *Historical Materialism* 19, no. 4 (2011) 169-92.

Fredrick Engels.¹⁸ Specifically, Nimitz addresses Marx's ability to recognize that Lincoln needed to "convert the War from one to end secession to one to overthrow slavery before the President himself."¹⁹ In his essay, Nimitz carefully deconstructs Marx's writings and exposes them to scrutiny under Civil War conditions. Additionally, Nimitz makes numerous comparisons with Engels that serve to isolate Marx's writing and offer a closer examination of his attitude regarding the American Civil War. Nimitz comes closer to an understanding of Marx and his position on slavery in particular, and the war in general, but again the review is decidedly one way, and does not provide a reverse examination of the impact the war had on Marx himself – and his political economic philosophy.

R. Blackburn discusses the reasoning behind labeling the Civil War as the "Second American Revolution."²⁰ Placing Abraham Lincoln and Karl Marx in diametric opposition regarding the "social question" of human slavery,²¹ Blackburn begins unraveling his analysis of the two men during the Civil War years.²² Blackburn points out that while Marx was vehemently antislavery, and a "declared foe of capitalism," Lincoln was a "champion of free wage-labour and the market revolution."²³ Additionally, Blackburn alludes to Marx's belief that "wage-labour was in fact wage-slavery,"²⁴ a point Ford examined, as stated above, and one that will be addressed in this review of *Capital*. Furthermore, Blackburn identifies the 1860s as, "the years of Marx's most sustained political activity... where his

¹⁸ Ibid., 170.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Robin Blackburn, "Karl Marx and Abraham Lincoln: A Curious Convergence*," *Historical Materialism* 19, no. 4 (2011)

²¹ The complete works of Marx and Engels have been compiled into a multivolume set entitled, *The Collected Works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. General Works 1844-1895* (England: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010). Marx calls the social question the "slave question" in Ibid. volume 19: 42, 115.

²² Blackburn, 99.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

theoretical reflections received their most mature form.”²⁵ He mentions this critical aspect of Marx’s chronological timeline in his conclusion, a point that this essay will revisit and expand upon.

A more direct reading of Marx’s writing during the Civil War comes from G. Runkle’s, “Karl Marx and the American Civil War.”²⁶ Runkle states in his introduction that the “ordeal of Karl Marx coincided with the ordeal of the American Federal Union,”²⁷ remarking on Marx’s physical, emotional and financial condition at the start of the war in the “spring of 1861.”²⁸ Following chronologically, Runkle examines Marx’s work in conjunction with that of Engels during the war. He pays specific attention to the newspaper articles Marx wrote for the *New York Daily Tribune* and *The Vienna Presse*, as well as to personal correspondence between the two men during the war years. In his examination, Runkle offers poignant insight into Marx himself. Runkle points out, for instance, that Marx wrote about slave based agriculture and recognized that it “was no longer profitable in older states” where the land had already been exhausted.²⁹ Runkle’s assessment will make up a portion of this essay, concerning Marx’s analysis of the working day. Like Blackburn, Runkle surveys the impact the war had on Marx, and builds valuable awareness of the opinion Marx had of slavery and the war, but he also limits his survey to these interpretations and does not link them directly to a Civil War influence on *Capital* itself.

Coming closer to the study of Marx himself during the Civil War years, Andrew Zimmerman has written several articles illuminating various aspects of Marx’s work by

²⁵ Ibid., 126.

²⁶ Gerald Runkle, “Karl Marx and the American Civil War,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 6 (2), (1964): 117–141.

²⁷ Ibid., 117.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 119

removing various theoretical blindfolds.³⁰ Zimmerman's primary thesis is twofold. First he declares a need to "speak of the Civil War as a redefinition" rather than a repetition of revolution;³¹ he then states that the Civil War "changed the meaning of revolution profoundly, from the overthrow of a political sovereign to the transformation of society."³² Key to Zimmerman's article, and the most significant aspect for this essay is the recognition that Marx did not "apply ready-made concepts of revolution to the U.S. Civil War," and that Marxist ideas and the Civil War "developed in tandem."³³ Zimmerman also recognizes that the "entanglement of Marxism" and the Civil War run "far deeper than the decision of particular writers to employ Marxist categories in their analysis."³⁴

Although the Runkle and Zimmerman articles open the door to an examination of Marx's writing specifically, these articles do not provide an examination of the work Marx produced as it relates to the Civil War. The scholarship thus far has formed the basis for interpreting the war through a Marxist lens, or for interpreting Marx himself by examining his work to discern possible opinions regarding slavery and capitalism. This essay will bridge the gap between these various attempts and will seek to understand the specific impact the American Civil War had on Karl Marx's final work, *Capital*. While scholars have mixed opinions regarding the validity of various forms of analysis, and some have addressed their conflicting opinions in singular works,³⁵ all forms of analysis are necessary,

³⁰ For the most appropriate article regarding the topic under consideration in this essay see, Andrew Zimmerman, "From the Second American Revolution to the First International and Back Again: Marxism, the Popular Front, and the American Civil War." in *The World the Civil War Made* 2015, eds. Gregory P. Downs and Kate Masur (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 304-306.

³¹ Zimmerman, 304.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 305.

³⁵ This idea comes from William Cronon. According to Cronon, "Narrative is the chief literary form that tries to find meaning in an overwhelmingly crowded and disordered chronological reality" William Cronon, "A

and will be used here, to establish a clear understanding of the influence the Civil War had on *Capital*. This all hands on deck approach will include postmodernist critical theory, alongside clinical historical analysis, in an effort to deconstruct one of the most complex and comprehensive treatises on political economic theory. In light of the powerful influence *Capital* has had on various fields of historical, political and social research, and the fact that many of these ideas were “developed while observing” the Civil War conflict, this examination is critical.³⁶

Beginning with an analysis of money, Marx simplifies his discussion by declaring, “gold is the money commodity.”³⁷ In the third chapter of *Capital*, Marx deconstructs the money commodity into two forms, a measure of value and a means of production, and reassembles these into the singular universal money.³⁸ Marx then defines money as “the necessary form of appearance of the measure of value which is immanent in commodities, namely labour time.”³⁹ Marx also explains the “price or money form of commodities is... purely ideal or notional.”⁴⁰ In other words money is a mental construct. Attached to the commodity, price becomes the “money name of the labour objectified in a commodity.”⁴¹ In order for a surplus of the money commodity to develop there must be hording;⁴² and, significantly, everything must be commodified as “everything becomes saleable and purchasable.”⁴³ Through this methodology, Marx asserts that since “money itself is a

Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," *The Journal of American History* 78, no. 4 (1992): 1349. Cronon also contends that, “the disease of literary theory is to write too much in abstractions.” *Ibid.*, 1350.

³⁶ Zimmerman, 328.

³⁷ Marx, 188.

³⁸ For Marx, the universal money is gold.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 188.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 195,196.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 228.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 229.

commodity,"⁴⁴ and is therefore "capable of becoming private property,"⁴⁵ social power is capable of becoming "the private power of private persons."⁴⁶

In this deconstruction Marx presents three startling aspects of the money commodity in relation to slavery. Money is a purely imaginary creation, humans and their labor can be bought and sold as a commodity on the labor market, and the process of a capitalist mode of production can only begin after there has been accumulation through hoarding – sacrificing the lust of the flesh, "to the fetish of gold."⁴⁷ The illusion of a universal money commodity, coupled with the ruse of social dominance based on religious ideology, permitted social class stratification, justifying the sanctified form of debauchery known as chattel slavery.

In the original German text of *Capital*, in his discussion of the derivation of capital accumulation, Marx uses the term *ursprüngliche*, which has been variously translated into English as primary, original, or primitive.⁴⁸ Taking the postmodernist approach of a critical theorist, it is possible to deconstruct Marx's use of this term, and its English translation to primitive, to symbolize the African slave. However, the German words, *urzeitlich* or *primitiv* would have served this function more directly. *Ursprüngliche* most accurately translates into "primary" in this instance. Marx compares the primary accumulation of capital to the role of original sin in theology, when man was forced to earn his sustenance by the "sweat of his brow."⁴⁹ Using the biblical analogy, Marx describes this starting point as a period when humans were similarly divided into two categories, "one, the diligent, intelligent, and

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 230.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 231.

⁴⁸ The Ben Fowkes English translation defines *ursprüngliche* as "primitive." Ibid., 873.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 874.

above all frugal elite; the other, lazy rascals, spending their subsistence, and more, in riotous living.”⁵⁰ Marx concludes that, in the process of primary accumulation (*Ursprüngliche* Akkumulation), “the former sort accumulated wealth, and the latter sort finally had nothing to sell except their own skins.”⁵¹

Marx also uses the same biblical analogy in a discussion of slavery in his article “The Civil War in the United States,” written for *Die Presse*, November 7, 1861. “If the North lets the South go, it then frees itself from any association with slavery, from its historical original sin, and creates the basis of a new and higher development.”⁵² It is significant to recognize Marx located the origin of primary accumulation when men “became sellers of themselves only after they had been robbed of all their own means of production.”⁵³ There can be no greater theft of a person’s means of production than his abduction and forced relocation to parts unknown. The history of the slave’s physical expropriation is “written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire.”⁵⁴ This connection between the article in *Die Presse*, and the passage in *Capital* shows the link Marx made between the primary accumulation of capital and the institution of slavery.

More concrete examples of Civil War influence on *Capital* come from sections of the text specifically dedicated to labor. At the heart of Marx’s critique of classical political

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² *Die Presse*, November 7, 1861. In Marx and Engels *Collected Works*, volume 19: 43.

⁵³ Ibid., 875.

⁵⁴ Ibid. Expropriation is “the action of the state in taking or modifying the property rights of an individual in the exercise of its sovereignty,” and slavery is its most extreme example. Land was not taken from slaves; slaves were taken from land. A person is his own private property. Merriam-Webster, accessed December 08, 2016, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/expropriation>.

economy is the concept of “socially necessary labor time.”⁵⁵ Marx addresses the question of what is socially necessary throughout the text, and there are a number of sections where he draws from events in America to aid in his explanation. Chapter six of *Capital* deals with the “sale and purchase of labor power,” and it is here that Marx begins his material association of slavery and capitalism.⁵⁶ “In order to extract value out of the consumption of a commodity” Marx begins; it is necessary for the capitalist to find “a commodity whose use-value possesses the peculiar property of being a source of value, whose actual consumption is therefore itself an objectification of labor, hence a creation of value.”⁵⁷ Marx defines value as the amount of time socially necessary to produce the commodity, meaning the labor involved in producing a commodity and the commodity itself are equal. The only way to garner value from this relationship is to cheat the worker of a portion of his labor time, to pay him less than fair value for his labor, and the most extreme form of this practice is human slavery – “for slave trade, read labour market.”⁵⁸ Marx recognizes this position and argues that in order for a person to sell his labor as a commodity, “he must be the free proprietor of his own labor-capacity, hence of his person.”⁵⁹ Arguing in defense of the worker against the tyranny of slavery, Marx states that a “proprietor of labour-power,” a worker, must always sell his labor “for a limited period only.”⁶⁰ If a worker were to sell his labor in a “lump, once and for all, he would be selling himself, converting himself from a free man into a slave.”⁶¹

⁵⁵ Ibid., 129.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 270.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 271.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 378.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 271.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

Marx adds to his illustration in the footnote stating, “before the American Civil War in the territories taken by the United States from Mexico... slavery is hidden under the form of peonage.”⁶² This footnote can be connected to Marx’s statement that apart from centralization of capital, “an altogether new force comes into existence with the development of capitalist production: the credit system.”⁶³ It is fair to draw from these ideas an understanding that an African slave in America, separated from home by an ocean, worked under an involuntary system of peonage. It is also reasonable to consider Marx’s position that through the credit system, the “custom not to pay for labour-power until it has been exercised,”⁶⁴ and the introduction of a debit system whereby the capitalist owner of credit and commodities exists simultaneously on both ends of exchange, forces the wage laborer into the position of wage slave.

Following his examination of the exchange of labor power, Marx transitions into a discussion of the working day.⁶⁵ Here too, Marx introduces slavery into his critique, only now he transitions from abstract to specific slave labor identifying the subject as “the Negro labour in the southern states of the American Union.”⁶⁶ As a base for his lengthy treatise on the working day, Marx addresses “the overworking of the Negro, and sometimes the consumption of his life in seven years” as a factor in a “calculated and calculating system.”⁶⁷ Essential to this section is the idea of a longer working day producing a shorter

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 777.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 278.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 340.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 345.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 345.

working life, and that “between equal rights, force decides.”⁶⁸

Returning the slave to an economic position of absolute zero, or the base value starting point for economic modeling, Marx contrasts the full day free from labor with a reversal – a day with no rest. Marx states, “a slave-owner buys his worker in the same way as he buys his horse. If he loses his slave, he loses a piece of capital.”⁶⁹ From his article in *Die Presse*, published 7 November 1861 it is clear that Marx had a solid understanding of slave populations in various territories.⁷⁰ From this position Marx presents the “maxim of slave management;” based on the plethora of slaves available for work in the “rice-grounds of Georgia, or the swamps of the Mississippi,” on sale in the slave markets of Virginia and Kentucky, “the most effective economy is that which takes out of the human chattel in the shortest space of time the utmost amount of exertion.”⁷¹

Before moving into the production component, it is first necessary to define the basis of labor price and the motivation of the capitalist in relation to this price and relative surplus value. In order to arrive at a value for socially necessary labor time, Marx first determined the standard value of day labor - the cost of the group of commodities required to sustain the laborer. The standard cost of a laborer to reproduce his labor is the necessary value or price of labor. Marx recognized this value as variable, dependent on the time and location of labor. In order to establish a zero wage limit, Marx identified the slave to be the laborer who receives these commodities directly, in lieu of wage payment.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 344.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 377.

⁷⁰ In the article called, “The Civil War in the United States” Marx provides a state by state accounting of slave populations in America. *Die Presse*, November 7, 1861. In Marx and Engels *Collected Works*, volume 19: 44.

⁷¹ Marx, *Capital*, 377.

At a set wage, if the number of hours mandatory for the laborer to secure his essential commodities is six, then the first six hours of labor will not produce surplus value for the capitalist. The laborer must work six hours to earn his daily bread and the capitalist must pay for the six hours – resulting in an equivalency. The capitalist will only begin to realize surplus value when the laborer has worked beyond the sixth hour for no additional wage.⁷² Due to coercive competition, and the limit of hours in a working day, the capitalist searches for advantages over other capitalists for added surplus value. Naturally, when other capitalists discover these advantages they are exploited across the market removing the advantage to a single capitalist, and the process begins anew. The capitalist generally finds sources for these advantages in one of two components of production – money and labor. The most common applications are a reduced wage, an intensified working day, or both.

The monetary and labor components combine in production, culminating with the application of machines. Marx used two separate systems of production to elucidate *Capital*, the industrial revolution and the institution of slavery, and their combination is most evident in the production process. Marx begins his analysis with the concept of cooperation, “A large number of workers working together, at the same time, in one place (or, if you like, in the same field of labour).”⁷³ Concentrating his terminology, Marx explains that these workers “enter into relations with the capitalist, but not with each other,” their cooperation begins with the labor process when they have “ceased belonging to themselves,” and as “members of a working organism, they merely form a particular mode

⁷² Ibid., 429.

⁷³ Ibid., 439.

of existence of capital.”⁷⁴

In an article for the *New York Daily Tribune*, October 21, 1861, Marx wrote, “the progressive division of labor has, to a certain extent, emasculated the general intellect of the middle-class men by the circumscription of all their energies and mental faculties within the narrow spheres of their mercantile, industrial and professional concerns.”⁷⁵ Mirroring this idea in *Capital*, Marx asserts that a laborer performing various activities in the production process requires “a change in his place, at another time his tools,” and the capitalist tries to close these “gaps in his (the laborers) working day” by tying him to the “same operation the whole day long.”⁷⁶ In this way the capitalist can realize added surplus value from the intensification of labor, while the laborer recognizes, through uniform labor, a disruption in the “intensity and flow of a man’s vital forces, which find recreation and delight in the change of activity itself.”⁷⁷ Whether the worker is a free wage laborer or a slave, he has been transformed into a human machine.

The advantage of a mechanical human labor force, and the natural tendency for capitalists to seize upon this advantage is the basis of what Marx described in his article for the *New York Daily Tribune*, October 21, 1861, as a “large scale dispersal of slaves.”⁷⁸ With its application distributed across the market, capital resorts to greater intensification and a greater distribution of the labor force in order to realize greater requisite surplus value. Accordingly, Marx considers “the war of the southern Confederacy... a war of conquest for the spread and perpetuation of slavery.” The struggle between the “North and the South... a

⁷⁴ Ibid., 451.

⁷⁵ *New York Daily Tribune*, October 21, 1861. In Marx and Engels *Collected Works*, volume 19: 22.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 460.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ *Die Presse*, December 14, 1861. In Marx and Engels *Collected Works*, volume 19: 116.

struggle between two social systems, the system of slavery and the system of free labour” helped codify Marx’s understanding of the division of labor within a society.⁷⁹

Labor power is the transformational starting point of the mode of production in manufacture, but in large-scale industry, the starting point is the instruments of labor.⁸⁰ The conflict between these two concepts prompted Marx to conclude that when the “system had attained a certain degree of development, it had to overthrow” the readymade foundation and “create for itself a new basis appropriate to its own mode of production.”⁸¹ The introduction of machinery in the northern states, in the wake of the industrial revolution, formed the new basis for a capitalist mode of production. When connected to the Confederate first strike in South Carolina, and attempts the Confederacy made to expand slavery into western territories, it is fair to assume that for Marx, this is the beginning of the Civil War. This sentiment was also reflected in his article for *Die Presse*, October 25, 1861, “The whole movement was and is based... Not in the sense of whether the slaves within the existing slave states should be emancipated outright or not, but whether the 20 million free men of the North should submit any longer to an oligarchy of 300,000 slaveholders.”⁸²

Two contradictory aspects of slavery and capitalism hindered the growth of large-scale industry in America. An expansion of slavery in America would have increased the size of the slave labor force, simultaneously decreasing the consumer base required for expanding capital growth. The continued expansion of slave labor would have cut into the

⁷⁹ Ibid., 49.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 492.

⁸¹ A theoretical statement is made from this passage that for Marx the American Civil War begins on page 504 of *Capital*. Ibid., 504.

⁸² *Die Presse*, October 25, 1861. In Marx and Engels *Collected Works*, volume 19: 42.

latent labor force capital needs in order to maintain objective control over its laborers. Marx's recognition of these contradictions informed his theories in relation to labor in *Capital* – specifically the section on “Machinery and Large-Scale Industry.”

Marx catalogued the process of transforming wage labor into wage slavery through the evolution of machine labor, which replaces “human force by natural forces.”⁸³ In an article for *Die Presse*, November 6, 1861, Marx examined the cotton gin, invented by Ely Whitney of Connecticut, writing:

Prior to this invention, a day of a Negro's most intensive labour barely sufficed to separate a pound of cotton fibre from the cotton seed. After the invention... an old Negrowoman could comfortably supply fifty pounds of cotton daily, and gradual improvements have subsequently doubled the efficiency of the machine. The fetters on the cultivation of cotton in the United States were now burst asunder.⁸⁴

This understanding allowed Marx to affirm that social labor processes are “purely subjective” combinations of specialized workers, while large-scale industry “possesses in the machine system an entirely objective organization of production.”⁸⁵ A second aspect of these combined sources is the conspicuous lack of concern for the worker.

Industrial production compares the cost of a machine to the cost of human labor, and whenever the costs of labor required to produce and maintain the machine are equal to the amount “saved by the employment of that machine, all that has taken place is a displacement of labor.”⁸⁶ But, a machine's level of productivity is not measured by the difference between its value and the tool it replaces. If the amount of human labor spent on

⁸³ Marx, *Capital*, 508.

⁸⁴ *Die Presse*, November 6, 1861. In Marx and Engels *Collected Works*, volume 19: 54.

⁸⁵ Marx, *Capital*, 508.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 513.

each machine is equal, the machines are equal in value. Thus, the “productivity of a machine” is measured in relation to the “human labour power it replaces.”⁸⁷ Furthermore, the value of the machine is not limited to the human labor equivalent. This difference is further exacerbated by the “value of the machine and the value of the labour-power replaced by it.”⁸⁸ Returning to the concept of the working day, with the understanding that the machine is capable of continuous production, the worker is valued at the length of a mechanical working day – further depressing the worker’s labor value. Finally, since the value of labor time is based not only on the time required to maintain the “individual adult worker, but also by that necessary to maintain his family,” and the application of machinery allows for the inclusion of “every member of that family” into the labor market, machinery spreads the “value of the man’s labour-power over his whole family. It thus depreciates it.”⁸⁹ While it may be that the family gains in wages by the employment of all members in production, the costs of “certain family functions” and domestic work must be purchased, hence the “cost of production of the working class family increases, and balances its greater income.”⁹⁰

Further examining the transition of free wage laborers into wage slaves, Marx determines capital is “animated by the drive to reduce to a minimum the resistance offered by man, that obstinate yet elastic natural barrier.”⁹¹ By evaluating the “moral depreciation” of a machine, and recognizing that this devaluation, based on the “labour-time necessary to reproduce either it or the better machine,” Marx explains that the depreciation value of

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 515.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 518.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., 527.

machines leads to a corresponding increase in the length of the working day when the machine is new.⁹² New machinery introduced, quickly followed by “new methods of reproducing it more cheaply” alongside “improvements which relate... to individual parts and... to its whole construction” leads to greater increases to the length of the working day and lower wages for the worker in unison.⁹³

This recognition of the capitalist mode of production resulting in wage slavery for the worker, brought about by Marx’s involvement in the Civil War led him to his economic paradox that, “the most powerful instrument for reducing labour-time... becomes the most unflinching means for turning the whole lifetime of the worker and his family into labour-time at capital’s disposal for its own valorization.”⁹⁴ Marx could have reached this same conclusion through an examination of ancient forms of slavery. In an article called “Bastiat and Carey,” written in July, 1857, but not published in *Die Neue Zeit* until 1903-1904, Marx states, “In real history, wage labour arises from the disintegration of slavery.”⁹⁵ From this example it is clear that Marx had an historical understanding that slavery was the origin of the wage laborer in capitalism. But through his involvement with the Civil War he viewed a nation transitioning into a capitalist mode of production. The transition into capitalism in a nation undergoing a simultaneous transition from slavery was the primary difference between forms of slavery in antiquity and slavery in America. In order to analyze the transition of a free worker into a wage slave, one must first understand the inner workings of chattel slavery. Marx was able to examine these events in America in real time, a

⁹² Ibid., 528.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 532.

⁹⁵ *Die Neue Zeit*, 1903-1904. In Marx and Engels *Collected Works*, volume 28: 13.

serendipitous feature that allowed Marx to formulate his ideas and bring new light into political economic theory.

Machinery provides the capitalist with an additional advantage apart from the reduced wage and intensified working day. Machinery aids in the production of cheaper commodities, while simultaneously reducing the hours of the working day a laborer works for himself, increasing the portion of the working day the laborer “gives to the capitalist for nothing.”⁹⁶ The continuous evolution of new machinery is the product of technology, which leads to machinery producing machinery. When the instrument of labor becomes a machine, the machine “immediately becomes a competitor of the worker himself.” The resulting division of labor further reduces the function of the laborer toward a more “particularized skill of handling a special tool.” Through technology, the job of handling this tool is appropriated by the machine eliminating the use value of the worker’s labor power, “and with it its exchange value.”⁹⁷

Technological applications to machinery gradually reduce the hours of labour while instantaneously lengthening them; technology also lightens the human load while concurrently increasing labor’s intensity.⁹⁸ This process leads to the augmentation of “surplus-value and the mass of products in which surplus-value is embodied.”⁹⁹ According to Marx, this process leads to a diminishing number of laborers required to produce the means of substance, precipitating “new luxury requirements and the means of satisfying

⁹⁶ Ibid., 492.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 557.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 568.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 572.

them.”¹⁰⁰ This results in a greater portion of the social product being converted into surplus product, the larger surplus product being reproduced into a “multitude of refined shapes,”¹⁰¹ or luxury items, and allows for a “larger part of the working class to be employed unproductively.”¹⁰² Technological advancements in machinery then make it possible to produce “domestic slaves, on a constantly extending scale, under the name of a servant class.”¹⁰³

Technological applications result in a cyclical relationship. They first impact the process of production, or the labor process. This influence leads to a reduction in the cost of commodities, lowering the cost of the combination of commodities required to maintain the worker and his family. In other words, the reduction in the price of commodities lowers the cost of reproduction of daily life for the laborer and his family. By reducing the cost of manufacture, enabling the capitalist to produce a greater volume of commodities, while simultaneously reducing the number of hours required from the worker, technology balances the loss of income to the worker with the lower price of commodities. In time the latent work force develops into a pool of domestic servants who are paid an ever-decreasing wage as technology continues to reduce the cost of commodities. In time, as the prices of commodities continue to fall, the worker and his family are compensated for their domestic service with the commodities themselves, and are reinstated, through the capitalist mode of production, into the slave class.

At first glance Marx does not seem to address the role of nature in a capitalist mode

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 573.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid., 574.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

of production at length in *Capital*. When considered in its entirety, however, the volume addresses this aspect of production in a subtle way throughout the text in the form of commodities. The commodity exists in two states of nature, the natural human need to consume commodities and the natural sources that are used to produce them. Marx establishes, from the beginning, that his aim is not to reduce or exorcize the production of commodities for the satisfaction of human needs, or from natural resources, but to critique a form of production that converts these natural resources into a means of capitalist valorization. There are theoretical steps required to analyze the natural human relationship to commodities, compared to the more concrete examples available for a discussion of natural resources. In order to extrapolate this idea it is best to separate these two forms of nature from each other, and address human natural tendency and the utilization of natural resources for commodity production separately.

Using the wooden table for his example, Marx introduces the transformation of a sensuous thing such as wood into a commodity that “changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness.”¹⁰⁴ The table, while still remaining wood in form, has been converted from its natural state into a use value designed to satisfy a natural human desire. Marx recognizes that the item produced is a product of the human organism and this function is “essentially the expenditure of human brain, nerves, muscles, and sense organs.”¹⁰⁵ He then separates the quantitative determination of value from the quality of the product providing that the duration of labor expenditure does not necessarily impact the quality of the commodity. Marx then declares the labor time required to produce “the means of

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 163.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 164.

subsistence must necessarily concern mankind,” but admits that this concern can vary in different stages of development.¹⁰⁶ Finally, he determines that as soon as “men start to work for each other in any way, their labor also assumes a social form.”¹⁰⁷ Assembling this idea, Marx establishes that the various forms of labor required to produce commodities, the measure of expenditure, or labor time necessary for production, and the relationships between producers “within which the social characteristics of their labours are manifested,” produce the social relationship.¹⁰⁸

Marx compares the act of seeing, the transmission of light from the “external object” to the eye, which he calls a “physical relation between physical things,” to the commodity form or the “value-relation of the products of labour.”¹⁰⁹ These relationships do not have any physical connection to the nature of the commodity and are simply a social relation between producers that has assumed the “fantastic form of a relation between things.”¹¹⁰ In other words, the natural human socialization process is established through the production and exchange of commodities. Marx calls this the “fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities... inseparable from the production of commodities.”¹¹¹ According to Marx:

“The labour of the private individual manifests itself as an element of the total labour of society only through the relations which the act of exchange establishes between the products, and, through their mediation, between the producers. To the producers, therefore, the social relations between their private labours appear as what they are, i.e. they do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 165.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

[*dinglich*] relations between persons and social relations between things.”¹¹²

This idea of inseparability is essential. Fetishism is not a conscious or tangible thing that can be detached from the production process. It is deeply embedded into the production and exchange of commodities. The result of this, in a capitalist mode of production, is that people transition from the direct natural human relation, and instead relate to one another through commodities.

When we inquire about the price of a commodity we are relating to another human through an understanding of socially necessary labor time. This labor theory of value, the price of a commodity based on the time socially necessary to produce it, has its origins in capitalism and had been a part of classical economic theory beginning with Thomas Hobbes (1588 - 1679). In his 1651 publication *Leviathan*, Hobbes wrote, “The ‘value,’ or ‘worth,’ of a man is, as of all other things, his price; that is to say, so much as would be given for the use of his power; and therefore is not absolute, but a thing dependent on the need and judgment of another.”¹¹³ What was missing from the Hobbes’s theory and other similar theories, presented in classical economics by John Locke, David Hume, Adam Smith, and David Ricardo, was the concept of social necessity. This oversight was something Marx sought to clarify in his critique, and slavery in America provided him with the unique vision into a feudal slave economy transitioning into capitalism.

Absent an encyclopedic understanding of the conditions of labor and the equilibrium price of commodities, we are forced into a position of reliance on the

¹¹² Ibid., 165-166.

¹¹³ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2014), 69.

commodity based human relation – a process that leads to greater alienation both from the producer and the commodity produced, and from the producer and consumer. This alienation at its most extreme leads inexorably to a slave labor system in capitalism.

From an article published in *Die Presse*, June 20, 1862, where he compares the “ladies of New Orleans”¹¹⁴ to the “goddesses of Olympus,”¹¹⁵ it is clear that Marx developed his ideas through a combination of historical data, and the events taking place in America before and during the Civil War. What Marx provides through this article, combined with various sections regarding social mechanisms in *Capital*, is a historical pattern of diverging social classes that have commodity production and exchange in their origins. Through examining the history of commodity production, and instances of slavery in antiquity, and comparing past instances of servitude to chattel slavery in America, combined with the development into a capitalist mode of production, Marx establishes the beginning of the natural human relationship based on commodity production transforming into separate classes based on which members of society control the means of production. From this starting point of the natural human desire for commodities, as the means of production are concentrated and centralized, through the capitalist mode of production, the social structure of society diverges leading to a singular capitalist system supported by wage slavery. What Marx recognized in America that separated itself from antiquity and informed some of his ideas regarding the natural human socializing process, was the transformation from chattel slavery to wage slavery at the hands of capitalism.

Before transitioning out of the theoretical entirely, it is worth taking a moment to

¹¹⁴ *Die Presse*, November 6, 1861. In Marx and Engels *Collected Works*, volume 19: 209.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 210.

note that Marx did not take a position against the capitalist. Marx understood that, once it began, the capitalist mode of production functioned apart from the intentional actions of either side of the economic equation. Speaking of the human relationship that is borne from the commodity relationship in a capitalist mode of production Marx wrote, “these magnitudes vary continually, independently of the will, foreknowledge and actions of the exchangers. Their own movement within society has for them the form of a movement made by things, and these things, far from being under their control, in fact control them.”¹¹⁶ A deeper evaluation of this idea is not possible here, but it is important to point out that this idea was not original to Marx, and shows that *Capital* was, as the subtitle suggests, a critique of political economy and in this statement Marx stands in agreement with this original idea first presented by Adam Smith, “... he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention.”¹¹⁷

Returning from the theoretical survey of human relationships and commodities, it is necessary to address the more material position of nature in capitalism. In the opening lines of *Capital*, Marx first declares that the commodity is an “external object” and the needs the commodity satisfies are not relevant to his analysis.¹¹⁸ Marx also dismisses the source of the needs a commodity might satisfy. Whether they are from the “stomach, or the imagination” makes no difference to the commodity.¹¹⁹ He then introduces his first significant analytical argument, defining the commodity as any useful thing, and then

¹¹⁶ Marx, *Capital*, 167-168

¹¹⁷ Adam Smith. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. Edited by S. M. Soares. MetaLibri Digital Library, 29th May 2007. 349

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

dividing it into “the two points of view of quality and quantity.”¹²⁰ Finally, Marx declares the commodity to be a “whole composed of many properties” making it “useful in various ways.”¹²¹ Having set his definition of the commodity, Marx states that the discovery of these “manifold uses of things is the work of history.”¹²²

Following his analysis of the commodity, Marx provides an evaluation of gold and silver standing in as the natural form of money due to their divisibility and the possibility of reassembling them again from their component parts. Gold, being a pure metal, can be separated and formed into smaller units while maintaining its inherent property – it remains pure gold.¹²³ This unique characteristic of gold and silver, coupled with the declaration that the need to discover the manifold uses of commodities, provides historians with an aspect of the capitalist mode of production that demands confrontation.

Not unlike the derivative forms of Marxist analysis mentioned above, environmental historians have also used Marx’s evaluation of capitalism in surveys of capitalism’s impact on the environment. Without making direct link to Marx, historians like D. Worster have connected several of Marx’s ideas regarding capitalism and free enterprise and their impact on the environment.¹²⁴ Worster also borrows Marx’s doctrine of alienation using the idea to examine the separation of nature from “the rest of the human condition.”¹²⁵

What is missing from these kinds of analysis is the role of nature itself on the

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid., 184.

¹²⁴ Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). 293.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 345.

capitalist mode of production, the changing methods of production based on the reduction of finite natural resources and the destruction of natural ecosystems. This is a point Marx touches on briefly in *Capital*, but does not explore in depth. A combinatorial study of gold as the money commodity, transitioning into the abandonment of the gold standard, beginning in the 1930s and culminating in the 1970s, and the environmental impact of this transition, for example, has not yet been made. The transformation of the money commodity from the mined earthly source, with its connection to human labor and subsequent links to the process of labor and exchange – and also to the various social and religious historical aspects of mined earth – requires further analysis.

It is important to recognize that *Capital* is a volume that Marx spent the majority of his life producing. While the Civil War had an impact, it was not realistic for Marx to rework the entire book around it. Marx could have borrowed from incidents of slavery throughout history, and does include references to slavery in antiquity, but in these sections, regarding money, labor power, and production, Marx makes specific mention of slavery in America. Considering the time he spent writing introductory volumes,¹²⁶ the fact that he set his work on *Capital* aside to focus on the Civil War, and the absence of significant examples of human slavery in antiquity in *Capital*, it is clear that the American slave system and the U.S. Civil War were vital to Marx's understanding of a particular mode of production developing around the formation and accumulation of capital.

Used as a base for Marx's critique of classical political economy, the American slave plays a special role as a form of calculable absolute zero – a foundation on which to build

¹²⁶ *Grundrisse* unfinished in 1858, and *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, published in 1859 were both introductory works to the final product, *Capital*

requisite economic models though the spectrum, from Feudalism and chattel slavery to a capitalist mode of production, free wage labor and eventually wage slavery. Marx could have completed *Capital* with material from Athenian Aristocrats, “an Etruscan theocrat, a *civis romanus*, a Norman baron” or a Wallachian boyar,¹²⁷ but he specifically included the American slave – waiting until after the war to publish the work.¹²⁸ The U.S. Civil War affected Marx in a profound way, and it has been postulated that the most logical reason for this attraction was that the Civil War redefined the idea and definition of revolution.¹²⁹

The American transition to a capitalist mode of production was a unique moment in the history of commodity exchange. For Marx, capitalism began with the initial hoarding of money, a procedure that prevented it from circulating. The ability to hoard in this way could only have developed through a system where labor was forced and payment for services rendered could be withheld. The system of chattel slavery allowed for this accumulation to occur, and Marx formulated what would become the final draft of *Capital* while these events were ongoing. The developing system of capitalism under a conflicting system of chattel slavery and free labor is why Marx focused his attention on the U.S. Civil War, and why it was only after the end of the conflict that Marx published his magnum opus, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Marx himself only completed volume one of *Capital*, but intended to write four complete volumes. Volumes two and three were compiled by Fredrick Engels, based on Marx’s notes, and were published after Marx’s death in 1883. Volume four was never completed.

¹²⁹ Zimmerman, 304.

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