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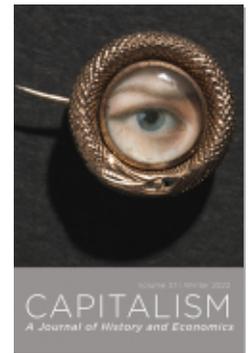
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Metaphorical Overtures of Freedom and the Plantation Complex

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IN HIS CLASSIC, *The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex*, the historian Philip Curtin offered an intricate portrait of the role of plantation agriculture in the early modern “world system.” Describing the complex as “the economic and political order centering on slave plantations in the New World Tropics,” Curtin traced the centrality of commodity and forced labor chains to the European-centered but increasingly global economy that had solidified by 1800.¹ Where for Curtin that complex “fell,” other scholars who have focused on worldwide trade flows—and the exploitation of enslaved peoples that supported it—have emphasized instead the expansion and transformation of the global plantation complex from the late eighteenth century up to contemporary times.² For example, where Curtin focused his powerful analysis on the Atlantic world, scholars have since illuminated the expansion of the plantation complex in the Indian Ocean and Asia Pacific.³ Such views emphasize a continuity rather than a neat rupture in the international division of labor, reinforcing the material and political remnants of riches born of coercion and violence.

Even now the plantation—as a site for the extraction of wealth born of exploitation—continues to form the central object of analysis for several

Note: We thank the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin for helping us to convene a 2018 conference on global plantation history, creating the starting point for this essay.

¹ Curtin, *Rise and Fall*, xi.

² See Tomich, *Second Slavery*; Wolford, “Plantationocene”; Thomas, *Political Life*.

³ See Bosma, *Sugar Plantation*; Harms et al., *Indian Ocean Slavery*; Allen, *European Slave Trading*; Manjapra, “Plantation Disposessions.”

new histories of capitalism in general and of racial capitalism in particular. For the most part, however, such studies still emphasize the “place-ness” of the plantation, and attendant debates deal with the centrality of those specific and connected locations to the economic “rise of the West.”⁴ We want to suggest, however, that it is precisely because the plantation is so central to the historical geography of global capitalism that it also constitutes a productive site within the history of ideas, and more particularly in the burgeoning subfield of global intellectual history.⁵ We thus pose the following question: What happens if we interrogate how “ideas,” and more especially *metaphors*, were central to the unfolding of specific material conditions and their continual reproduction underlying the plantation complex globally?

As a first step in answering this question we turn to the concept-historian Reinhart Koselleck, who offered another view of the period in which Curtin and others located the fall and/or the expansion of the plantation complex. Koselleck described the years stretching from the 1770s to the 1830s—the period of revolutionary modernity and the first age of abolition—as the *Sattelzeit* (i.e., the saddle period), or the transition to an epoch of global modernity. Beginning in the 1960s, Koselleck elucidated the *Sattelzeit* in terms of the study of “historical semantics.” He noted that in the period after 1770, “meanings of old words and neologisms proliferate[d].”⁶ He focused on the historical process by which old keywords, such as “estate” and “revolution,” were redefined, and by which powerful new keywords, such as “citizen” and “liberalism,” emerged. Koselleck and his collaborators argued that the emerging lexicon, and the concept history (*Begriffsgeschichte*) it comprehended, dialectically determined and were determined by the transforming social realities during this age of revolutionary modernity. Although their conceptual work was largely confined to the history of Europe and its settler colonies, the transformation alluded to by the early *Begriffshistoriker* was actually global in character.

⁴ Curtin, *Rise and Fall*. As opposed to Curtin’s “rise and fall” narrative, we draw attention to global expansion and transformation of the global plantation complex from the late eighteenth century up to contemporary times.

⁵ Any “site,” not only institutions, can offer an object of global intellectual history to the extent that a “place” becomes a concept at the act of drawing the boundaries between “inside” and “outside.” In those moments, we can observe how the totality of the concept of the “world” is conceived in ways that challenge or reinforce patterns of inclusion and exclusion on the world stage itself. Bilotto, “Sundry Worlds,” 729.

⁶ Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 77.

While Koselleck gets us closer to the global intellectual dynamics we have in mind, we suggest a need to move beyond the discrete history of concepts, toward the role and work of metaphors that provide the intellectual and imagistic conditions under which concepts are formed. One of the best interlocutors for this task is Hans Blumenberg. In his early contribution to global intellectual history—to the study of traveling and world-straddling discourses that defined the rise of modernity from the 1700s onward—Blumenberg pointed to the underlying metaphorical conditions of thought as worthy of study alongside the conceptual crystallizations. In that text, he discussed metaphors as the “substructure of thought, the underground, the nutrient solution of systemic crystallizations [of concepts].” He proposed that social meaning is produced by the projection of “preconceptual images,” or metaphors, onto the world, which then create the conditions for matrices of conceptual order to emerge within these imagistic forms. In short, metaphors are ways in which we get from one concept to other concepts through interpretive impulses and imagery. Metaphors are vectors; means of transferring meaning between ideas that are otherwise distant from each other; pathways of connection in the symbolic realm. Blumenberg observed that some metaphors—what he termed “absolute metaphors”—serve not only in the transfer of significance among linguistic signs but as the “founding reserve” for the imagination under given historical horizons. “Historical metaphors” is the study of the changing tropological reserves by which concepts also undergo ongoing modification.⁷

As a critical rejoinder to *Begriffsgeschichte*, then, Blumenberg proposed that “metaphorology” should serve as fundamental research in the study of concept history.⁸ Metaphors, observed Blumenberg, are not concepts but the cognitive matter that conditions the growth of concepts. So, for example, the metaphor of light became so powerful in the 1700s *not* because of its analytic specificity within any one conceptual field (be it of optics, religion, or politics), but precisely because it generated powerful connections between fields of knowledge. Similarly, Blumenberg pointed out that the metaphor of the “machine” undergirded late eighteenth-century thought in discussions ranging from hand mills to statecraft. Other governing metaphors of the emerging modern age, he proposed, were the “self-centered universe” and the “shipwreck.”⁹ The metaphor of the self-centered universe, Blumenberg

⁷ Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, 5.

⁸ Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, 77–80.

⁹ Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, 5, 102.

claimed, activated ideas and innovations in the domains of astronomy, political philosophy, religious reformism, and imperial expansionism because of how it tethered these disparate intellectual developments together into a larger formation. The metaphor of the shipwreck, Blumenberg argued, emerged at the turn of the nineteenth century as an underlying structure of signification in discourses about statecraft, intimate relations, and selfhood alike. For Blumenberg, historical metaphors—or the rise of new “absolute metaphors” in a historical period—is consequential for the sociopolitical and material transformations taking place during that period. He devoted much of his later work to identifying conditioning metaphors that undergirded the conceptual structures of modernity’s semantics circa 1800.

Like Blumenberg, other philosophers interested in the social and historical production of meaning have taken the study of metaphor far beyond the domain of rhetoric and poetics alone and have shown how it illuminates fundamental questions of epistemology—the critical reflection on the parameters of knowledge and how they emerge and morph in relation to the forces of history. Paul Ricœur pointed to the tropes, icons, and images of metaphoric attribution as part of the “phenomenology of imagination,” the underlying figurative structure of meaning that makes possible the everyday manifestation of imagination and conceptualization.¹⁰ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson also observed the ways in which metaphors provide the conditions of possibility for how meaning is made in the everyday, noting, “our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.”¹¹ And scholars such as Hayden White and Lisa Lowe have explored how the production of knowledge and “the explanatory effect” in the social sciences, including in the writing of history, is itself structured by tropological conventions specific to their particular historical moment.¹² Indeed, concepts about social reality are always and everywhere dependent on paradigms of metaphorical thinking.¹³

For our purposes, thinking with Blumenberg opens up one avenue for reworking and expanding the scope of *Begriffsgeschichte*—the study of historical semantics most associated with the contributions of Koselleck—beyond its inherent Eurocentric perspective and preoccupations. In short, the study of historical metaphors provides a route to a truly global and interrelational

¹⁰ Ricœur, *Rule of Metaphor*, 214.

¹¹ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors to Live By*, 3.

¹² White, *Metahistory*, 31; and see Lowe, “Metaphors of Globalization.”

¹³ Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, 5.

approach to global intellectual history.¹⁴ In this frame, we see the plantation complex was an entanglement of dispersed sites for the emergence of global modernity and so too of the interplay of diverse structures and mentalities.

Here then lies the crux of our claim: one of the central, framing metaphors that emerged as rooted in plantations revolved, seemingly paradoxically, around the metaphor of “freedom.” More specifically, we claim that the metaphors of freedom determined the social and material transformation of the plantation complex itself during this period.¹⁵ The ways that “freedom” was thought within the plantation complex—first as metaphor substrate, and subsequently as a variety of competing and contested concepts—differed from, and operated in relationship with, the metaphors of freedom associated with the rise of liberalism and the intellectual history of European metropolises and revolutionary creole republics during the period 1770–1840.¹⁶ The polysemy of the plantation complex’s freedom metaphor, and the fact that it galvanized the entangled actions of oppressors, beneficiaries, and subalterns alike, helps us complicate and rethink the supposed dichotomy between freedom and bondage in the history of the plantation complex. In fact, in order to understand how forms of bondage remained so durable in the emergence of global plantation modernity, as well as the durable and emergent forms of resistance and creative counterresponse within the plantation complex, we study how elite, intermediate, and subaltern historical actors created new meanings out of freedom’s paradigm in disparate and diffracted forms.

We thus argue that tracing the permutations of the freedom metaphor allows a thoroughgoing rethinking of the plantation complex within the intellectual history of global modernity. In particular, we consider three ways in which the metaphors of freedom operated across the plantation complex of the Caribbean and the Americas in the age of revolutions and abolitions. The first relates to the abolition of slavery and transmogrifying ideas about “free” labor. A second set of concepts playing on the metaphor of plantation freedom contributed to the intellectual history of insurgencies and escapes from plantation garrisons. And the third domain relates to ideas about an industrial revolution in the tropics that would supposedly contribute to the ongoing “freeing of the soil” and the unleashing of nature’s biochemical abundance.

¹⁴ Margit Pernau has made important contributions to *Begriffsgeschichte* beyond Eurocentrism; see, e.g., Pernau, “Whither Conceptual History?”

¹⁵ Williams, *Keywords*.

¹⁶ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

Plantation Thinking: Modernity and Servitude

Typically, studies of the emergence of freedom-thinking center on urban and bourgeois republican circles across the settler Americas and the European continent. We are used to thinking of ideas of freedom as associated with metropolitan, bourgeois concepts of equality among citizens, the right to religious dissent, and the guarantee of property ownership—concepts that prominently figure in Koselleck's *Begriffsgeschichte*. In contrast to this view, we argue that the metaphors and conceptualizations of freedom also emanated from the sharp contradictions of enslavement and modernity in rural and semiurban plantation areas spanning the Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific Oceans. Such a view also opens avenues for grasping the generative intellectual importance of the agricultural-industrial “periphery” in structuring global thought. Plantation freedom-thinking was not defined by concepts of civic inclusion and egalitarianism. The metaphors of freedom emanating from the plantation complex was not opposed to slave-based plantation capitalism and racialized servitude, but saturated by it.

The plantation metaphor of freedom generated its own discourses about new mobilities that interrelated with ongoing systems of bondage. Thus, the global proliferation and transformations of plantation societies generated a metaphorical substructure for freedom to be imagined in diffracting and contested ways.¹⁷ These expanding waves of plantation thinking also constituted the tropological, although continuously disavowed, substructure of liberal ideas of freedom, too. In this sense, the intellectual life of the plantation complex served as the disavowed substrate that conditioned the emergence of liberal discourses of freedom—continually haunting liberalism and putting it into ongoing crisis.¹⁸

Before tracing this historical metaphors of freedom, however, there is need to pause and examine the existing historical understanding of the plantation as a site of exploitation. Much of the existing literature places the provenance of the plantation in the medieval Mediterranean, with precedents going back to the Roman *latifundia*, entering the Atlantic space in the fifteenth century.¹⁹ Plantations emerged as sites of monocropping on relatively small plots with a few hundred acres and approximately the same number of workers. These production centers relied on exterior supplies of goods and labor.

¹⁷ See Barad on diffraction and the study of entanglement in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

¹⁸ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*.

¹⁹ See Dockès, “Le paradigme sucrier”; Galloway, *Sugar Cane Industry*; Curtin, *Rise and Fall*; Tomich, “Rethinking the Plantation,” 15.

Initially, the ownership of plantations was usually based in Europe's commercial centers such as Venice, Florence, Augsburg, or Antwerp. The most famous and possibly largest sugar plantation of the fourteenth century was located in Cyprus and owned by the prominent Venetian Cornaro (or Corner) family. Theirs was a fully integrated agroindustrial complex capable of producing huge amounts of refined sugar, deeply impressing contemporary visitors.²⁰ Generally, European merchant capital financed the earliest plantation complexes in the Mediterranean and Atlantic worlds, supplied enslaved workers, and transported the produce to European consumers. Active involvement of merchant houses and bankers in managing both capital and labor to generate maximum profit distinguishes plantations from other large commercial landholdings, such as the agricultural estates in Europe's semi-peripheries and later on the haciendas in the Spanish colonies that were operated as rather self-sufficient economic units.²¹

Although the tightly organized Cornaro plantation is considered to be germinal to the Atlantic plantation complex, it was not a model that was simply transferred across geographical space. It was reinvented in a variety of global configurations. While the "Cornaro model" did exist in the Eastern Atlantic islands and Hispaniola, it did not gain much ground in Brazil, the most important Atlantic sugar producer at the turn of the seventeenth century. Here, the majority of the farmers owned only a few enslaved people and some land producing cane for a mill owner. At that time, moreover, the word "plantation" had a completely different meaning in the English language, denoting a "population settlement."²² In the Caribbean region, these population settlements were pawns in a global struggle waged by English, French, and Dutch nations against the hegemony of the house of Habsburg, which controlled most of western and central Europe as well as the immense territories that came to be known by Europeans as the "New World." The settlement of white convicts, nonconformists, and indentured workers on the Caribbean islands and on North American coasts served the dual purpose of creating a class of tobacco and indigo farmers as well as civil militias to deter the Iberian foes.

White indentured laborers tended tobacco gardens across Barbados, Martinique, and Guadeloupe until the mid-seventeenth century. These societies were completely transformed by the introduction of sugar production.

²⁰ For a description of this Cornaro plantation see, e.g., A. T. Luttrell, "Sugar Industry." For a discussion on the capitalist features of this plantation, see Solow, "Capitalism and Slavery," 715.

²¹ See Curtin, *Rise and Fall*.

²² Thompson, *Plantation Societies*, 8.

Brazilian technology and enslaved Africans were imported and these in turn were combined with the tightly integrated management that had famously marked the Cornaro estate in Cyprus. This plantation transformation, coined as the “sugar revolution” by Barry Higman, occurred first on the tiny island of Barbados in both organizational and ontological terms. White smallholders growing a variety of crops were replaced by large estates cultivating a single commodity with the objective to obtain the maximum profit from scarce nature through maximum exploitation of enslaved African labor.²³ Indeed, the conversion to sugar in these French and British Caribbean colonies completely changed the meaning of the plantation. As it transitioned from a form of settlement colony to an emerging form of extraction colony,²⁴ the plantation became a strictly orchestrated unit of production in a confined spatial setting, markedly different from the land-abundant production system in Brazil.

The Caribbean plantation became the center of an agroindustrial complex, developed to deal efficiently with limited natural and human resources, and to control every aspect of production. It stood at the vanguard of Western modernity and was a formative element of industrial capitalism. As C. L. R. James, the famous Trinidadian historian, pointed out, the enslaved lived a “modern life” in the sense that traditional kinship relations were destroyed, much of their food and clothes were imported, and the minute division of labor and time management bound the enslaved even closer together than the proletarians of their time.²⁵ Marcel Van der Linden suggests that plantation management methods prefigured those of industrial workplaces, and Robin Blackburn alludes to the etymological affinity between “plantation” and “plant,” another word for factory.²⁶

The concept of the sugar revolution captured transformations that took place almost simultaneously in Barbados, Martinique, and Guadeloupe and would spread over practically all the British, French, and Dutch Caribbean islands. Its implications reached even further, however, and became a defining moment in the identity formation of the Americas. The Brazilian economist Celso Furtado made the pointed argument that the replacement of white settlers by heavily exploited enslaved Africans served as the crucial process by which colonial settlements became large-scale capitalist enterprises benefiting the economies of the emerging worldwide economic

²³ Higman, “Sugar Revolution,” 213.

²⁴ See Best and Levitt, *Essays on the Theory*.

²⁵ James, *Black Jacobins*, 392.

²⁶ See Van der Linden, “Re-constructing the Origins.”

core in Europe.²⁷ He contrasted these plantation societies with the white settlements of smallholders in North America that developed their own institutions.²⁸ Racialization of labor relations on plantations brought about the delineation of two competing and entangled social visions in the New World. There was the republican ideal of peaceful, racially homogeneous, socially egalitarian, and, to a large extent, self-sufficient societies. Republican liberalism defined itself against a different ideal encapsulated by the plantation complex, and yet existed in a disavowed relationship with it. The plantocratic model of a deeply racialized socially stratified, and heavily militarized society in which wealth could be extracted from industrial agricultural production was republican liberalism's haunting shadow. Republican and plantocratic ideals were, of course, inseparable and mutually constitutive in the period from 1770 to 1840. Metaphors of freedom infused the development of both new republics and newly reorganized plantation colonies.

Despite their tremendous human cost, plantations survived and affected the entire Atlantic world. Over the course of the eighteenth century, plantation complexes became linked with the most advanced centers of maritime technology, financial institutions, and commodity trade in northwestern Europe and the east coast of North America. Slave-based production and commerce accelerated economic growth and enhanced the industrialization and commercial capabilities of Europe's most advanced economies.²⁹ In addition, scholars of the New History of Capitalism have forcefully argued that the booming plantation economy of the American South in the nineteenth century developed simultaneously with the mature industrialism of the North. And although critics such as Trevor Burnard and Giorgio Riello question the direct economic contribution of slave-based production to industrial growth, they nonetheless subscribe to the point that slavery made substantial contributions to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century economic growth in Europe.³⁰

²⁷ Furtado, *Economic Growth of Brazil*, 109.

²⁸ This juxtaposition between plantocracies and white settlement guided by a Jeffersonian spirit informs also the seminal work by Daron Acemoglu. See Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson, "Colonial Origins."

²⁹ For the most recent debates and relevant data, see the special issue of *Slavery and Abolition* 42, no. 1 (2021), "Europe and Slavery: Revisiting the Impact of Slave-Based Activities on European Economies, 1500–1850," ed. Tamira Combrink and Matthias van Rossum.

³⁰ See Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*; Rosenthal, *Accounting for Slavery*; Burnard and Riello, "Slavery," 244. For a reply to their argument that the New History of Capitalism overrates the con-

The tangled relationship between modernity and servitude, observed by C. L. R. James at the micro level of the plantation estate, reached new scalar levels as the nexus between plantation agriculture and industrial capitalism intensified. New commodity frontiers emerged in Cuba, Brazil, the southern United States, Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia (including Java, Malaya, Mauritius, Ceylon, Malabar, Madras, Bihar), and the Pacific archipelagoes. The production of cash crops came to be embedded in local agroeconomic social systems, exploiting existing servile rural labor relations. Moreover, the industrial revolution removed the restrictions on the size of plantations, which had previously been limited to what could be overseen by a single manager or by the amount of animal or wind power, water, or firewood a plantation could extract from its immediate environment. The global scale of commodity production for industrializing countries involved millions of laborers of whom a significant minority was still enslaved by the mid-nineteenth century.

Paradoxically, we can understand this development in terms of the global *expansion* of the metaphors of freedom, and the disparate and conflicting varieties of freedom-thinking generated within the plantation complex.³¹ New modalities of oppression, as well as new forms of creative response and resistance, were crystallized out of the substrate of freedom's metaphor during the 1770–1840 period. Our point is not, of course, that social freedoms expanded across the globe with the expansion of the plantation complex. We observe, instead, that as the plantation complex expanded, the trope of "freedom" ignited many contradictory and contesting social visions. Not freedom in actuality, but the *metaphorics of freedom*, swept across plantation grounds and their international production and distribution networks. Freedom-thinking within the plantation complex did not necessarily repudiate bondage. It often sought ways to attenuate and mitigate bondage, or even to regulate and extend forms of bondage beyond the abolition of slavery. Abolitionist thought in the French and British imperial zones of the Caribbean, and across the revolutionary Americas, innovated new ways of thinking of freedom as a *form* of adjusted and term-time bondage.³² Beginning in 1780, in the context of the revolution in the thirteen North American colonies, lawmakers in Pennsylvania initiated a new gradualist system of emancipation that would soon serve as an international model for antislavery endeavors across the British and Spanish Americas.

tribution of slavery to antebellum US growth, see Stelzner and Beckert, "Contribution."

³¹ Engerman, "Contract Labor," 651.

³² See Stanziani, *Labor on the Fringes*.

Pennsylvania's 1780 abolition required all people currently enslaved to continue living under slavery for the rest of their lives. In addition, children born after March 1, 1780, would be required to live in bondage until their eighteenth birthday (for girls) and twenty-first birthday (for boys), after which they would be freed. These first experiments in new forms of "freedom," *post nati* freedom (i.e., freedom after birth), began to develop, closely aligned with indentureship. Modeled on existing laws for manumission, as well as on the bonding of children and artisan laborers, the arrangements that emerged first in places such as Philadelphia were distinctive in that "freedom" was invoked by legislators to imagine, in new ways, the continuity of servitude.

Terms of eighteen to twenty-one years of bonded "apprenticeship," or indenture, for black children born of enslaved mothers typified the first emancipations across the post-revolution United States of America, including across New York, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and New Hampshire. The innovation of *post nati* emancipations soon extended across the American North, then to the revolutionary Spanish Americas after the Congress of Cadiz (1810–14), and eventually across the British West Indies.

In the United Kingdom, inspired by the rise of postslavery in North America, writers such as Granville Sharp and Thomas Clarkson as well as the abolitionist dean of the British parliament, William Wilberforce, all worked from the metaphor of bound freedom. Modeled on the early modern practices of seven-year indentureship of novices within artisanal trades, Sharp (himself trained as a draper) proposed that freed people should serve an additional seven years of indenture to slave owners before obtaining their freedom. For Sharp, this seven-year term of servitude would allow for the enslaved to pay off their debt to their erstwhile owner, and also allow the owner to instruct prospective freed people in the ways of freedom. Clarkson and Wilberforce, and a host of other leading British abolitionists, adopted and elaborated Sharp's idea about plantation freedom as a continuation of bondage after slavery.

By 1802, British managers of imperial labor supply in the colonies began experimenting with the transport of term-time bonded laborers—indentured servants—from China to the plantation estates of Trinidad.³³ And, in 1807, with the British abolition of the slave trade, the invention of termed servitude as a new, modernist contribution to the meanings of freedom began to spread across the Atlantic through the work of the Admiralty

³³ See Lowe, "Intimacies."

and Mixed Commission courts that began “freeing” tens of thousands of captive African people aboard intercepted slave ships.³⁴

Commencing in 1807, antislavery patrollers intercepted slave ships and escorted them to the Admiralty Court at Sierra Leone, where African captives on board were “condemned” as human property and a bounty paid on each of their heads to the antislavery patrolmen. The erstwhile captives were redesignated as “Recaptured Africans” and later as “Liberated Africans” and then freed into various forms of indentured servitude. As the British government formalized its antislave-trading administrative system, long-term indentureships, generally fourteen-year terms, became the rule. The Recaptured or Liberated Africans were conscripted into military duty, assigned to build roads and buildings, or sent into plantation labor.

The revolutions across Spanish America from 1814 to 1821 resulted in the expansion of plantation freedom. As the nationalist revolutions unfolded over the coming decade, new creole nation-states, including Gran Columbia, Peru, and Santo Domingo, all announced “gradual emancipations” governed by so-called laws of the free womb. These arrangements universally decreed the freeing of newborn children of enslaved people by transferring them into the condition of long-term servitude. Emancipation funds were set up to purchase the freedom of adult enslaved people. In some cases, such as in Brazil after 1831, the state declared that captives rescued from slave ships—the *Libertados*—not only had to serve life-long terms of indentureship, but that their freedom could also not be shortened through self-purchase (*coartación*). The metaphor of plantation freedom conditioned ideas of abolition and emancipation. This same metaphor, paradoxically, also conditioned new regimes of bondage.

These processes unfolded dramatically across the Indian Ocean and in Asia, too. Labor recruiters channeled the growing labor flows from China and India using a variety of arrangements and institutions, including debt-bondage and indenture. Within the infrastructure of the Chinese coolie trade, for instance, which encompassed extensive networks of boarding houses, skippers, and plantations, workers were considered to be merchandise. Thomas Stamford Raffles—the founder of Singapore, which in no time emerged as the center of the Chinese coolie trade—took steps in 1823 to ameliorate these workers’ conditions by setting a limit of two years for debt repayment. This was an early step toward the widely applied system of plantation indentured labor contracts, in which the very protection of laborers linked them

³⁴ See Richards, “Anti-Slave-Trade Law.”

under penal law to the employers to whom they were indebted. As early as 1832, the Dutch colonial government prohibited Chinese miners from leaving their *kongsis* (Chinese mining associations) before they had repaid their debts. While the unfreedom of the indentured labor contract was condemned as “new slavery” by some, it was eventually accepted as based upon the freedom of contracting. In the new plantations of Asia, colonial control over labor was considered to be part of their protection against arbitrariness. In practice, the indentured labor systems became infamous for their abuse of labor and were subject to widespread desertion.³⁵

Freedom was thought alongside and in interrelation to bondage, not in opposition to it. Indenture and apprenticeship represented, we propose, manifestations of transmogrifying ideas of freedom specific to the *Sattelzeit* and the rise of global plantation modernity. This historical epoch, ushered in by the world-historical “turn” of 1770–1840, was defined by the contested strands of freedom-thinking that mediated the expanding plantation complex. Transmogrified freedom-thinking incited new oppressions and new insurgencies, as the plantation metaphor of freedom generated diffracted patterns of meaning that spread across the globe.

Insurgency

It would be impossible to understand the full metaphorical resonance of “free labor” without the conceptual counterpart of “insurgency.” This pairing becomes particularly fertile if we explore the interactions between the revolts among the enslaved across the New World and revolutionary tides across Europe and its settler colonies. As a case in point, the French loss of their mainland North American territories after the Treaty of Paris in 1763 fueled French reinvestment in Caribbean colonies in subsequent decades and, with it, both a rapid growth in foreign trade and a retrenchment of plantation slavery. By 1789, the French Antilles had become the most valuable tropical colony in the world. In the midst of fierce debate between those who saw abolition as a moral necessity and those who rejected it as economic suicide, the first French revolutionary club to be formed, the *Société des Amis de Noirs*, founded in 1788 by Jacques Pierre Brissot, held abolition as its *raison d’être*. The metaphor of plantation freedom as new mobility within continuations of bondage informed its work. Among the black population, countervailing ideas about freedom grew with force. And

³⁵ For a concise discussion of this topic, see Bosma, *Making of a Periphery*, 114–18.

these ideas emphasized flight from and insurgency against the plantation labor regime. Revolutionary Haitian notions of freedom troubled republican ideals of freedom. At the same time, Haitian freedom continued to engage and encompass conditions of bondage.

For hundreds of years on the island of Hispaniola, and increasing exponentially with the growth of plantation production in the eighteenth century, black people liberated themselves by fleeing from the coastal towns and savannahs into the mountainous interior. They formed maroon communities beyond the reach of the colonial state. More than 48,000 marooning enslaved people escaped the plantations between 1764 and 1793.³⁶ On August 14, 1791, Dutty Boukman, a Vodou priest, and Cécile Fatiman, a Vodou priestess, held a large gathering to organize revolutionary action among the enslaved at a place called Bois-Caïman in the northern interior of the island. An insurrection led by Boukman soon arose. The northern town of Le Cap became the hub for Boukman's revolutionary mobilization. The French colonial militia captured and beheaded him in November 1791 and displayed his severed head in an attempt to trap the enslaved in the thrall of fear. About one year earlier, Vincent Ogé, a businessman of mixed race, known within the Domingois racial hierarchy as a "free man of color" (*gens de couleur libre*) because of his partial white parentage, attempted a rebellion against the planter class in order to demand civil rights, especially the right to vote, which was reserved only for island whites. Ogé, once captured, was publicly broken on the wheel and executed in Le Cap.

By 1792, a new leader stepped into the breach. Toussaint L'Ouverture a freed black person emancipated in 1776, was a military and political strategist par excellence. He renounced his slave owner's surname, Bréda, and renamed himself "L'Ouverture," meaning "the breach" or "the opening." Toussaint L'Ouverture's vision of a Jacobin, multiracial democracy in Haiti took inspiration from Enlightenment ideas and shared the spirit of revolutionary republicanism developing in both France and the North American colonies.³⁷ For many years of the Haitian revolution, he maintained allegiance to and even admiration for imperial France, declaring the wish to be "black, free, and French." Apprehended by Napoleonic troops in June 1802 and transported to prison in France, he would not see the unfolding of the final phase of the revolution. After Toussaint L'Ouverture, the idea of Haitian freedom would shift among the revolutionaries from

³⁶ Fouchard, *Haitian Maroons*, 152; Casimir, *La culture opprimée*, 61.

³⁷ See Gauthier, *Triomphe et mort*.

one based in the idea of republicanism to that of a maroon nation persisting amid an international system of racial and imperial oppression. The 1801 revolutionary constitution, penned under Toussaint L'Ouverture, banned enslavement and declared the protections of equality, liberty, and property. After years of all-out war against French and British imperial troops, the first constitution of sovereign Haiti (1805), prepared under Jacques Dessalines, one of L'Ouverture's erstwhile military generals, worked from a much different imaginary and drew on a different kind of metaphorical thinking than Toussaint L'Ouverture's document.

The constitution of 1805 featured the intention to break out of not just a domestic plantocratic order but out of an international order of domination.³⁸ The constitution declared Haiti an "empire," all the while recognizing the larger international system that would seek to keep it in bondage. The language of the constitution encoded the demand for a form of freedom from within the horizon of ongoing domination—rooted in a patently nonrepublican metaphor of plantation freedom. The constitution named Dessalines, the first emperor of Haiti, as the "avenger" of the Haitian people. The document, in its exclusions, implicitly anticipated the ongoing opposition of the international order. There would be no ownership by white people "of whatever nation," aside from a few exceptions. And no Haitian would be allowed to emigrate and naturalize in another country. These provisions, and the defiant declaration of an "empire," show that the framers of the first Haitian constitution contended with the need to invent degrees of freedom within a revanchist international order set on ensuring Haitian unfreedom. The converse was also true: early Haitian leaders, including Toussaint L'Ouverture, Dessalines, and Henri Christophe, all infused the newly won freedom of Haitians with forms of servitude and bondage, including the imposition of *corvée* labor and efforts to press postrevolutionary Haitian people back onto plantations. The Haitian people responded by fleeing for the countryside and establishing what Jean Casimir called the "counterplantation system" through the establishment of the *lakou* system, a decentralized grassroots institution of family compounds that organized peasant agriculture.³⁹

France and its European and American counterparts refused to officially recognize Haiti's revolutionary independence for decades. Back in 1776, France was the first nation to recognize the United States' revolutionary independence. In 1783, two years after the last decisive victory of the American

³⁸ Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed*.

³⁹ See Casimir, *La culture opprimée*; Gonzalez, *Maroon Nation*.

revolution, the British Empire acknowledged the independence of the former American colonies at the Treaty of Paris. But these countries denied this same consideration to the first independent black polity.⁴⁰ Although never fully isolated, especially because of extensive merchant and trading networks interlinking the Caribbean basin and the American Atlantic seaboard, Haiti was ostracized by an international community of French, British, American, and Spanish powers and treated as a political pariah.⁴¹ At the 1815 Congress of Vienna to reestablish the European international order after Napoleon's demise, France negotiated with other European powers to use "whatever means possible, including that of arms to regain Saint-Domingue or to bring the population of that colony to order."⁴² France's refusal to recognize Haitian freedom received support from all other European and North American states. Britain outlawed any official political or economic contact between Haiti and the British colony of Jamaica. American president Thomas Jefferson imposed a total blockade of political and economic engagement with Haiti during the first fragile years of its existence, 1806–10. Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands recognized Haiti as an independent country only in 1826. Spain granted recognition in 1855. And the United States withheld diplomatic recognition from Haiti as a nation until 1862.

Scholars have shown how, beginning in the 1770s, long before official abolitions of slavery, dynamics of peasantification emerged across certain plantation areas. So, for example, in parts of Jamaica, the enslaved established local agricultural systems and distribution networks that, in some cases, not only coexisted alongside plantation production but substantially overtook it. Similarly, in the hinterlands of the Chesapeake Bay, enslaved and freed people coordinated to organize significant limits to the social power of planters, including the creation of their own banking and credit systems. Peasantification also contributed to the ethnogenesis of social groups on plantations, as new communities and new cultural-linguistic identities, such as the Maroons of Jamaica and the Geechee of North and South Carolina, emerged from the way freedoms were won *from below* within the ongoing oppression of plantation regimes.⁴³

Haiti, as a symbol of freedom, provided inspiration for insurrectionary leaders of the Americas, whether in areas of peasantification, urban slavery,

⁴⁰ See Armitage, *Declaration of Independence*.

⁴¹ See Gaffield, *Haitian Declaration*.

⁴² Alcenat, "The Case for Haitian Reparations."

⁴³ See Mintz et al., "Slavery and the Rise of Peasantries"; Hahn, *Nation under Our Feet*; Fatah-Black, "Introduction: Urban Slavery," 1–14.

or rural plantation enclosure. The symbol of Haiti spoke to black and creole crowds across the Americas. Haiti activated the metaphor of freedom as insurgency across the hispanophone, francophone and anglophone Caribbean, and in the revolutionary Spanish Americas in the time of *Símon Bolívar*. The Haitian revolution became the metaphor for a particular kind of freedom—a troubled, yet exigent, freedom whose possibility and manifestation opened from within enduring conditions of bondage.⁴⁴

In 1821, when Denmark Vesey and a number of co-organizers led an antislavery insurrection of free and enslaved black artisans, peasant farmers, and field workers in and around Charleston, North Carolina, the symbol of Haiti's troubled yet exigent self-emancipation was close at hand. Not only did Vesey "write two letters to [Haiti] on the subject of the plot" to collectively maroon from the established plantocratic order, but the rebellion occurred with a millenarian assurance that "assistance from Haiti and from Africa was at Hand." Plantation freedom—the metaphor of new possibilities for movement from within the horizon of ongoing bondage—inspired all aspects of Vesey's planned insurrection. The plotters made their plans in secret meeting places and hideaways, locations of *petit marronage*. In addition, the act of mounting an insurrection was not framed in the minds of the plotters as a struggle for an anticipated and distant freedom but rather as the forceful seizure of freedoms already rumored to have been granted by the US Congress, but unjustly withheld. Vesey preached that the "Congress had actually declared [the enslaved] free, and that they were held in bondage contrary to the laws of the land."⁴⁵ Under the persisting conditions of the plantation complex, the rumor of a "past perfect" emancipation, as opposed to the idea of a promissory liberation, often ignited and sustained insurrectional action. So, for example, during the rebellions among the enslaved in Barbados in 1816, in Guyana (Demarara) in 1823, and in Jamaica in 1831, insurgents believed they were grasping the freedom already rumored to have been bestowed by the distant British Crown. Similar to the spirit of the 1805 Haitian constitution itself, in which the fledgling nation, without internationally respected boundaries and without recognition within the framework of extant international law, nevertheless declared itself an "empire"—this insistence on the perfectedness of an unrealized aspiration characterizes a major contribution of plantation-thinking to global intellectual history in the era of revolutionary modernity.

⁴⁴ See Ferrer, *Freedom's Mirror*; Scott, *Common Wind*; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*.

⁴⁵ Vesey, Kennedy, and Parker, *Trial Record*, 12.

Freeing the Soil

The global plantation complex generated new ideas about the meaning of free labor under enduring servitude as well as the meaning of black political freedom within persisting systems of racial order. But new ideas also emerged about the “freeing” of agricultural crops and the biochemical potency they contained in the context of worldwide abolitionism. Scholars have written about the industrial scientific revolution taking place across plantation areas from the 1770s through the 1840s, affecting the rapid expansion of cotton production across the American South, of sugar production in Cuba, and of coffee in Brazil.

Scientific discoveries led to new technologies that did not originate from the production imperatives of local agricultural settings, as had been the case for a millennium, but in universities and in private or government-sponsored agronomical laboratories. The unstinting search for higher yielding crops, beginning in the eighteenth century with the global botanical voyages of Louis-Antonie Comte de Bougainville and James Cooke, and the laboratories of Pierre Poivre and Joseph Banks, gave rise to a global network of botanical expertise focused on freeing the soil.

The first age of emancipations and postslavery, 1770–1840, prompted the rise of botanical science aimed at ensuring an increase in plantation productivity, not despite but by dint of the transition toward postslavery. By the 1830s, scientific innovation rapidly developed in the centers of emerging plantation productivity, especially across the Mississippi River valley, in Cuba, in Guyana and Trinidad, in northern Brazil, and in Indonesia (Java), just as new plantation forms of “free labor” arose.

In fact, agricultural scientists and administrative classes in plantation colonies viewed the postslavery future of plantations with optimism. In 1811, Franz Karl Achard, the father of the beet sugar industry, for instance, underlined in his monumental book on this subject that freeing of sugar from beets was an excellent way to also free enslaved people; to destroy the slave trade and thus the plantation complex itself.⁴⁶ Later, the Saint-Simonian spirit aimed at putting engineers and industrialists in charge of societal development. This technocratic utopian vision encompassed a rapprochement between abolitionism and industrial ambitions to build steam-driven sugar factories that would draw their cane from a large group of free smallholders. In an unlikely alliance, the prominent French abolitionist Victor Schoelcher, the cane sugar engineer P. Daubrée, and the sugar planter

⁴⁶ Achard, cited in Baxa and Bruhns, *Zucker im Leben der Völker*, 130.

Charles Alphonse Comte de Chazelles advocated a tropical industrial revolution to reconcile the seemingly incompatible aims of freeing the enslaved while also freeing sugar profit from the soil of the French Antilles.⁴⁷ Agricultural scientific modernity, and the ways it activated the metaphor of freedom, informed the abolitionist “Free Soil” movement on the expanding western frontier of the United States in the 1850s, and in Brazil during the decades preceding the 1888 general emancipation. Talk of freeing the soil became a way of invoking futuristic visions of postslavery productivity, while also ensuring the reproduction of plantocratic social power.⁴⁸

Akin to the Saint-Simonian utopianism was the futuristic agronomical treatise, *The Sugar Question Made Easy*, by Conrad Friedrich Stollmeyer. Stollmeyer was a student of crop science from Germany and an abolitionist who settled in Trinidad in 1844. He had been living in Philadelphia and by 1836 was a member of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society. As such, he was steeped in the metaphors of plantation freedom—of the interrelation of emancipatory futurity and ongoing oppression—as it related to the post-slavery condition of freed people under Pennsylvania’s gradual emancipation law. Stollmeyer warmly welcomed the universal emancipation across the British plantation colonies, 1833–38, in which new plantation freedoms of “apprenticeship” of the freed people and “indentureship” of Asian, African, German, and Portuguese migrant workers were being implemented. With excitement for the form of labor freedom emerging across the British West Indies, Stollmeyer traveled to Port of Spain and quickly involved himself in debates about agricultural planning.

Stollmeyer’s vision for the future of agriculture across the West Indies was cyborg in nature.⁴⁹ He envisioned the rise of a labor force of “iron slaves,” “moulded and cast, and fitted by experienced British engineers.” The rise of industrial machines across Trinidad, proposed Stollmeyer, each purchased “at less than five hundred pounds, if driven either by steam or waterpower, will do the work of *three hundred* human slaves.”⁵⁰ This futuristic vision for the total mechanization of plantations appeared in many other leading agronomical texts of this period, including Alvaro Reynoso’s influential 1862 treatise on the cultivation of sugar. Here, our interest is in the metaphor of freedom that informed writings such as Stollmeyer’s *Sugar Question*. His inquiry was focused on “freeing” the land, or, as he put it, freeing “the powers of

⁴⁷ See Schoelcher, *Les colonies françaises*; Chazelles, *Emancipation*; Daubrée, *Question coloniale*.

⁴⁸ Monsma and Fernandes, “Fragile Liberty,” 9.

⁴⁹ See Taylor, *Empire of Neglect*.

⁵⁰ Stollmeyer, *Sugar Question*, 18.

nature” through mechanization. Key to Stollmeyer’s imaginary was the continuation of the exhaustive extraction of the environment and the scaled-up expansion of agricultural commodities.

Plantation Futurity

Sidney Mintz argued in many of his essays for added attention to the multiple, polysemous meanings of freedom within the plantation complex, and especially for the study of how the enslaved themselves transformed bondage through their actions and resistances into something that did not accord with liberal conceptions of the bondage-versus-freedom divide.⁵¹ From this perspective, we should study the plantation complex not only for the forms of ongoing bondage but also for its errant, indeterminate, and insurgent futurities, and the specific genres of freedom-thinking that mediated its social conditions—among plantocrats, freed people, and scientific intermediaries alike.⁵²

We are so used to thinking of plantations as sites of subjection and subordination. We forget that the plantation complex was perhaps the most important engine for thinking about new and diffracted meanings of “freedom” during the rise of modernity. In terms of metaphors, plantations provided the conditions for the unfolding of contradictory, contested, and enigmatic concepts of social freedom. To see the plantation complex in this way is to open a broader horizon for study and to better understand what is at stake for global intellectual history in the study of plantation-thinking.

Historians have identified the period 1770–1840 as a focal point to understand the revolution in political, economic, and social structures, specifically as they relate to the rise of nation-states and new economic thought. Attention, focused on republican ideals, has rarely considered either plantocratic or maroon visions of freedom, which also shaped the rise of revolutionary modernity. In other words, attention to historical metaphors (not just the historical semantics) provides us with insight into what was changing in the atmosphere of thought during the *Sattelzeit*. This approach provides us with different insights into historical transformation.

By understanding “freedom” as a metaphor, we better grasp how the many meanings associated with life within the plantation complex—from

⁵¹ Mintz, *Caribbean Transformations*; Mintz, “Panglosses.”

⁵² On the insurgent futurities of the plantation complex, see McKittrick, “Plantation Futures,” and Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*.

discourses about labor control, to visions of fugitivity and past-perfect liberation, to debates about cyborg management of crops—actually participated in a shared imagination about new degrees of adaptive mobility and creative response within systems of bondage that, themselves, continued to persist. The study of the plantation complex during the first age of abolition illuminates nothing less than an epistemology of modernity—the parameters of knowledge and imagination that touched sequestered, yet entangled, social groups on a global scale.

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