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TS History

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This week, readings included John Brown's Last Speech and an excerpt from *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* by Walter Johnson.

In John Brown's last speech to a courtroom, Brown makes three justifications for why the prosecution of his actions was unjust: denial of intent, in that he intended to free the slaves peaceably, not to cause an insurrection; injustice of penalty, in that the successful continuation of his plans would have elicited *reward*; and religious justification, in that his actions followed that of the Bible and God. Brown concludes by declaring that he feels no consciousness of guilt, and that if he needed to give up his life for justice, so be it.

Walter Johnson explores in *River of Dark Dreams* the question as to if American slavery was capitalist; he acknowledges that the two obvious positions – yes and no – are each weak when considered independently. Johnson goes on in reframing the discussion to carefully argue that the slavery of the South was inextricably tied to and enabled by the capitalism of the North, while avoiding broad, preconceived notions of what capitalism meant and was. Three facets of the cotton planter's business were controlled by capitalism: the volatilities of natural processes were balanced with complex balancing systems of credit and debt; labor processes were measured and maintained strictly by productivity and profit, in addition to slaves doubling as liquidated capital; and financial processes that arose funded the operation and allowed an entire chain of middlemen to profit from the cotton trade.

In *River of Dark Dreams*, Johnson carefully articulates that it is too simple to outright declare that slavery *was* capitalist or *was not* capitalist, instead taking the position that slavery in the Southern ‘Cotton Kingdom’ was enabled by the global capitalism of the North; this is articulated in the sense that planters, with the crutches of capitalism, expanded and manipulated slavery for profit. While I agree with the nuance he articulates in his claim, I argue that the length between slavery and capitalism was disjointed by the cotton farmer. Slaves, indirectly, *and* farmers, more directly, were exploited by global capitalism, which led to the reformation of the long and imbalanced chain of labor and capital from slaves to farmers to factors to merchants to manufacturers. Cotton did not fit smoothly into capitalism; instead, it was forcefully pounded into its square mold, often against cotton farmer’s wishes. In the exploitation of cotton farmers, capitalism took control out of the hands of planters and into a distributed system of banks, merchants, and others that had no incentive to act in their interest; it was this lack of control that drove the viciousness of slaveowner-slave relationships during the period. The capitalist structure superimposed upon the cotton trade took advantage of cotton farmers by forcing them to absorb almost all of the risk in the complete chain. For one, planters were legally responsible for their cotton, but could not be present at the sale of their cotton; thus, their factors made the crucial decisions for them.¹ However, factors had little motive to represent the cotton farmers’ interests, since one factor had multiple clients and hence had little stake in any one transaction². The goal was aggregate mediocrity, not risky price-chasing. By propping up a system of advances and consignments, factors, merchants, and banks were able to make money off interests, charges, and commissions³ while pushing risk to the cotton farmers, which absorbed a disproportionately large amount of risk from market fluctuations. These complex systems,

¹ Walter Johnson, “River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom” (Belknap Press, 2013), 262.

² Johnson, “River of Dark Dreams”, 272.

³ Johnson, “River of Dark Dreams”, 261.

Johnson asserts, “allowed for the temporal and spatial unevenness of the cotton market to be smoothed out.”⁴ This may have been the case, but in levelling off risks of the cotton market, it placed a disproportionate amount of burden in the form of risk and responsibility on farmers, a toll that translated on their slaves. A farmer that accrued debt from more than two bad returns through a multitude of causes, including pests, harsh winters, unsuccessful shipping, would have gone out of business immediately, almost ironically from the very institutions meant to safeguard the market from such ecological risks. Furthermore, the cotton market became the center of speculation, which made it extremely volatile⁵; thus, the value of a product – a culmination of years of labor and investment – could plummet or spike in a matter of a few minutes. As one Louisiana journalist wrote, “They turn the farmer’s life into that of a gambler and a speculator”⁶; additionally, the one control over their cotton farmers had – withholding their cotton – proved impractical and practically useless⁷. With the rise of such a rigid and all-encompassing system, it was impossible for cotton farmers *not* to forfeit control over their cotton. Given little control over their cotton, farmers could only desperately throttle more productivity out of their slaves⁸. Instead of being motivated out of cruel greed, enabled by the systems of capitalism, farmers materialized their distress onto their slaves, often maliciously. Thus, slaves – at the bottom of the vicious cotton trade chain – and farmers – the joint between slaves and the banks, while not conflating their drastically different experiences, were *both* victims of capitalist exploitation.

⁴ Johnson, “River of Dark Dreams”, 261.

⁵ Johnson, “River of Dark Dreams”, 266.

⁶ Johnson, “River of Dark Dreams”, 271.

⁷ Johnson, “River of Dark Dreams”, 272.

⁸ Johnson, “River of Dark Dreams”, 279.