

Abstract

Close to the end of volume one of Marx's *Capital*, at the part VIII named 'So-called Primitive Accumulation,' the following passage is found: 'While the cotton industry introduced child-slavery into England, in the United States it gave the impulse for the transformation of the earlier, more or less patriarchal slavery into a system of commercial exploitation. In fact, the veiled slavery of the wage-labourers in Europe needed the unqualified slavery of the New World as its pedestal'.

Slavery in England! Is it only a simple metaphor? Or did Marx believe that wage-labourers were literally slaves? In Part II of his book, he distinguished the labourer as an owner of a commodity (labour-power) from the slave as being a commodity itself. Hence, the wage-labourer should be free 'in the double sense'.

Therefore, we can ask why Marx mentioned 'the veiled slavery' and how it was different from 'unqualified slavery'. Behind these phrases underlies Marx's critique of the liberal ideas like 'freedom' and 'justice'. Explaining this ideological and historical context is the subject of this paper.

In the territory of British Empire the slave trade was abolished in 1807, slavery in general in 1833, the sugar preference in 1846. Before these attacks on slavery, Adam Smith compared the productivity of 'a free servant' with that of a slave in the *Wealth of Nations*, and concluded that 'the work done by freemen comes cheaper in the end than that performed by slaves', because 'a person who can acquire no property, can have no other interest but to eat as much, and to labour as little as possible'.

Employment of 'free' labourers is more profitable than slavery. That was why not only humanitarians but also capitalists took part in the 'liberal' attack on slavery.

In this sense, *freedom* was closely connected with an idea of justice. In the *Lectures on Natural Right and Political Science* at Heidelberg 1817-18, Hegel said as follows: 'Even if I am born a slave and am fed and brought up by my master, and my parents and ancestors were all slaves, I am free the moment I so will it, the moment I come to the consciousness of my freedom. For my personality and the freedom of my will are essential parts of myself, of my personality'.

Therefore, as an abolitionist, Hegel championed free labour. He advocated it with the following rationale: 'I can hand over to another for a limited time the use of my particular physical and mental powers and aptitudes because, as determinate, they have the aspect

of an external relationship to my personality’.

In the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1820), Hegel repeated that ‘it is in the nature of the case that the slave has an absolute right to free himself’ and confirmed that ‘property’ is the immediate existence of ‘the freedom of an individual person’. For Hegel, therefore, slavery is unjust because a slave cannot acquire property.

The target of Marx’s critique is to show this ‘liberal’ championship of the ‘freedom’ of wage-labourer is false.

First, in the *Economic Manuscript of 1861-63*, Marx points out that the conditions of production are alienated and not belonging to wage-labourer under capitalism. As a result, the products of wage-labourer are not his property. Marx continues as follows: ‘The recognition of the product as its own, and its awareness that its separation from the conditions of its realisation is an injustice—a relationship imposed by force—is an enormous consciousness, itself the product of the capitalist mode of production and just as much the knell to its doom as the consciousness of the slave that he could not be the property of another reduced slavery to an artificial, lingering existence, and made it impossible for it to continue to provide the basis of production’.

Second, Marx questioned the ‘freedom’ of wage-labourer, who has no alternative but to work for some capitalist. Speaking of the ‘free self-determination’ in that manuscript, Marx compares free workers with slaves again as follows: ‘The continuity of the relation between slave and slaveholder is preserved by the direct compulsion exerted upon the slave. The free worker, on the other hand, must preserve it himself, since his existence as a worker depends on his constantly renewing the sale of his labour capacity to the capitalist’.

A wage-labourer, therefore, can acquire no property and do no free self-determination. This situation is literally a form of slavery, which is veiled by the idea of ‘free labour.’

Finally, Marx used the words ‘veiled slavery’ in the part entitled ‘So-called Primitive Accumulation’ of his *Capital*. With this title he means ‘the “previous accumulation” of Adam Smith’ and assures that ‘this primitive accumulation plays approximately the same role in political economy as original sin does in theology’.

According to Smith, ‘the accumulation of stock must, in the nature of things, be previous to the division of labour’ and ‘parsimony, and not industry, is the immediate cause of the increase of capital’.

A thrifty capitalist encounters a free labourer. This was a ‘liberal’ myth pertaining to the genesis of capitalist society and continues to be down to present. Debunking this myth was the objective of Marx’s critique of political economy and remains ours as well.