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Nick Nesbitt, *The Price of Slavery: Capitalism and Revolution in the Caribbean*. Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2022. viii + 274 pp. Tables, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$95.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780813947082; \$35.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9780813947099; \$28.00 (eb). ISBN 9780813947105.

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Over the past twenty years, Nick Nesbitt has developed an original and transformational critical perspective on French Caribbean literature and political thought in a number of scholarly books--from *Voicing Memory* (2003) to *Universal Emancipation* (2008) to *Caribbean Critique* (2013)--that are by now central texts in francophone postcolonial studies.[1] One therefore approaches a new Nesbitt monograph with certain expectations: one expects an elegant critical voice that presents a rewarding challenge to the reader; a varied and unique conceptual apparatus, combining philosophy, political theory, and literary aesthetics; and an insistence on emancipatory, universalist political claims. *The Price of Slavery* fully meets each of these expectations, yet it also signals a significant turn in Nesbitt's thought, one that we might call his "return to Marx."

This book's ambitious objective--and its important contribution--is to produce a Marxist theory of the relation between transatlantic slavery and the capitalist social form, a relation that Trinidadian historian Eric Williams famously posits in the title of his pioneering 1944 book *Capitalism and Slavery*. [2] How can Marxian political economy comprehend the place of plantation slavery within capitalism when Marx's logic holds that, because slaves themselves *are* commodities and their labor by definition cannot be a commodity, they cannot work for a wage, and therefore categorically cannot produce surplus value, the very lifeblood of capitalism? Working through this exciting *problématique*, Nesbitt divides the book into two sections, "From Marx..." and "...to Black Jacobinism." Though they do resolve into a coherent whole, these two parts nonetheless differ starkly in their specific critical preoccupations. The first part, as its title suggests, is almost entirely devoted to Marxist historiography and political economy. The book's second part, which is closer to Nesbitt's previous scholarly work, applies the theoretical apparatus worked out in the first part to analyses of the writings of key figures from the "Black Jacobin" critical tradition, a current of radical Antillean thought that Nesbitt himself has done so much throughout his career to recover, codify, and propound.

Chapter one engages directly with Williams's *Capitalism and Slavery* and the critical debate that emerged from the question posed by this foundational text. Nesbitt is impressive here in the breadth of his bibliography--reaching comfortably far beyond scholarship in francophone literature and postcolonial studies--as well as in the boldness and confidence of his critical voice,

engaging with this wide body of Marxist historiography on his own terms. Starting with Williams, Nesbitt traces the decades-long scholarly debate about capitalist slavery and demonstrates the conceptual limitations of each successive intervention within it, from Williams to Eugene Genovese to Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman to Robin Blackburn. Throughout this critical discussion, Nesbitt persists in taking an anti-empirical, anti-historicist, unapologetically conceptual and theoretical approach to the question of slavery within Marxism. Nesbitt asks the question that the historians and theorists, he repeatedly points out, “never ask”: the question of *social form*. Rather than taking capitalism as a “self-evident historical fact,” that is, Nesbitt seeks, inspired by Marx’s work in *Capital*, to treat both slavery and capitalism as social forms, and to theorize their relation as a “historical and theoretically specific totality” (p. 30). At the end of the chapter, Nesbitt offers his bold answer to the theoretical challenge of articulating capitalism and slavery, one that he restates and recapitulates with some insistence throughout the entire book. The Nesbitt thesis is that, in the capitalist social form, slaves are defined as fixed constant capital, as means of production in the same category as windmills, draft animals, and robots.

Chapter one’s argument of the limits of historicist and quantitative discussions of the slavery-capitalism relation sets the stage for chapter two, the finest piece of theoretical writing in the book and among the finest in all Nesbitt’s work. The chapter consists of an extensive and sophisticated engagement with Marx’s writings about slavery that develops the overall thesis he offers at the end of chapter one. Here is where Nesbitt’s resolutely Althusserian “return to Marx” is accomplished, as he insists on moving beyond Marxist humanist accounts of slavery and capitalism and grounds his critical project in Marx’s systematic critique of political economy and its tendential laws. Whereas Nesbitt’s previous works are influenced by Marxist thinkers such as Alain Badiou, Marx’s own writings are the main object of Nesbitt’s work here. In short, to adequately theorize specifically capitalist slavery, Nesbitt (re)reads *Capital*. Nesbitt is admirably clear and precise in his exposition of Marxian concepts—distinguishing labor from labor power and value from its forms of appearance, for example, and finely developing Marx’s theories of money and the commodity form. This careful precision pays off, culminating in the convincing argument that Antillean slavery’s place within global capitalism was to have allowed the capitalist slaveowner an enormous “capture [of] surplus value” (p. 101), though the inability of slave labor to produce relative surplus value led tendentially to slavery’s diminishment as industrial capitalism developed in the nineteenth century.

Chapter three, which focuses on the revolutionary Black Jacobin critique of capitalism as a social form. Appropriately, C.L.R. James’ magisterial history of the Haitian Revolution, *The Black Jacobins*, is the main focus of the chapter and the point upon which the book pivots to its second part. [3] Nesbitt rereads James’s historical narrative to distill from his analysis of the Haitian Revolution an abstracted theory of mass revolutionary success: “insurgent masses + leader(s) of genius + force of the idea (of equality) yields world-historical revolution” (p. 113). Nesbitt treats James as, like Marx, a revolutionary theorist of social form, looking for universal laws of history at work in the actions of Toussaint Louverture and the uprisings of enslaved Haitians. To analyze the tendential laws that produced this singular emancipatory event, Nesbitt concludes, is to try to understand *in general* the conditions that make revolutionary overthrow of unjust social forms possible anywhere and at any time.

Chapter four focuses on the still-understudied Haitian nineteenth century and the “competing social forms” that replaced plantation slavery in Haiti (p. 131). Flowing logically from the previous chapter, which dealt with the structure of revolutionary sequences, this chapter is

dedicated to theorizing what follows in the wake of revolutions. In the case of post-revolution Haiti, this entailed a social struggle over Haiti's "subsumption...within the expanding order of global capitalism" (p. 131). His main object of analysis here is the *Code Henry* the extensive 1812 civil code enacted by King Henry Christophe, who ruled the North of Haiti from 1807-1820 and drew inspiration for this legislative feat from Napoleonic law. The chapter contains what must be the most sustained and in-depth critical analysis of the *Code Henry* to date, again grounded in Marxian critique of political economy; Nesbitt analyzes the social form that the *Code* envisioned and sought to institute in postcolonial Haiti.

Chapter five, "The Caribbean Critique of Social Form," traces the Black Jacobin critique of the political economy of colonialism in the twentieth century through a number of canonical Antillean literary and political writings. This final chapter nearly bursts at its seams, as Nesbitt attempts to contain within its thirty-two pages a critical discussion of the Marxist political imaginaries of three highly significant Caribbean writers: Aimé Césaire, Jacques-Stephen Alexis, and Suzanne Césaire. Nesbitt's treatment of Aimé Césaire reasserts and develops an argument Nesbitt has made previously:^[4] though he split from Stalinism in 1956, Césaire never disavowed Marxism as such but rather maintained a "Marxian, democratic socialist and anticolonial militancy" through the 1980s (p. 8). Effectively refuting the "disparaging revisionism" that produced the image of a depoliticized Césaire who valued poetry over radical politics, Nesbitt analyzes Césaire's recently edited *Écrits politiques*, distilling their specific critique of colonial capitalism as a social form (p. 165). Nesbitt's description of Césaire's politics as democratic socialist is insightful, and what is particularly salutary in his discussion here is that he engages extensively with Césaire's political interventions on specific issues of development, labor, and urbanism, over several decades, thus demonstrating conclusively that Césaire's socialism was no youthful indiscretion but rather was fundamental to the poet-statesman's political and poetic vision.

Though this final chapter's sheer breadth is impressive, Nesbitt's discussion of some authors here is--necessarily--schematic. The one author to whom Nesbitt might be said to give short shrift, however, is Alexis. Though he praises Alexis for his systematic analysis of capitalism "in its Haitian modality" (p. 178) in *Compère Général Soleil*, he argues that Alexis is limited by a "Stakhanovite" and "workerist" ideology, a Marxist-Leninist utopian vision of disalienated labor and mastery over nature as the guarantee of human flourishing in an emancipated, egalitarian society run by and for the proletariat.^[5] Nesbitt's main objection, as I will discuss in the paragraph below, is that this vision is "blinded by the sun of labor" and thus prevented from a broader Marxist critique of the monetary form of labor (p. 181). Here one wishes that Nesbitt had considered--or at least had the space to consider in this book--the broader scope of Alexis's literary and political writings, which contain both a more developed critique of social form (though it is true that Alexis does not extensively discuss the money form as such) and a more nuanced view of ecology (an important question for Nesbitt, which I will discuss below) than can perhaps be seen in this first novel.^[6]

Ecology is a most interesting and timely thread that runs through the final chapter, as Nesbitt weighs the authors' twentieth-century socialist visions of labor and economic development against the vitally important contemporary issue of the sustainability of the ecosphere. Nesbitt criticizes Césaire and Alexis for failing to perceive "any contradiction between the unhindered development" of their islands and "the natural beauty that sustains all forms of life there" (p.172)-a charge that is unquestionably true in light of the contemporary climate catastrophe but that,

as Nesbitt acknowledges, is by no means limited to these two authors or even to Marxist thought writ large. In the chapter's final section, Nesbitt's treatment of Suzanne Césaire as a precocious if critically naïve thinker of Marxist ecology is an interesting, highly original, and most suggestive rereading of her essays; Césaire alone, he writes, "calls into question the wage form itself" and refuses a utopian vision of industrial labor and development (p. 184). However, this discussion of ecology that comes up at the book's end remains schematic—which is to say that it leaves the reader highly intrigued but wanting more. This is no doubt due in part to the fact that we have relatively few published writings from Suzanne Césaire—seven short articles from *Tropiques*—and these texts themselves are, as Nesbitt notes, more "lyrically suggestive" than systematic (p. 185). Nesbitt manages to cover so much ground in this chapter, however, that it is unclear where he might significantly expand these discussions other than in future writings, which indeed makes for an exciting prospect.

Overall, *The Price of Slavery* is a transformative work of scholarship that offers a compelling framework for understanding the relationship between Antillean slavery and the capitalist mode of production. Furthermore, Nesbitt's return to Marx—specifically, to *Capital*—as an analytical apparatus for francophone postcolonial studies opens the field to further work on slavery and its afterlives through the lens of Marxist political economy and social theory. The implications of Nesbitt's thesis on the Marxist theory of the slavery-capitalism relation, with its theoretical rather than empiricist emphasis, obviously reach far beyond the field of francophone postcolonial studies; the book as a whole constitutes an exciting contribution both to the scholarly study of slavery and to francophone postcolonial studies. The book is an example to contemporary scholars of how Marxist critique of political economy, far from being reductive or distracting, can both enrich our understanding of post/colonial forms of domination and sharpen our analyses of literary and other cultural products.

NOTES

[1] Nick Nesbitt, *Voicing Memory: History and Subjectivity in French Caribbean Literature* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003); Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008); and Nesbitt, *Caribbean Critique: Antillean Theory from Toussaint to Glissant* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2013).

[2] Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, 3rd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

[3] C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint Louverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Vintage, 1989).

[4] See especially Nesbitt's *Caribbean Critique: Antillean Critical Theory from Toussaint to Glissant* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013) and Nesbitt's commentaries in Albert James Arnold, ed., *Aimé Césaire: Poésie, théâtre, essais et discours* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2013).

[5] Jacques Stephen Alexis, *Compère Général Soleil* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982 [1955]).

[6] See especially Alexis's second novel *Les arbres musiciens* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957) and his recently republished political treatise *Le marxisme, seul guide possible de la révolution haïtienne* (Delmas: C3, 2021).

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