Theories of Slavery

The Nieboer-Domar hypothesis:
So how did slavery, as an institution, develop? One general explanation, known as the Nieboer-Domar hypothesis, suggests that slave systems emerge when labour is in short supply, and therefore highly valuable, and land is plentiful (this relationship is often referred to as ‘the land-labour ratio’). In other words, the hypothesis suggests that having a class of landowners who do not work in a land-rich environment requires that landowners become ‘labour owners’, preventing their workers from exercising an ‘exit option’ or ‘voting with their feet’ by compelling them to work or ‘tying’ them to estates, leading to the emergence of serf or slave systems. Therefore control of labour, rather than ownership of landed property, becomes a marker of power and status, and a source of wealth. In a land-scarce environment, on the other hand, the availability of labour and the absence of alternative subsistence would keep the value of any individual’s labour low, making it easier to hire and control wage labourers.

The Nieboer-Domar model has proven remarkably durable, and with modifications many scholars of slavery still reference it as a starting point, but there have been a number of serious critiques of the ‘simple’ model it proposes. Evsey D. Domar himself provided the first fundamental criticism, noting that the land-labour ratio is not the only, or even the primary, factor determining the degree of labour ‘freedom’.1 Landlords and workers exist in polities (a broader term for political communities that includes kingdoms, states, and nation-states) whose politics determine the extent to which landowners can exploit slave labour. Slave systems require that the polity defend and support the right of landowners to trade and transport slaves, and control enslaved labour. The polity might also regulate and taxes the trade, and uses its military resources to support it. This support could include aiding slave owners in suppressing slave rebellions and providing a legal framework defining slavery, enforcing discipline on slaves and punishing runaways.

Additionally, the hypothesis suggests that slavery is solely a response to economic incentives related to land availability (we can extend ‘land’ to capital in various forms). But, as the example of Ottoman slavery above suggested, not all slave systems were centred on the control of agrarian labour. Slaves might be providing military, administrative, domestic or sexual services, and the model does not really apply to societies like the Ottoman empire where slaves were primarily employed in such roles. There are also other forms of ‘unfreedom’, as David Northrup points out, which were also not directly related to resource-labour pressures, but rather social or ideological ones: restrictions on rights or activities based on gender, race, ethnic origin, or religion.

More fundamentally, critics argued that in its most basic form, the model does not adequately explain the varying costs and benefits of different forms of labour and their relationship to resources. For example, in a modern capitalist system, workers might organise a strike to create an ‘artificial’ labour shortage that has nothing to do with absolute numbers of workers or their relation to capital, and capitalists might respond by either adopting labour-saving tactics to reduce their reliance on labour, or, if this is not an option, coercing workers instead of giving in to strike demands. And, as was also alluded to above, ‘free’ wage labourers in factories were often coerced in various ways, or were purposefully drawn from populations considered more docile and less able to resist harsh labour conditions (young women and children). That capitalists in a ‘free’ wage labour system might resort to forms of coercion does not fit with the Nieboer-Domar model.

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‘Social Death’:
Instead of proposing a single overarching model, historians have therefore found it more useful to ‘historicise’ the concept of slavery by charting its evolution over time and space. This then allows us to define slavery by comparing fundamental aspects of different slave systems (see excerpt from Eltis and Engerman in source exercises, below). Many trace the origin of chattel slavery, the most extreme form of ‘unfreedom’ originating in the ancient world, to the practice of treating enemy captives as the property of their conquerors in warfare. These captives ceased to be members of an independent community and became instead the property (‘chattel’ is a term for moveable forms of physical property, i.e. not land or buildings) of their captors. Throughout much of human history and across different societies, prisoners of war were often seen as having lost their right to personhood and membership in the conqueror’s community. At the start of the Atlantic slave trade in the early 16th century, the slaves sold to Portuguese traders were prisoners of war. (Slavery was seen as a more ‘humane’ option for prisoners of war from the ancient to the early modern eras, since the other possibility was immediate execution.)

Rather than focussing on slavery as an economic system, Orlando Patterson, in Slavery and Social Death (1982), looked instead at slavery in terms of socio-political relationships and power dynamics in human societies. He opened Slavery and Social Death with the statement that ‘all human relationships are structured and defined by the relative power of the interacting persons.’ He compared dozens of slave-holding societies across time and space to define slavery as ‘one of the most extreme forms of the relation of domination, approaching the limits of total power from the viewpoint of the master, and of total powerlessness from the viewpoint of the slave.’ Patterson used Marxist theory, statistical and quantitative analysis, and extensive research to compare the institution of slavery from the ancient Mediterranean, medieval, colonial, and postcolonial periods. Regardless of the specific historical context, Patterson stated, slavery was at a fundamental level a relation of domination. One of the first critics of the Nieboer-Domar hypothesis, Patterson went on to argue that slavery was not primarily an economic system, but was instead defined by three kinds of relationships of oppression that, together, constituted a ‘social death’ which then allowed the slave’s labour or services to be employed in a new system of control. The first condition was that the subjugation of slaves is underpinned by violence, and the ability of their owners to physically coerce them. Secondly, slavery involves ‘natal alienation’, i.e. a complete removal of family and community ties, leaving them without any form of legal or social protection or the ability to inherit or pass on rights or property. Finally, slaves are considered socially debased (‘dishonoured’), whereas their owners are seen as social elites; (‘honourable’).

Patterson’s definition of slavery is useful because it distinguishes between slavery and other forms of ‘unfree’ labour: indentured labourers, pawns, debt servants, or other ‘servile’ groups, for example, did not experience ‘natal alienation’. In medieval Europe, pawns were offered by their families as surety for loans, but were able to rely on their family connections to ensure their safety during the loan period and would be returned to their former lives after the loan was paid off. Indentured servants in early modern Europe and its colonies were protected, at least in theory, by contracts which fixed the terms of their employment, and therefore had access to legal protection.

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‘Agency’ and resistance:
While Patterson’s work was initially well-received, and ‘social death’ was widely used to explain the nature of slavery as an institution, later historians were concerned that ‘social death’ as a concept was being too broadly applied, and did not do justice to records of lived experiences of slavery. In terms of a slave’s legal status, ‘social death’ seems appropriate: slaves no longer could claim protection under the law. But, some historians argued, we have many historical accounts of slavery that suggest that it was impossible to completely strip people of older cultural and social identities.

Patterson’s idea is valuable because it explains the social logic behind slavery as an institution, but it also provides a cautionary tale about the use of ‘all-encompassing’ theories to explain historical processes. Frederick Cooper, an historian of colonial and postcolonial Africa, suggested in *Colonialism in Question* (2005) that the problem with ‘social death’ was that it described the slaveholder’s ideal of how slavery worked, rather than the historical experience of slavery. Cooper argued that ‘social death’ ignored the *agency* of the slaves themselves, both to resist the new systems of control imposed upon them and to preserve earlier social identities and relationships. Other historians have seen ‘social death’ as a way to understand the process of ‘commodification’, of transforming people into property, in a way that does not suggest that slaves were somehow responsible for their own enslaved condition.

In earlier histories of slavery, there was a tendency to view slaves themselves as entirely passive, unable to effectively resist or influence the slave system. As David Eltis and Stanley L. Engerman note, ‘slavery is generally regarded as the most extreme form of dependency and exploitation’. Yet many historians of slavery have noted that resistance and rebellion among enslaved populations developed simultaneously with the trade itself; in other words, the agency of individual slaves and organised groups of slave rebels shaped the nature of slavery from the very beginning of the trade and slave systems. Debates about the extent to which enslaved people were able to influence the course of events or alter their own circumstances created a historiographic debate about the nature of slavery itself. Some historians have argued that denying slaves agency undermined a historical record of resistance, individual achievement, and the ‘survival’ or ‘retention’ of West African culture in the New World; others argued that it is equally important to emphasise the dehumanising, brutal aspects of slavery which often suppressed and destroyed such resistance or cultural continuities.

Slave labour, alongside other forms of coerced or unfree labour, has underpinned economic production from the ancient world through to the modern era, just as various forms of ‘unfreedom’ have structured human societies and polities during the same period. Often, the societies that relied on slave systems perceived them as crucial and ubiquitous to socio-economic life. Thus, while we think of slavery today as a strange aberration, for much of human history, as David Eltis notes, it was wage labour that was the ‘odd institution’. Orlando Patterson has gone so far as to argue that our contemporary understanding of ‘freedom’ is entirely dependent on the institution of slavery.

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