Slaves to the Marketplace

Economic Liberty and Black Rebelliousness in the Atlantic World

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Late one night in 1822, a small band of men plotted revolution in a narrow house on Charleston's Bull Street. "[A]s soon as [we] can get the money from the Banks, and the goods from the stores," advised Rolla Bennett, the enslaved servant of South Carolina's governor, we "should hoist sail for Saint Doming[ue]" and live in freedom in the Caribbean republic. That came as welcome news to Frank Ferguson, a black artisan, who had grown weary of passing a large portion of his cash earnings on to his owner, Ann Ferguson. He "would pay [her] no more wages," he insisted, for "what would the Whites want with wages, [as] they would soon be no more." Twenty-two years before, and three hundred miles north, an enslaved blacksmith named Gabriel had told his brother Solomon of his dream of pulling down "the merchants" and "possess[ing] ourselves of their property." Any rebels who fought with him might "take the treasury, and divide the money amongst" themselves.[1]

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1. Confession of Rolla Bennett, June 25, 1822, in Lionel Kennedy and Thomas Parker, eds., *An Official Report of the Trials of Sundry Negroes, Charged With An Attempt to Raise an Insurrection in the State of South Carolina* (Charleston, SC, 1822), 68; Confession of Frank Ferguson, June 1822, in Records of the General Assembly, Governor's Messages, South Carolina Department of Archives and History; Testimony of Prosser's Ben at trial of Gabriel, Oct. 6, 1800, Executive Pa-

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There are numerous ways to interpret these statements. Perhaps the slaves who banded together with Denmark Vesey regarded the specie in Charleston's banks as back pay for decades of uncompensated labor. Perhaps these bondmen recognized how much white men, particularly merchants, coveted cash, and so taking what whites valued was simply sweet revenge. Perhaps it was pragmatic. Vesey understood that Haiti's embattled president, Jean-Pierre Boyer, would be less than pleased to see a small armada of wanted men sail into his harbors, and so the money and goods might persuade him to risk the wrath of white Americans and European statesmen. Or perhaps the most obvious reading is also the correct one: That by the early nineteenth century, many slaves around the Atlantic world were attuned to the claims of money and property, and that regions of rebelliousness correlated to areas where the market economy was most advanced.[2]

This essay suggests that enslaved rebels throughout the Americas, and particularly those in the early national and antebellum United States, rose in revolt not merely because their urban milieu presented those who lived and labored in close proximity to one another with singular opportunities to organize, or even that city geographies diminished legal controls over them, but also because it gave them a better understanding of cash power. The cumulative experiences of these slaves provided them with a vision of a different class system—one, incidentally, that was emerging in Saint Domingue—in which class position was based upon initiative and economic advancement rather than on the more sluggish, agrarian plantation-based society in the countryside, where prosperity and race were conflated within a static and less dynamic system.[3]

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pers, Negro Insurrection, Library of Virginia (hereafter LV); Confession of Prosser's Solomon, Sept. 15, 1800, Executive Letterbook, LV.

2. Haiti had been running advertisements in North American newspapers urging free blacks to emigrate since early 1817, which led to a lively debate about voluntary colonization in the free communities of the urban north. See the Boston *Recorder*, Feb. 18, 1817; Boston *Columbian Centinel*, Feb, 28, 1821; Connecticut *Mirror*, Sept. 24, 1822; Boston *Commercial Gazette*, Aug, 23, 1822. Boyer, however, wished for peaceful emigration, not the arrival of hundreds of men and women wanted by United States authorities for conspiracy and insurrection.

3. This is not to suggest that Saint Domingue was the "model" for post-1791 slave rebellions in the Americas, or that what in this essay is defined as capitalism was particularly advanced in Haiti. Nor am I arguing that the market economy brought changes that were especially "egalitarian"; the result was often the reverse.

More than half a century ago, Herbert Aptheker put it best: The "cause" of slave revolts was slavery. At bottom, that was certainly true and well understood by all but the master class. Determined to avoid conceding the obvious, southern whites invariably pointed to foreign causes and outside agitators. In 1822, for example, Carolina authorities blamed their recent troubles on New York Senator Rufus King and "the Missouri poison"; just as, parenthetically, Charleston's mayor insisted in 1963 that "outsiders rather than city Negroes" were responsible for a protest march organized out of Vesey's old African Methodist Episcopal Church. Yet Aptheker's blunt assessment does little to explain why large-scale slave conspiracies were more prevalent in some parts of the Americas than in others, or why slave rebellions were virtually absent from the English mainland colonies in the seventeenth century, but almost endemic to the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Most of all, it says little about the type of person who instigated slave revolts.[4]

There are numerous possibilities when it comes to explaining the patterns of slave rebelliousness in the Americas, and there are almost as many interpretations as there are historians who have investigated this question. Religion was often a factor, as revolts and conspiracies from Stono River to Saint Domingue and from Vesey to Nat Turner attest. So too was the opportunity for peaceful liberation a factor in defusing rebelliousness. In the seventeenth century Chesapeake region, Africans like Anthony Johnson, who stood a fair chance of working their way free after fourteen years of servitude, found safer ways to achieve freedom than in sharpening a sword. By comparison, the enslaved Africans, many of them from the Kingdom of the Kongo, who assembled in Norfolk and Princess Anne Counties in 1730 in what Anthony Parent describes as

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The point of this essay, rather, is that potentially rebellious bondmen on the mainland saw it not merely as an example of what rebellious blacks might be able to accomplish politically, but also as an example of how bright, industrious blacks—such as Toussaint Louverture—could advance their prospects and material condition of life. I have addressed this view at length in "Caribbean Dreams, Haitian Nightmares: Race and Class in the Competing Visions of Denmark Vesey and Simón Bolívar," *Atlantic Studies* (Oct. 2005).

4. Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York, 1943), ch. 4; Charleston *City Gazette and Commercial Advertiser*, Aug. 14, 1822; "Charleston Torn By Racial Tension," *New York Times*, July 22, 1963, 16. (The *Times* story mentions Vesey in its brief history of the church. I am grateful to Robert L. Paquette for this citation.)

the "largest slave uprising [in Virginia] during the colonial period" understood that their only hope of liberty lay in violent rebellion. One might point also to demographics, the ratio of black to white, of slave to free; Toussaint Louverture had numbers on his side that Frederick Douglass could never hope for in early national Maryland. Aptheker argues for a succession of conspiracies, as black anger rose and fell (after, that is, the inevitable white retribution that followed each servile plot), while more recently, Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh folded African and Creole struggles into a larger cycle of Atlantic proletarian resistance.[5]

None of these theories, of course, are mutually exclusive. As Eugene Genovese once warned, no single "model [of rebelliousness] can do more than heighten our understanding of the probabilities, for slaves anywhere and at any time might take up arms." Without necessarily dispensing with any of these theories, one might consider the possibility that specialists in the field have been working within a flawed contextual framework, which is to say a paradigm defined by temporality and political upheaval, rather than by the larger economic changes sweeping the Atlantic colonial empires in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Specialists have long noticed how the American and Haitian revolutions served as a dividing line between older, restorationist movements like the vast maroon colony of Palmares (which sought to re-create lost African societies in the Americas) and more explicitly politicized revolts of the age of revolution. But perhaps historians have also been too quick to confuse correlation with cause, or at least not to examine properly the economic factors that lurked just beneath the sort of inclusionary politi-

5. On the role of religion in the 1739 revolt, see Mark M. Smith, "Remembering Mary, Shaping Revolt: Reconsidering the Stono Rebellion," *Journal of Southern History* 67 (Aug. 2001), 513–34; on Haiti, Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 2004), 97–102; on Virginia, Anthony S. Parent, Jr., *Foul Means: The Formation of a Slave Society in Virginia, 1660–1740* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2003), 160-162; on Turner, Patrick H. Breen, "A Prophet in His Own Land: Support for Nat Turner and His Rebellion within Southampton's Black Community," in *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory*, ed. Kenneth S. Greenberg (New York, 2003), 103–18; Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, ch. 5; Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston, MA, 2000), 174–210.

cal demands that were voiced by politicized rebels in Gabriel's Richmond.[6]

The connection between urbanization and black rebelliousness, for example, has long been recognized, although here too the relationship has perhaps been improperly understood. A number of historians, from Claudia Goldin to Midori Takagi, have suggested that unwaged labor was not fundamentally incompatible with urban areas. Other writers, most notably Richard Wade and Barbara Fields, argue otherwise. Wade, for example, argues that the slave controls necessary to sustain unfree labor tended to break down in winding city alleyways. It is true, as Genovese once remarked, that urban areas offered "especially favorable conditions" for enslaved men to meet and plan for their freedom, but those winding alleys were the least of it. Rather more serious was the fact that too many urban masters, from New York to Havana, allowed their slaves to use a portion of their time and labor for their own account. It may simply be a coincidence that most slave conspiracies matured in or near urban areas. It can be no accident that the vast majority of rebel leaders did not harvest rice or sugar or tobacco but hired their time away from their masters and were able to put a few coins into their pockets.[7]

Introducing cash into the labor relationship of slave societies that was designed to be nonmarket was risky. Modern scholars of the slaves' internal economy suggest that masters turned a blind eye to slave marketeering or hiring out, because it made running their estates less costly. Certainly men who cared more about their own profit margin than the broader security of white society as a whole saw little harm in letting their slaves buy or sell wares on the open market. So long as bondpersons did

6. Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1979), xxiv.

7. Claudia Dale Goldin, *Urban Slavery in the American South, 1820–1860* (Chicago, IL, 1976); Midori Takagi, *"Rearing Wolves to Our Own Destruction": Slavery in Richmond, Virginia, 1782–1865* (Charlottesville, VA, 1999); Richard C. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities: The South, 1820-1860* (New York, 1964); Barbara J. Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland During the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, CT, 1985); Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution*, 14. Takagi in particular argues that slavery functioned well within the context of urban Virginia, and, seen in isolation, she is right. The point of this essay, however, is to wonder how many such success stories the slave South could afford before it ceased to function as a nonwaged society in which a majority of workers were chained to the land.

so only during their "free" time, some slaveholders even believed that granting their unwaged workers a modicum of economic rights improved the efficiency and morale of laborers on their estates. As Harry L. Watson observes, prudent whites "made these concessions as part of a conscious management strategy." Particularly in the countryside of the Upper South, slaves bartered their produce and eggs to neighboring white farmers, who knew them and knew their owners, and rarely trafficked in goods of which their masters were unlikely to approve.[8]

It is undoubtedly the case that the amount of cash such slaves earned was modest. Peter Coclanis in particular has argued that historians have made far too much of the small sums of money slave marketers were able to acquire, since the vast majority of their time was spent in unwaged labor for their master. Nor should we underestimate the difficulty of enslaved sellers getting their produce to urban markets. Outside of Savannah, slaves built boats and carved canoes to ferry their goods; a few begged or surreptitiously borrowed their masters' wagon or mule for Sunday travel. The majority, as Betty Wood notes, not only traveled on foot but were forced to transport themselves and their goods to market and back in a single day. Even if they were able to save their earnings over the course of a decade, very few slaves were able to acquire enough cash to purchase the freedom of even a single family member; as the sun rose on Monday, weary bondpersons returned to their masters' service.[9]

Yet even if the sums earned were modest by early national and antebellum standards, what little there was conferred a degree of psychological independence on the wage-earning bondman. In the sugar fields of Louisiana and Jamaica, enslaved men and women dressed in their finest

8. Larry E. Hudson, Jr., *To Have and to Hold: Slave Work and Family Life in Antebellum South Carolina* (Athens, GA, 1997), 16; Harry L. Watson, "Slavery and Development in a Dual Economy: The South and the Market Revolution," in *The Market Revolution in America: Social, Political, and Religious Expressions, 1800–1880*, ed. Melvyn Stokes and Stephen Conway (Charlottesville, VA, 1996), 52; Lorena S. Walsh, "Slave Life, Slave Society, and Tobacco Production in the Tidewater Chesapeake, 1620–1820," in *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas*, ed. Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan (Charlottesville, VA, 1993), 191.

9. Peter Coclanis, "Slavery, African-American Agency, and the World We Have Lost," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 79 (Winter 1995): 880–81; Betty Wood, *Women's Work, Men's Work: The Informal Slave Economies of Lowcountry Georgia* (Athens, GA, 1995), 89.

clothes—garments they had acquired through their own labors—before heading toward market squares. By putting on their Sunday best and walking into town, as Roderick A. McDonald has remarked, slaves "not only put the plantation behind them physically," they "also divested themselves of the identifiable accoutrements of slavery that their plantation garb constituted." During the week, the master and overseer and driver defined their existence, but Sunday markets did far more than simply provide slaves with a place to sell their wares. Enslaved men were able to barter for goods that their masters refused to provide, such as liquor, or acquire luxuries like tobacco. Even if sellers returned to their cabins not one cent richer, they spent the day participating in an independent market economy that *they* controlled. For at least one day out of seven, McDonald adds, "the markets served to loosen, both physically and psychologically, the bonds of servitude." As North Carolina slave Lunsford Lane observed after he sold his first basket of peaches, "the hope that then entered my mind of purchasing at some future time my freedom, made me long for money; and plans for money-making took the principal possession of my thoughts."[10]

If surprisingly large numbers of black men and women hawked their wares in Sunday markets, a smaller but potentially far more troublesome group of slaves earned cash by selling their skills around the urban South. Because white masters owned the very bodies of African Americans—and not merely their labor or time, as had been the case with indentured servitude—bondpersons had to submit to the fact that their work could be arbitrarily redirected to suit the economic fluctuations of urban America. In rare cases, the period of hire might stretch to fifty weeks, but most city masters leased their human property by the job or for a few days. Agreements between masters and slaves varied, but usually masters kept most of the money their slaves earned, while slaves might get about one-third of the cash paid to their owners. Curiously, most whites fretted less about the impact cash might have on their unfree

10. Roderick A. McDonald, "Independent Economic Production by Slaves on Antebellum Louisiana Sugar Plantations," in *Cultivation and Culture*, 289; Roderick A. McDonald, *The Economy and Material Culture of Slaves: Goods and Chattels on the Sugar Plantations of Jamaica and Louisiana* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1993), 34–35; William L. Andrews, ed., *North Carolina Slave Narratives: The Lives of Lunsford Lane, Moses Grandy, and Thomas H. Jones* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2003), 102. (I am grateful to Walter Johnson for this reference.)

workers than they did about getting paid in full by the men they contracted with. "The class who hire negroes," complained George Young, "are pretty much the same in all communities: persons who are generally hard run and poor besides."[11]

Some masters hired out the black women they owned, and female domestics were often leased to neighbors during the social season. But gender and motherhood structured the lives of enslaved women just as it did free blacks, and far fewer women than men were leased away from their owners' service. Many who were hired out went with their husbands. California was the wife of Isaac, a "faithful & steady" bondman who "hawls wood." Virginian James McDowell hired "Isaac & his family" as a group, as it made no financial sense to hire California "out at random." But skilled bondmen were an altogether different matter. Farmers and white artisans short on apprentices provided a ready market for enslaved carpenters, coopers, and blacksmiths. If female marketeers put in long hours for little cash, a handful of skilled slaves earned wages that even northern whites envied. On John Randolph's Nottoway plantation, black coopers received cash bonuses for producing barrels beyond a specified number. On a different estate, a slave named Thornton earned twenty dollars for constructing a cart. In Charleston, Polydore Faber, "an excellent sawyer of Lumber [and] a Rope Maker," pulled in roughly twenty dollars each month around the lumberyards at Gadsden's Wharf.[12]

For such men, the market revolution of the early nineteenth century meant new hardships, but also new opportunities. Recent studies of changes in transportation, internal improvements, or the coming of cash

11. Mary Beth Corrigan, "'It's a Family Affair:' Buying Freedom in the District of Columbia, 1850–1860," in *Working Toward Freedom: Slave Society and Domestic Economy in the American South*, ed. Larry E. Hudson, Jr. (Rochester, NY, 1994), 168; Jonathan D. Martin, *Divided Mastery: Slave Hiring in the American South* (Cambridge, MA, 2004), 89.

12. Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York, 1985), 75–76; Stephanie M.H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women & Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004), 96–97; McDonald, "Independent Economic Production," 284–85; Petition of Catherine Faber, Nov. 18, 1822, General Assembly Petitions, South Carolina Department of Archives and History. Faber, an elderly widow, rented Polydore as a kind of Social Security fund, since she had few other sources of income.

to the countryside invariably focus on the impact of these developments on white producers and consumers. When slavery is mentioned at all, it remains in the context of how the emerging factory system in New England served to drive cotton production across the Gulf South. But as southern ports along the coast or dotting the inland waterways blossomed into major commercial cities, their expanding populations demanded dairy products, meat, produce, and most of all, skilled craftsmen. Antebellum water transportation demanded wood to stoke the fires, and fruits and vegetables to feed the passengers. Slaves along the major river systems devoted ever longer hours to their gardens as they produced apples, greens, and even butter for nearby market towns. So many steamboats began to hire slaves as cooks, domestics, and freight handlers that enterprising agents rented slaves from their masters and then subleased them to steamboat companies for a profit. William Richeson was hired by one young entrepreneur named Cook, who "had hired him from his mistress and then [re]hired him, at Memphis, to the boat."[13]

If whites like George Young worried only that the hiring system meant that he had to do business with unreliable poor whites, he was quite mistaken. As dangerous to social stability as was the practice of slave hiring, worse still from the perspective of racial supervision was the fact that owners often found it convenient to allow their bondpersons to hire their own time, in effect, as one annoyed master put it, "to choose [their] own master." Instead of finding a position for their surplus slaves, masters allowed trusted bondmen to secure their own appointment, negotiate their own wages, and come and go as they pleased, provided they paid their owners an agreed-upon amount at the end of each month. Whatever a skilled craftsman could make beyond the sum he owed his master, he kept. Although self-hire became common around the Chesapeake in the years after the Revolution, and could always be found in southern towns and cities, the demands of an expanding cotton economy kept the practice from developing into the Lower South. In the countryside, slaves remained tied to their masters' often isolated estates. But from Baltimore to Richmond to Charleston to Memphis, ambitious enslaved artisans who put in long hours enjoyed the possibility of keeping much of their

13. Walsh, "Slave Life, Slave Society," 191; Thomas C. Buchanan, *Black Life on the Mississippi: Slaves, Free Blacks, and the Western Steamboat World* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004), 21.

earnings. "At the Christmas holidays," observed a visitor to the South, the "cities and towns are alive with negroes, in their best attire, seeking employment to come."[14]

Whether they hired themselves or were leased by their masters, slaves were required by law in every southern state to return to their masters' homes at the end of each working day. But many did not, and some simply could not. Cities like Savannah and Richmond were compact enough that hired bondmen could usually return to their owners' houses each night. But slaves who hired their time by the week, or signed aboard steamboats, found it necessary to find a room near their place of temporary employment. One historian has even suggested that slave "resistance also was fostered by the practice of living apart." If selling one's wares at a Sunday market increased the psychological distance between master and slave, the ability of large numbers of urbanized African Americans to operate in nearly autonomous back-alley communities with other black craftsmen openly challenged slavery by creating a sense of collective self-sufficiency. One urban bondman, John Williams, complained that his "rights" had been violated when his legal owner, Joseph Winston, continued to assign him tasks despite the fact that he had been hired to John Enders for the year. One stunned visitor to the South commented on a slave who had so little contact with his master that he saw him only at Christmas, when he "paid his [share of] hiring money, g[ave] an account of his travels and successes, [and said] how well he was doing."[15]

The constant reallocation of craft labor through the leasing of surplus bondmen from one temporary master to another may have rendered servile labor—an inefficient, antiquated form of labor organization—more compatible with the requirements of urban capitalism, but in the process white masters demonstrated they little understood the liberating power of cash. In one curious case along Virginia's James River, hired slaves who toiled at the Buffalo Forge iron works were paid a cash wage, which enabled some of them to open savings accounts in their own names.

14. Robert S. Starobin, *Industrial Slavery in the Old South* (New York, 1970), 135; Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge, MA, 2003), 223; Clement Eaton, "Slave-Hiring in the Upper South: A Step Toward Freedom," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 46 (Mar. 1960), 672; John B. Boles, *Black Southerners, 1619–1869* (Lexington, KY, 1984), 129.

15. Wood, *Women's Work, Men's Work*, 129; Takagi, *"Rearing Wolves to Our Own Destruction,"* 118–21.

Virginia bankers clearly felt uncomfortable about paying interest on money belonging to slaves, but if local authorities paid little attention they typically allowed business to trump racial concerns. By the late 1850s, some slaves, such as the industrious Sam Williams, were earning overtime of more than $100 each year. Sam and his wife Nancy may have been saving in hopes of purchasing their freedom or that of their children, but the fact that they stashed cash into a bank vault suggests that their material condition of life was adequate enough that they did not feel the need to use their earnings for the basic necessities of food or clothing.[16]

Men like Williams's master, who took the greater portion of their slaves' earnings, rarely noticed that the growing desire for cash on the part of their workers fueled an illicit trade in stolen goods. When they did ponder the question, whites attributed theft to the "proclivities" of African Americans, or the morally damaging nature of slavery. Quaker Robert Williams suspected that the institution itself led blacks into "lying & thieving, Idleness & deceit." Modern scholars think differently, of course, and most endorse the view of one perceptive observer, who summed up the common slave attitude with, "What I take from my master, being for my use, who am his slave, or property, he loses nothing by its transfer." Yet in some cases it was more complex than that. As Roderick McDonald observes, many bondmen regarded theft not as the transfer of goods "but as resistance to slavery [itself], and as the appropriation and redistribution of illicitly accrued wealth." Seen from this perspective, theft was not simply a matter of stealing for sustenance; it was a clandestine demand for wealth by those who had actually created it.[17]

Evidence indicates that discerning whites understood this all too well. They regarded urbanization as antithetical to unfree labor, hiring out as destructive to servile control, and contact with the market economy as

16. Charles B. Dew, *Bond of Iron: Master and Slave at Buffalo Forge* (New York, 1994), 183–85.

17. Loren Schweninger, "Slave Independence and Enterprise in South Carolina, 1780–1865," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 93 (Apr. 1992), 107; Philip J. Schwarz, *Twice Condemned: Slaves and the Criminal Laws of Virginia, 1705–1865* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1988), 119; Alex Lichtenstein, "'That Disposition to Theft, with Which They Have Been Branded': Moral Economy, Slave Management, and the Law," *Journal of Social History* 21 (Spring 1988), 413–40; McDonald, *Economy and Material Culture of Slaves*, 43.

leading to implicit demands for the reallocation of wealth. As one nervous Annapolis resident phrased it while drafting an advertisement for the sale of three slaves, none had been "corrupted by town habits." Nor was it merely individual masters who understood that paternal social relations could not easily be reconciled with the demands of urban capital. Legislators in slave societies across the Americas correctly noted the corrosive effect that practices typical to town venues had on slave controls. When the assembly in Antigua passed a statute banning the "Custom [of] permitting slaves to go about the Towns" to "hire themselves or take their own Liberty," they all but conceded that the sound of hard money clinking in the pockets of slaves was also the sound of the masters' authority being torn asunder.[18]

When that sound grew too loud, southern assemblies clamped down further with increasingly Draconian (albeit often unenforceable) laws inhibiting the economic liberty of bondpersons. It is no accident that many of these codes immediately followed major slave conspiracies and revolts. South Carolina's comprehensive twenty-four-page code of 1740, commonly dubbed the "Negro Act," was enacted shortly after the Stono uprising. Because permitting slaves "to traffic and barter" provided them with not only "an opportunity of receiving and concealing stolen good[s], but to plot and confederate together, and form conspiracies," the legislature allowed for the confiscation of both goods and profits and held both the slave and master responsible. Shortly after, Georgia lawmakers enacted their own code, which they closely modeled after South Carolina's. Bondpersons could not "buy, sell, or exchange any goods, wares, provisions, grains, victuals, or commodities of any sort or kind whatsoever." Politicians across the South—slaveholders all—had no desire to prevent fellow masters from employing their slaves as they might see fit, but rather to prevent human chattel from participating in the market.[19]

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18. Robert H. Gudmestad, *A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2005), 21; Amy Dru Stanley, "Wages, Sin, and Slavery: Some Thoughts on Free Will and Commodity Relations," *Journal of the Early Republic* 24 (Summer 2004), 282; David Barry Gaspar, *Bondmen and Rebels: A Study of Master-Slave Relations in Antigua with Implications for Colonial British America* (Baltimore, MD, 1985), 161.

19. "Negro Act," 1740, in *An Alphabetical Digest of the Public Statute Law of South Carolina*, ed. Joseph Brevard (Charleston, SC, 1814), 1, 238–39; Betty

Worse yet, from the perspective of control, the influence of the market economy not only provided new opportunities to slaves, but also often eroded class and racial barriers. After a day of bartering in rural towns, or following a day of hired labor in larger urban venues, enslaved artisans and unskilled day laborers of both races fell into the natural habit of retiring together to dine and drink. In the Chesapeake area, many grog shops were infamous, according to one Virginia authority, "for the equality which reigned [between] the blacks and the whites—all is hail fellow well met, no matter what the complexion." In most western Atlantic seaport towns, a working-class subculture emerged that cut across racial lines. Apprentice boys, servant girls, bond hirelings, mariners, free blacks, and immigrants banded together in a common cultural domain of street fairs, laboring celebrations, and disorderly houses. Along the Mississippi River, despite the racism that was endemic to the steamboat industry, free blacks and whites labored beside slaves for hire, and on occasion, risked their careers by assisting men they knew to be fugitives. From Richmond to New Orleans, well-heeled urban dwellers were horrified by the "negro den[s] where white, yellow [mulatto], and black congregate[d] to eat, drink and be merry."[20]

What particularly concerned southern whites was the model of black resiliency and even upward mobility that free blacks presented to their enslaved brethren. As historian Donald R. Wright has observed, the "mere existence of so many fellow humans of African descent who were not in slavery made many African Americans want the same status enough to attempt escape to get it." Southern politicians of the early national era consistently condemned free blacks for "every day polluting and corrupting public morals," but they appeared especially unnerved by the fact that so many of these black "rogues" were drawn to the market. Southern newspapers were filled with stories like that of Charles Oates, a "notorious [free black] villain." Oates was infamous around Williamsburg, Virginia, for breaking and entering; typically, Oates traded

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Wood, *Slavery in Colonial Georgia, 1730–1775* (Athens, GA, 1984), 122–23; Wood, *Women's Work, Men's Work*, 82.

20. Boles, *Black Southerners*, 128; Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 85; Buchanan, *Black Life on the Mississippi*, 111; Ira Berlin, *Slaves without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1974), 261–62.

away the fine linens he stole, but he kept "the cash" he made off with "in [his] possession."[21]

As E. P. Thompson once noted in only a slightly different context, this urban subculture was not in itself revolutionary, because it did not consciously challenge the established class structure of slave societies. But black artisans who shared a tankard with a white craftsman or sailor or, more seriously, entered into a solemn relationship with a white immigrant woman—as Caesar Varick did with "Irish" Peg Kerry in 1740s New York—surely flouted established social conventions. Planter legislators rightly feared that the decidedly undeferential discourse heard in cramped drinking cellars threatened their hegemony, and they labored hard to break apart these interracial gambols, but often without success. In Brazil, many street actions organized by the urban poor, such as the anti-Portuguese riots of 1831, saw *crioulos* and mulattoes protest and riot alongside poor whites and Africans.[22]

But did such behavior truly threaten to bring down slave societies? Did contact with the market loosen restraints in a way that endangered social stability in the Old South? One disgruntled master railed against hiring out as the first step on a very slippery slope. Give slaves the right "to choose a master," he complained, and soon they will "refuse to accept one at all." True enough, so many slaves for hire in the border South made a dash for Pennsylvania or Ohio that it was often difficult to distinguish between leased slaves and runaways. But because the vast majority of rural bondmen rarely left their master's plantation, did it matter that the small number of enslaved men and women who came

21. Donald R. Wright, *African Americans in the Early Republic, 1789–1831* (Arlington Heights, IL, 1993), 121; Charles Fenton Mercer to Alexander Stevenson, Nov. 3, 1823, Benjamin Bland Papers, Virginia Historical Society; Charles Fenton Mercer to William Gaston, January 1, 1828, Gaston Papers, University of North Carolina; *Virginia Gazette*, Aug. 16, 1776.

22. E. P. Thompson, "Patrician Society, Plebeian Culture," *Journal of Social History* 7 (Summer 1974), 397; João José Reis, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil: The Muslim Uprising of 1835 in Bahia* (Baltimore, MD, 1993), 145; Peter Charles Hoffer, *The Great New York Conspiracy of 1741: Slavery, Crime, and Colonial Law* (Lawrence, MA, 2003), 62; both Jill Lepore, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan* (New York, 2005), and Eric W. Plaag, "New York's 1741 Slave Conspiracy in a Climate of Fear and Anxiety," *New York History* 84 (2003) advance thoughtful but ultimately unpersuasive arguments that the *ten* fires of 1741 were the products of white paranoia.

into contact with the market economy began to think seriously about living in a free-labor state?[23]

Historians have generally drawn a neat line of demarcation between day-to-day resistance to slavery—such as truancy, running away, or the destruction of property—and overt rebelliousness of the sort practiced by Nat Turner and his disciples, which was aimed at bringing down the entire system of chattel slavery. As Walter Johnson has cautioned, when scholars allude to individual acts of resistance as an "implicit threat" to slavery, "they leave unanswered the question of how isolated acts of sabotage" might have posed "an explicit threat" to the larger southern social order. Yet it may be that the distinction between resistance and rebellion itself is a misleading one, and not merely because the varieties of rebelliousness were so varied. One does not have to suggest that every slave who hired his time or sold eggs at a town market plotted revolution to realize that southern whites were correct in thinking that *any* contact with cash set a very dangerous precedent. Midori Takagi rightly insists that "self-hiring privileges, cash bonuses, and crowded marketplaces did help slaves resist and rebel." Each time a bondman launched a "successful challenge," that act of autonomy helped lay the basis "for larger and more politicized forms of resistance." Historians err in believing that only the act of sharpening a sword constituted rebelliousness, for when slaves invested their cash wages in funding black churches or in "underwrit[ing] underground organizations that helped slaves escape," they were inflicting real damage on the system. But because putting an end to the "spirit of insubordination" would have meant eradicating urban slavery itself, Takagi adds, city authorities were ultimately powerless to act.[24]

At bottom, of course, rebelliousness was a question of intent. To achieve collective liberation, rather than merely to participate in random efforts at economic independence that might slowly eroded white control over them, large numbers of bondmen—already alerted to the possibilities of a different world through their contacts with urban markets—had to make the conscious decision to rise for their freedom. In most cases, this was a matter of leadership. Popular revolts require determined, charismatic leaders to pull together general discontent, to articulate how in-

23. Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 223.

24. Walter Johnson, "On Agency," *Journal of Social History* 37 (Fall 2003), 116; Takagi, *"Rearing Wolves to Our Own Destruction,"* 117.

termittent economic freedom could become literal freedom from bondage. As Gerald W. Mullin has suggested of Gabriel, the enslaved artisan rose to the fore due to his "businesslike" ability to "make decisions, delegate responsibilities, and pursue routine tasks to their completion." So too did aged carpenter Denmark Vesey become "the chief man" to the younger craftsmen in Charleston. As Mayor James Hamilton later conceded, as a businessman Vesey was "distinguished for [his] great strength and activity," and in the eyes of the black community, he "was always looked up to with awe and respect."[25]

If nothing else, routine contact with the urban market brought skilled bondmen into contact with other slaves who shared their dreams of economic liberty. As Walter Johnson concedes, "[c]ollective resistance is, at bottom, a process of everyday organization, one that, in fact, depends upon connections and trust established through everyday actions." Planter polemicists certainly recognized that the underlying danger of hiring out was not that it allowed for petty theft, but that it created an illicit network of trade and communication that could prove disastrous to white control. As Thomas Pinckney worried, contact with free blacks, other enslaved artisans, and even unskilled white laborers might transform obsequious bondmen into the "willing instruments of any delusive plan of mischief which may be presented to them."[26]

The fact that skilled bondmen recognized a common enemy did not necessarily prove that they recognized themselves to be members of a distinct class with specific economic grievances that could only be resolved through violent rebellion. When analyzing human behavior, no economic model can ever prove infallible. For each slave like the bellicose Monday Gell, a skilled harness maker who lived apart from his Charleston master in "all the substantial comforts of a free-man," there was another like quiescent George Wilson, a blacksmith for hire, who informed on his friend Rolla Bennett. Yet there are compelling hints, as David Barry Gaspar argues, that the "psychological and sociopolitical

25. Gerald W. Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (New York, 1972), 147; Kennedy and Parker, eds., *Official Report*, 81; James Hamilton, *An Account of the Late Intended Insurrection Among a Portion of the Blacks of the City* (Charleston, SC, 1822), 17. I am grateful to Peter Kolchin for this insight on the connection between intent and rebelliousness.

26. Johnson, "On Agency," 118; [Thomas Pinckney], *Reflections Occasioned by the Late Disturbances in Charleston* (Charleston, SC, 1822), 9.

base for a large-scale plot was perhaps strongest among the many artisans" who hired their time and earned a cash wage. If the economies of the southern states and territories in postcolonial America may largely be described as seigneurial, a crude form of capitalism—a mode of production characterized by free wage labor (or on occasion semi-free) and the separation of the labor force from the means of production—began to appear in the towns and cities of the early republic (as well as along the western Atlantic). On plantations from Virginia to Louisiana, master and slave forged a quasi-feudal bond, where the relationship between the two, despite the fact that the enslaved were engaged in forced labor, was primarily social rather than economic. But the transitional roles in which urban slaves found themselves—from the hiring out that was common in Richmond and Baltimore to the drawing of cash wages common to skilled slaves in Buffalo Forge and Brazil—were relationships based largely on market considerations, and they offered the enslaved a glimpse into a world of mobility and prosperity that even their masters could scarcely understand.[27]

The nearly utopian notion that a different sort of future was possible to slaves courageous enough to pick up a weapon informed most of the revolts and conspiracies that took place in the Americas from the mid-eighteenth century onward. Some of the slaves arrested in 1820 "for conspiring against the white people" in British Demerara appear to have been as concerned with protecting the emerging tradition of having two or three days a week to themselves, so that they could cultivate their provision gardens and go to the market with their produce, as they were with legal freedom itself. Eugene Genovese once argued that slave revolts in the age of revolution "must be understood primarily as part of the most radical wing of the struggle for a democracy that had not yet lost its bourgeois moorings." But perhaps a more precise formulation would be that most enslaved rebels were *only just* beginning to develop a bourgeois sensibility. When, for example, the enslaved blacksmith Gabriel planned to burn the Richmond warehouses in 1800 as a diversionary tactic, the destruction of property troubled some of his artisan recruits.

27. Charleston *Courier*, Aug. 23, 1822; James Hamilton, *An Account of the Late Intended Insurrection*, 21; W. Hasell Wilson to Robert Wilson, no date, Charleston Library Society; David Barry Gaspar, "The Antigua Slave Conspiracy of 1736: A Case Study of the Origins of Collective Resistance," *William and Mary Quarterly* 35 (Apr. 1978), 320.

George Smith, a slave who hired his time, said he "was not for burning the [ware]Houses, as he observed they would want the Whole of them for their own use" upon becoming free.[28]

None of this is to deny that rural slaves could be rebellious—and of course Haiti's Night of Fire began on the Plaine du Nord, just as Turner's revolt exploded in the cotton county of Southampton—or to suggest that urban slaves were perpetually on the barricades. But the fact remains that in most cases, rebel leaders came disproportionately from urban areas. The United States is hardly atypical in this regard. The vast majority of slaves on the mainland lived on farms or plantations, yet two revolts matured in New York City, two in or near Charleston, one in Richmond with ties to Norfolk, and one just below New Orleans on the heavily commercial sugar plantations of the German Coast. Outside the United States, the pattern was similar. The Demerara rebellion of 1823 began on the estates closest to Georgetown and situated on the highly profitable coast between the Demerara and Mahaica Rivers, and Robert L. Paquette has demonstrated that the scattered uprisings that shook Cuba during the 1830s and early 1840s took place in the commercial Western District plantations just outside of Havana.[29]

So too does the extant evidence strongly indicate that rebellion was the occupation of skilled slaves and men who grasped the power of cash. Field hands, of course, could be found tangled up in the court proceedings that followed slave conspiracies, but they rarely were the instigators of these plots. Admittedly, the extant documentation pertaining to rebellions invariably defies quantitative analysis, because white magistrates almost never asked the sorts of questions that historians would have had them ask. But when the occupational status of enslaved rebels can be obtained, it is clear that skilled slaves found their way into courts in numbers that far exceeded their statistical ratio in the overall slave community. In the 1835 Muslim uprising in Bahia, for example, five of the

28. Emilia Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823* (New York, 1994), 172; Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution*, 2; Confession of Young's Gilbert, Sept. 23, 1800, Executive Papers, Negro Insurrection, LV.

29. Robert L. Paquette, *Sugar Is Made With Blood: The Conspiracy of La Escalera and the Conflict between Empires Over Slavery in Cuba* (Middletown, CT, 1988). Even Nat Turner's rebellion, however, had an urban dimension, to the extent that the rebels hoped to reach the aptly named town of Jerusalem.

186 defendants were peddlers. Another ten were artisans, twenty-nine held unspecified urban occupations, and twenty-five more were domestics. Eleven were designated as either mariners or "farm workers," with the remaining 106 as unknown. Similarly, of the 135 slaves and free blacks put to trial by Charleston magistrates in 1822, occupations are known for 41 of the defendants. Four were carpenters, four were coopers, two were blacksmiths, and five were rope makers. The others were painters, cooks, stone masons, wheelwrights, ship caulkers, and draymen; not a single man, as far as the evidence indicates, waded Carolina's rice fields.[30]

Those were not isolated cases. Enslaved artisans took the lead in organizing rebellions across the Americas. In the fall of 1736 in British Antigua, a bondman named Court, alias Tackey, orchestrated an island-wide conspiracy with the aid of an enslaved carpenter called Tomboy. Many of those who joined the conspiracy were drivers, but most of the leaders were creole slaves who had never worked the fields. Among the rebels executed were thirteen carpenters, eight coopers, two masons, three domestics, and even three fiddlers, but of the forty-nine men banished from the island, only six were unskilled field workers. The judges who condemned the leaders, in language reminiscent of that later heard in courts in Richmond and Charleston, wondered how such artisans could "complain of the hardship of Slavery; their lives being as easy as those of our White Tradesmen and Overseers." Five years later, a similar group of slaves plotted against authorities in New York City. Although magistrates were even less concerned in this instance in discovering the occupations of the accused, Leslie M. Harris argues that "the arson attacks were part of an extensive plan among an interracial group from

30. Reis, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil*, 167; Douglas R. Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD, 2004), Appendix II. Martin, *Divided Mastery*, 178, argues that "privileged" bondmen orchestrated revolts, but primarily because "self-hired slaves were more loosely supervised by whites than were other slaves," and not because their skill made "them any less enslaved." That is true in part, yet as John Lofton, *Denmark Vesey's Revolt: The Slave Plot That Lit the Fuse to Fort Sumter* (Kent, OH, 1983), xi, wisely observed, "Revolutionary movements have usually been led and widely supported, not by the most deprived class but by those who were better off [and so] wanted to remove the remaining vestiges of tyranny precisely because they could visualize and appreciate the advantages of freedom."

the lower classes that sought to achieve greater economic and political equality."[31]

Despite this, a number of recent studies of the internal or domestic economies of slavery have focused on such entrepreneurial bondmen, but typically without explicitly connecting such involvement with the first steps toward rebellion. Several decades ago, Gerald Mullin suggested a link between assimilation and the development of a skill as laying the basis for overt rebelliousness, but perhaps a more accurate formulation is that such skills only led bondmen to consider organizing for their liberty when combined with the marketplace, and especially with urban centers. Certainly Larry Hudson understood this when he argued that access to cash and "the intrusion of market values" challenged "the more traditional values of the quarters." Across the American South, whites fretted that allowing enslaved sellers into Charleston or Savannah on Sundays weakened the hegemony of the master class by making slaves less reliant upon their owners, or that it provided them with the opportunity to gather and plot. But one of the real dangers, whether masters understood it or not, was "the market's ability to provide slaves with a source of self-esteem and material improvement that did not require them to go cap-in-hand to the great house."[32]

There can be little doubt that most whites frowned on marketeering activities, which they tended to associate with the theft of their own goods. Yet here too, evidence indicates that most masters—many of whom understood the larger Atlantic marketplace only imperfectly—failed to grasp the larger danger of allowing capitalist market values onto their plantations. Indeed, in discussing this point, Philip Morgan comes dangerously close to echoing Richard Wade's discredited theory that urbanization and economic freedom actually *inhibited* slave rebelliousness by giving bondmen too much to lose. In explaining why his award-

31. Gaspar, "Antigua Slave Conspiracy of 1736," 317–18; Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626–1863* (Chicago, IL, 2003), 43; see also Graham Russell Hodges, *Root & Branch: African Americans in New York and East Jersey 1613–1863* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1999), 97–98.

32. Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion*; Larry E. Hudson, Jr., "All That Cash: Work and Status in the Slave Quarters," in *Working Toward Freedom*, 84; Robert Olwell, "A Reckoning of Accounts: Patriarchy, Market Relations, and Control on Henry Laurens's Lowcountry Plantations, 1762–1785," in *ibid*, 38.

winning study features no separate chapter on rebellions, Morgan asserts that his entire book "is a study of resistance." Yet his claim that "slaves constantly achieved small victories" by working toward labor autonomy may help clarify why some scholars believe that actual slave plots never existed in New York in 1741, in Antigua in 1736, in the Chesapeake in the 1790s, and in Virginia in 1802. Rather than recognizing this "autonomous [labor] culture" as a stepping stone toward revolution, Morgan insists that by "carving out some independence for themselves," enslaved marketers simply "eased the torments of slavery."[33]

The debate over whether slave systems in the Americas were a curious variety of capitalism or a modern form of seigneurialism that rested uneasily within the framework of the Atlantic trading world is an old one, and one that gives no indication of resolution. But whether one chooses to regard the great planters of the western hemisphere to be calculating agrarian capitalists who operated their "factories in the field" according to commercial demand, or whether one sees them instead as fundamentally prebourgeois lords who participated in the larger Atlantic network even as they resisted its values and ideology, there remains the possibility that the slaves who entered into rebellion better understood the power of capital and its corrosive effect on the plantation regime, than did their masters. Cash, at the very least, allowed for the possibility of self-purchase, or purchase of a spouse or other family member. Typical of those involved in rebellions was the aged African Sanim, who was known to his Brazilian masters as Luís. Although he could scarcely speak Portuguese, Sanim was a skilled tobacco roller and an urbanite. He not only saved his meager earnings, but also organized a pool, or savings fund, for other skilled slaves. The practical Sanim divided this pool into three parts: One-third went to pay the masters' portions of the slaves' wages, and the remaining two-thirds went for the purchase of cloth to make Muslim garments and to buy letters of manumission.[34]

33. Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1998), xxii; Philip D. Morgan, "Conspiracy Scares," *William and Mary Quarterly* 59 (Jan. 2002), 165–66.

34. Reis, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil*, 132–33; I have waded into this debate in "Markets Without a Market Revolution: Southern Planters and Capitalism," in *Wages of Independence: Capitalism in the Early American Republic* ed. Paul Gilje, (Madison, WI, 1997), an essay that agrees with David Waldstreicher's warning against "the customary conflation of markets and capitalism." I certainly do not

In this regard, Sanim had much in common with Wat Tyler, who rose to the forefront of the English peasant revolt of 1381. Historians need to be sensitive to specific context, of course, as capitalist development—or lack thereof, in many places in the Americas—occurred at different time and at different rates in the western hemisphere. That said, historians of popular revolts, or those who wish to understand particular varieties of class formation, need to read as widely as possible in search of subtle connections. Trained, as most of us are, in a small portion of the globe and in an even smaller slice of time, we tend to miss the obvious. But as Rodney Hilton demonstrated more than three decades ago, the English peasant revolt was far from a traditional rural insurrection. The "focus of the rising," he noted, "was London," and artisans like Wat the Tiler resided just outside the city in "the most industrialized and commercialized part of the country," where old feudal relationships had been torn asunder "by the developing market economy." One does not have to argue that these craftsmen were bourgeois or even petty capitalists in mentality to suggest that the coming of a cash economy provided these men with a vision of new possibilities that lay beyond their tiny village or their lord's estate.[35]

This realization should not blind us to other factors that led to slave rebelliousness across the Americas. As Stuart Schwartz has observed, the Malê movement of 1835 revealed the "deeply African nature of Bahian slave culture," as well as how little that religiosity fit with the links that scholars from Eugene Genovese to Stanley Harrold have drawn between slave rebellions and "the wider political movements of the Atlantic revolution." But many of the Hausas involved in the revolt saw no contradiction between being, as João José Reis bluntly put it, "good Muslims and good businessmen." Nearly half of the Hausas swept up by authorities in 1835 were artisans or tradesmen who "came to the city to sell tobacco and other goods." In the words of the old Islamic proverb,

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mean to suggest that slave marketeers' contact with the market promptly turned them into capitalists. See his "The Vexed Story of Human Commodification Told by Benjamin Franklin and Venture Smith," *Journal of the Early Republic* 24 (Summer 2004), 269, note 1. On the continuing debate over this point, see Walter Johnson, "The Pedestal and the Veil: Rethinking the Capitalism/Slavery Question," ibid., 299–308.

35. Rodney Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free: Medieval Peasant Movements and the English Rising of 1381* (London, UK, 1973), 174.

"Merchants are the messengers of this world and God's faithful trustees on Earth," and if enslaved rebels from New York to Charleston, and from Richmond to Havana, did not share that faith, the evidence is that they more than shared the sentiment.[36]

36. Stuart B. Schwartz, *Slaves, Peasants, and Rebels: Reconsidering Brazilian Slavery* (Urbana, IL, 1992), 15; Stanley Harrold, "Slave Rebels and Black Abolitionists," in *A Companion to African American History*, ed. Alton Hornsby (Malden, MA, 2005), 203; Reis, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil*, 169.