



The Hall-Colley Debate: a Stop on the Road to the 1619 Project

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Abstract

The publication of the *1619 Project* in 2019 by the *New York Times Magazine* has proved to be a discursive pivot for historiographic debate over the place of liberty, justice and servitude in the social history of the USA. Discussion around this event has been focused and intense, but little has been done to situate the Project in either a wider field of historical sociology or a longer trajectory in the discourses of social and political history. By tracing a certain genealogy in this historiography back through the recent New History of Capitalism to a broader Atlantic and even global set of concerns in late-twentieth century social and cultural history, the article focuses on something I have named the Hall-Colley debate. Back in the early 2000s, this debate struck at the very heart of how liberty, captivity, servitude and domination are conceptualized and experienced historically, and it indicates an early formation of something much more developed by the time of the 1619 Project. While delving into the historiographic particulars of this debate around empire, freedom and capitalism, the purpose of this analysis is to identify how something one might call the ‘hierarchy of unfreedoms’ has gradually insinuated its way into the discourses of historical sociology up to and including the 1619 Project. The implication of this development has been a growing censoriousness in how we do social history, an increasingly maladroit handling of historical revision and reassessment, and a strengthening tendency towards closure in how we explore socially heterogeneous experiences of unfreedom in unanticipated places.

Keywords American politics · Atlantic capitalism · Class · Hierarchy of unfreedoms · Historical sociology · Historiography · Identity · Liberty · Republicanism · Slavery

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Introduction

The title alludes to a historiographic dispute that has resurfaced over the last few years in the pages of journals, newspapers, social media and the blogosphere, and which was sparked off in the late summer of 2019 by the publication in the USA of something called the *1619 Project* (Desmond, 2019; Hannah-Jones, 2019; Silverstein, 2019, 2020). Committed to print by *The New York Times Magazine*, the 1619 Project presents as a compendium of essays, articles and journalistic vignettes, which takes as its central motif the arrival of the first slaves of African origin to the shores of North America in the year 1619.¹ Brought in a vessel called *The White Lion*, ‘20. and odd’ enslaved persons were disembarked at the mouth of the James River in the Virginia Colony having been transported over the Atlantic from what is now the Angolan coast (Painter, 2006: 23–24). The effect to which the 1619 Project seems to aspire is a provocative juxtaposition with the more celebrated *Mayflower*’s 1620 arrival in Massachusetts Bay, which of course stands as a landmark in the foundational historiography of the USA.

In this vein, the Project goes on to narrativize the Revolutionary War of 1776 as an endeavour fundamentally to maintain the slave economy (Hannah-Jones, 2019: 18), with the American polity essentially compromised from the outset and ever since as a racial state predicated on the slave-power as the core of the American value system. The suggestion is that 1619 is the true founding date of the American story, and 2019 is its quatercentenary.

It seems that the Project ‘aims to reframe the country’s history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of Black Americans at the very center of the United States’ national narrative’ (Silverstein, 2019). Though the Project has received glowing praise from some quarters, objections have arisen from a gamut of critics, ranging quite broadly from outraged free-market ideologues and conservatives, through critically oriented intellectuals and academic historians, to irked contrarians and squeamish fellow travellers (see Magness, 2020a).

The contention revolves around two main elements in the brief mission statement recited above. Firstly, there is the shrinking conceptual space implied between ‘slavery’ and ‘the contributions of Black Americans’ in the history of the USA, recasting for some commentators a burdensome millstone that is decidedly counterproductive for any ‘constructive black American identity’ in the twenty-first century (McWhorter, 2020a; see also Reed & Mackaman, 2019; McWhorter, 2021; Reed, 2022). Secondly, the expression ‘at the very centre’ seems to sail too close for some academics to an absolute centre of schematic exclusivity, hermeneutic privilege and mono-causal explanation (Linker, 2021), which a number of historians in particular have found indefensible (Oakes, 2020; see also Burnard & Riello, 2020: 238). In general, the centre of gravity in these counter-critiques revolves around a serious discomfiture with what they consider to be an overly ideological agenda couched in its pages (Althusserian, as well as the more mundane Weberian sense of ‘ideology’). Suffice it to say that the Project

¹ Whether these were properly ‘slaves’, ‘servants’, or ‘captives’ has become a contested point (Painter, 2019; Guasco, 2017; Luban, 2018: 731).

has proven polarising, adding yet one more twist to the rearrangements that have swept across our intellectual–political landscape of late. Friends have become enemies and enemies’ friends, and finding common ground seems as increasingly difficult as it is increasingly necessary, at least to those of a more Habermasian persuasion.

The relative academic merit in the Project’s asserted propositions has also been called into question. Accepting the journalistic core of the 1619 Project as an essentially polemical enterprise (Coclanis, 2022: 485), its immoderation need not necessarily be held against it, but the sheer exclusivity and ‘reductionist interpretations’ in the Project threaten to take us into a place that has both a troubling past and an unnerving future (Coclanis, 2022: 487; see also Harris, 2020; Barbara Fields quoted in North & Mackaman, 2020).² Moreover, the self-styled originality of the enterprise has been deemed somewhat presumptuous by critical and progressive historians, political economists and sociologists, who are put off by the implication that they (and others now no longer with us) have not been doing for decades what the Project claims of itself (Magness, 2020b; Oakes, 2020; Coclanis, 2018: 8–9). Finally, the apparently reckless error in some of its content, as well as in its surrounding public spin offs, has also dismayed otherwise sympathetic observers who now feel that the line between the lectern and the pulpit has been crossed (Wilentz, 2020; Magness, 2020b; Oakes, 2020; McWhorter, 2020a, 2021; Harris, 2020; Fields quoted in North & Mackaman, 2020).

However, the problems stretch further than matters of scholarly rigour. Should the social and political aims of the Project be realised, what has not been addressed is the potential effect upon the public exploration, articulation, discussion and digestion of experiences of unfreedom as expressed by diverse groups and individuals not encompassed by the Project. Readers can think for themselves on which groups and experiences this might entail, but reference has already been made elsewhere to indigenous peoples (Wright, 2020), slaves brought to North America by the Spanish before 1619 (Torres-Spelliscy, 2019), tranches of Europeans labouring in varieties of enforced servitude (Painter, 2019; Wood, 2019) and black people in North America who have not drawn on the well of ‘Middle Passage epistemology’ (Wright, 2015, 2020). Similarly, some have drawn attention to the sweeping and dismissive suppositions put forth in the Project that seem rather tendentious and selective, such as Hannah-Jones’ perhaps incautious claim that ‘time after time throughout our history, the most ardent, courageous, and consistent freedom fighters *within* this country have been Black Americans’ (Hannah-Jones, 2021: 453). One can imagine a number of groups that might feel hard done to by this statement.

The exhaustive exclusivity of the 1619 Project has contained within it a monopolising thrust, whose historiographic aim seems to be proprietorial. Though its progenitors would be loath to admit it, the sectional bent of the Project might pose a real threat to our prospective enlargement of the space of human freedom through historical investigation, critical reflection and dialogic engagement. As we shall see, the taste for monopoly in the 1619 Project is not entirely novel, and by delving a

² For a broader treatment of this reductionism, see Mohandesi (2017); Reed and Reed (2021).

little into its genealogical prehistory, we can understand not merely how we have come to this moment, but also how this moment is part of a longer historiographic struggle over the discourse of unfreedom that has unfolded through the last couple of decades.

The particular concern expressed here is that the manoeuvre resurfacing in the 1619 Project is a familiar one and it plays upon and feeds into something that one might call the *hierarchy of unfreedoms*. By positioning the 1619 Project historiographically, we can appreciate more clearly how it is not just a random piece of journalism, but part of a wider synchronic tendency in cultural and historical sociology towards interpretive closure, moral patenting, anti-intellectualism and a potentially dangerous censoriousness in the 'hierarchy of unfreedoms'. The argument presented here tries to reveal one of the potential dangers that lurks in the competitive drive for historiographic monopoly engendered by the intersectional schematic as manifested through the likes of the 1619 Project. In its conscious efforts to open up the discourses of oppression, this schematic actually seems to draw us toward a kind of 'caste system of social justice' (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020: 128–131), a *vampire castle* that realises the 'dis-articulation of class from other categories' and 'seeks to corral people back into identi-camps' (Fisher, 2013). This is the core of what I shall critique below.

It must be said that intervention into this discourse is a tricky matter. No small number of individuals have foundered in its treacherous waters (see Harper's, 2020), but the need for sincere and dissenting thought is directly proportional to this danger. To critique is not to reject, but rather to engage in an enterprise of mutual development through disagreement. I reject the notion that this article is merely a 'privilege-preserving epistemic pushback', or even that it is a species of 'shadow text' (Applebaum, 2017: 886), for I cleave to the modern notion that what one writes is still more important than one's position in writing it (see Gitlin, 1995: 200–219). My critique here is motivated not by the usual knee-jerk denialism nor aversion to unpleasant truths that can be found in the pages of the *National Review* or the *Claremont Review of Books*, but by a very real concern over this larger, unfolding historiographic trajectory in how we discuss experiences of unfreedom. It is therefore to this trajectory that we must now turn.

The New History of Capitalism

With an intellectual background in left-bank French poststructuralism, post-Marxism, discourse analysis and critical race theory, the 1619 Project has emerged out of a quite particular historiographic conjunction of discourses and debates around slavery, capitalism and modernity identified as the *New History of Capitalism* (Coclanis, 2022: 489), which in turn has coalesced over the 2010s out of a much broader field of research on the history of empire, trade, colonisation, money, industry, agroecology, labour, slavery, commodification, accumulation and uneven development, dating back to the 1960s and beyond (Rockman, 2014). In Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman's Introduction to the flagship volume *Slavery's Capitalism* (2016), one can nevertheless identify a red thread

running through the New History of Capitalism to the 1619 Project statement (See also Beckert, 2015; Baptist, 2014; Johnson, 2013).

During the eighty years between the American Revolution and the Civil War, slavery was indispensable to the economic development of the United States. Such a claim is at once self-evidently true and empirically obscure. A scholarly revolution over the past two decades, which brought mainstream historical accounts into line with long-standing positions in Africana and Black Studies, has recognized slavery as the foundational American institution, organizing the nation's politics, legal structures, and cultural practices with remarkable power to determine the life chances of those moving through society as black or white (Beckert & Rockman, 2016: 1).

Many of the critical objections made to the 1619 Project, regarding originality, accuracy, utility and sometimes sincerity, have already been rehearsed in academic reactions to the New History of Capitalism scholarship, and the connection between the two has been noted (see Hilt, 2017; Olmstead & Rhode, 2018; Vries, 2017: 133–134; Stanley, 2016: 346–347; Wright, 2014: 877–879; 2017; Clegg, 2015). The summation of Beckert and Rockman that 'American slavery is necessarily imprinted on the DNA of American capitalism' (Beckert & Rockman, 2016: 3) has clearly been absorbed, expanded and further essentialized in the 1619 Project, where Nikole Hannah-Jones states more emphatically that '[a]nti-black racism runs in the very DNA of this country' (Hannah-Jones, 2019: 21). Around this strangely essentialising, ahistorical and rather misleading portrait, similar themes, conclusions and claims recur throughout both the NHC literature and the 1619 Project in a way that indicates the presence of a common historiographic direction of travel. The New History of Capitalism and the 1619 Project might work from the shared and uncontroversial assumption that 'American slavery emerged to meet the needs of colonial exploitation and capitalist expansion' (Desmond & Emirbayer, 2020: 69), but the common ground between the two goes further than this joint position on the history of capitalism and bondage in the Atlantic world.

The emergence of the New History of Capitalism in the 2010s is seen as part of a post-2008 radicalisation in academia (Coclanis, 2018: 2; Burnard & Riello, 2020: 232), particularly regarding views on historical capitalism (Barryre & Blin, 2017: 1; Clegg, 2015: 281; Hilt, 2017: 511). The understandable consequence has been a turn away from the more tepid temperatures of economic history (Coclanis, 2022; Magness, 2020b; Hilt, 2017: 511), and towards a more hostile critique of capitalism marked by the traumatic experience of crisis-ridden financialisation (Sklansky, 2012, 2014; Coclanis, 2022; Hilt, 2017: 514; Clegg, 2015: 283, 290). However, there seems to be a 'particular perspective' or strand within the New History of Capitalism (Hilt, 2017: 512), from which the 1619 Project has been especially inspired. This strand draws more heavily on the 'the history of subjectivity and identity' (Sklansky, 2012: 239), owing less to Marxian critiques post-2008 than it does to the historiographic trajectories that were part of a deeper prehistory to the New History of Capitalism. Considered by some as a 'logical outcome of post-war deconstructivism' (Barryre & Blin, 2017: 6), this 'prehistory' has more to do with what Peter Coclanis calls 'po-mo strains of cultural history' (Coclanis, 2018: 2), and to what others see as the 'persistence of culturalist approaches from the 1990s' (Scott Marler in

Beckert et al., 2014: 507), the primacy of ‘political construction’ over economic determination (Burnard & Riello, 2020: 229; see also Enstad, 2019: 84), and the gradual insinuation of identarian agendas into historiographic debates on early-modern history (North and Mackaman 2021). Despite the fair quantity of reflexive and collegial discussion over the composition and agenda of the New History of Capitalism (see Beckert, et al., 2014), there nevertheless lurks unacknowledged not exactly a rift within it but at least a plurality or spectrum.

When Seth Rockman tried back in 2009 to navigate the shoals of identity and class in his analysis of early Baltimore’s downtrodden, he carefully reassured the readers of *Scraping By* that his point was ‘not to say that class trumped race (white supremacy) and gender (patriarchy) as the primary determinant of who worked where and owned what’. He also tried to remind us that ‘these analytical categories of historical experience were not in competition, and historians need not offer one primacy over another’ (Rockman, 2009: 11). However, his mediating and conciliatory words perhaps unwittingly drew attention to an implicit tension emerging within the New History of Capitalism, sometimes unhelpfully boiled down to the race/gender vs. class dichotomy, and a tension that has heightened into the furore around the 1619 Project. The problem comes when the fruitful contradiction in this tension gives way to a single thesis in the dialectic.

The historiographic problem here is connected to a more general and practical one in poststructuralist critical theory, and that problem is an immanent one. Whilst acknowledging the contribution to the tabernacle of historical materialism made by poststructuralist critique, cultural history and the ‘po-mo’ problematisation of epistemic categories (Kristjanson-Gural, 2008; see also Hall, 2007: 139), its more critically sensitive features seem to have morphed into a mainstream of ‘reified postmodernism’ through the 2000s and into the 2010s (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020). Principally, what was a problematising and critical voice has shifted into the speech of normative assertion grounded upon paradigmatic predicates and reliant upon founding texts. The question mark has been replaced by the period, which in turn is giving way to the exclamation mark.³ What was destabilising has calcified into doctrine, and what was deconstructive is reassembling into a more or less coherent edifice. Most crucially, a *rive gauche* critical disposition that was almost pathologically reflexive has acquired the now familiar tone of anglophone moral authority strengthened by an ironic eventuality few saw coming⁴: the return of grand narrative (McWhorter, 2020b; see also Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020: 65, 209). As unavoidable as narrative might be, Angus Burgin is right that one of the ‘potential hazards’ in its metastasis into master narrative can be that it becomes ‘totalizing’ (Burgin in Beckert et al., 2014: 507–508). At the very least, it can close up the discursive space for the legitimate expression of heterogenous experiences and for other types of discussion (see Stanley, 2016). When it comes to the popularisation of poststructuralist critical

³ This seems to reflect Pluckrose and Lindsay’s (2020) periodisation of ‘postmodernism’ (1960s–1970s), ‘applied postmodernism’ (1980–1990s) and ‘reified postmodernism’ (2010s).

⁴ A notable exception would be Eagleton (1996: 45–68).

theory, Peter Coclanis and David Carlton have noticed the contradiction, principally implicit in the New History of Capitalism, but also explicit in the 1619 Project.

Too often their [poststructuralist theorists] ideas have been appropriated to bolster agendas not their own. In particular, an irony arises from historians' simultaneous embrace of postmodernism and narrative, for "story-telling" privileges precisely the sort of linearity of expression that a true postmodern skepticism would question and that economic historians have in fact been adept at criticizing over the years. More likely, the historians' preference for such "stories" has less to do with postmodernism than with identity politics: the insistence that one's "story" is inviolable, that stories are incommensurable with one another, and that the best way to approach the past is through juxtaposing these stories *Rashomon*-style' (Coclanis & Carlton, 2001: 95-96).

Beyond the confines of academic history, this is a tendency more and more in line with one of the 'quadrants' that George Packer discerns in today's American political culture. It is driven by a counter-Whiggish sibling of presentism, and it reaches into the past in order to establish its ahistorical worldview, to solidify its moral certainties and to achieve its sectional political objectives.

[It] sees American society not as mixed and fluid, but as a fixed hierarchy, like a caste system. An outpouring of prizewinning books, essays, journalism, films, poetry, pop music, and scholarly work looks to the history of slavery and segregation in order to understand the present—as if to say, with Faulkner, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." The most famous of this work, *The New York Times Magazine*'s 1619 Project, declared its ambition to retell the entire story of America as the story of slavery and its consequences, tracing contemporary phenomena to their historical antecedents in racism, sometimes in disregard of contradictory facts. Any talk of progress is false consciousness—even "hurtful." Whatever the actions of this or that individual, whatever new laws and practices come along, the hierarchical position of "whiteness" over "Blackness" is eternal' (Packer, 2021).

This schematic moralism is why some see among the disciples of the New History of Capitalism not just an 'activist impulse' (Hilt, 2017: 512),⁵ but a lack of 'scholarly comity' (Coclanis, 2018: 6), an 'overtly judgemental and ahistorical' disposition (Burnard & Riello, 2020: 230) and even the tones of a 'militant insurgency' (Wright, 2017). Militant insurgency does not frighten *me*, but militant insurgents can be another matter. Unlike some of the economic historians who have fronted the push back on the New History of Capitalism, I am not especially perturbed by the prospect of 'critical social analysis by historians' (Hilt, 2017: 512), and my epistemological proclivities are probably more aligned with the Foucauldian stance on knowledge production and historical 'representation' taken by Caitlin Rosenthal

⁵ For the deeper connection of moralism, censure and anti-intellectualism to 'activism', see Featherstone, Henwood, and Parenti (2004).

(2016). Some critics might opine the ‘history as rhetoric’ that they see in the New History of Capitalism, and contrast it unfavourably with the more proper and conventional ‘history as scholarship’ (Hilt, 2017: 518), but the boundary for me is not so clear. However, to the extent that scholarship in the New History of Capitalism and its progeny veers deeper and deeper into a mode that is ‘sweeping, polemical, and rooted in present-day politics’ (Burnard & Riello, 2020: 232), and to the degree that ‘indignation outranks accuracy’ (McWhorter, 2021: 38), it risks enabling popularisers who are too indulgent of their own identarian needs and even their own personal complexes. The upshot? Problematisation is replaced by assertion, questioning gives way to declaration, and collegiality is lost to personal angst. Most importantly, for a critical agenda at least, solidarities among the subaltern, the dispossessed, the dominated (in those places where such solidarity is actually appropriate), are being pulled apart into balkanised recrimination and internecine dissipation.⁶

Although it has drawn upon historical materialist vocabularies and conceptual tools, this strand in the New History of Capitalism trajectory is drawing ever further away from the Marxian view of historical capitalism as a constellation of immanently contradictory conceptualisations that require dialectical analysis to open up spaces of critical contingency and autonomous judgement. At the same time, it seems to have abandoned the search for the ‘common shared element’ that produces the *Multitude* of the dispossessed and dominated (Hardt & Negri, 2005) and that makes of its uneven heterogeneity, something broadly coordinate in common struggle. Instead, with the identarian involution we have historiographic practitioners that are ‘far less comfortable than their brethren on the left with the messy ambiguity that is history’, and who have no time for the ‘baffling indeterminacy in history’ (Mokyr, 2007: 2), rather ‘preferring more dichotomous, categorical formulations’ (Coclanis, 2022: 490–491; see also McWhorter, 2020a),⁷ but which nevertheless follow the movement of ever decreasing circles towards the self (see Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018; Mohandesi, 2017). As Jodi Dean has so eloquently summarised, the intense investment in identity that ‘shores up a fragile individuality... provides a location for political righteousness’, and so ‘prevents the formation of the solidarities opposition to capitalism requires’ (Dean, 2016; see also Dean, 2018; Reed & Reed, 2021; Mohandesi, 2017; Michaels, 2010; Zizek, 2018). The outcome seems to be a line from ‘postmodernism’ to ‘reactionary tribalism’ via identity thinking insufficiently reflected upon in an ever strengthening Strong Program (Antonio, 2000). This is the road to 1619.

Can we get back to a more ‘constructive’ line (Táíwò, 2022) on the proper relationship between what is common and heterogenous, shared and individual, universal and particular, abstract and concrete, generic and idiosyncratic, comparable and unique in our critical histories? Without subsuming who we are within neutralising pseudo-universals, and with at least a nod to multiplicity, disparity and the

⁶ Though some people do not like the term, ‘balkanization’ is nevertheless the appropriate expression. It is a metaphor with a ‘built-in unhappy ending’, and as such serves as ‘a reminder of the futility of using history as a basis for endless recrimination’ (Gitlin, 1995: 230).

⁷ For a vintage expression of the point, see Eagleton, *Illusions of Postmodernism*, 25–27, 59.

polymorphous, it should be apparent that personal identification with category can so easily slide into party and section.

In *Scraping By*, Seth Rockman ‘does not find a shared consciousness, identity, or politics percolating from working people themselves, but *sees class as a material condition* resulting from the ability of those purchasing labor to economically and physically coerce those performing it’ (Rockman, 2009: 11, my italics). This seems to strike the right pose. When we become preoccupied with categoric identity, we lose track of the material *relation*, the relation as an isomorph that runs along the contours of categoric identities, coordinating in plurality, but in a way that challenges our grievance monopolies and shows how we might combine unevenly against powerful asymmetries endured in common. In a way that casts doubt on the more incautious claims to which Rockman has put his name elsewhere, he goes on in *Scraping By* to recognise in the plurality of Baltimore’s nineteenth century labouring poor how ‘an American working class came into being through its common commodification and the ensuing circumstances of material insecurity’, and how ‘although positioned in different ways by race, sex, nativity, or legal status, all these workers experienced the exigencies of the labor market, navigated underground economies, and developed inventive survival strategies that were usually more alike than different’ (Rockman, 2009: 11). In this, we have at least something to analyse, discuss and debate across identity thresholds, in which we can coordinate analytical nuance with critical clarity and sensitivity to difference. At that time completely at odds with the red thread of the 1619 Project, Rockman’s prescription in 2009 was that ‘historians must look for the larger system constituted at the intersection of these categories and seek the overlapping “relations of ruling” that organized the lives and labors of workers of divergent subjectivities and identities’ (Rockman, 2009: 11; see also McNally & Ferguson, 2015). This echoes the ‘concept of layers within layers’ (Wallerstein, 1974: 119), with which Immanuel Wallerstein struggled in his efforts to coordinate what is common in the relation of unfreedom without swallowing up the coexistent disparities, distributions and asymmetries in that unfreedom as experienced by different groups, categories, fractions or even individuals in the world-system. This is not unrelated to the “layering” of causes’, as opposed to ‘mono-causal factors’, for which critics of the *New History of Capitalism* have been pleading (Burnard & Riello, 2020: 238).

Critical analysis and exegesis of the New History of Capitalism has been fairly extensive, so I want to look at a moment in the genealogy of 1619 that is prior, tangential, but nevertheless part of the same discursive emergence. I want to investigate a moment in the ‘prehistory’ to the New History of Capitalism mentioned above, to something I have termed perhaps somewhat theatrically the Hall-Colley debate. This exchange will take us beyond the American confines of the New History of Capitalism (Barryre & Blin, 2017; Burnard & Riello, 2020: 226; see also Hilt, 2017: 511), as we shift sideways into a more global framework centred around the British empire, the wider Atlantic metabolism, and the New World *in toto*. The relevant British and Commonwealth discourses on early-modern capitalism and empire have tended to concentrate on the Caribbean, but they do share with the New History of Capitalism an orientation around the early-modern

Atlantic economy, the transatlantic slave trade, the role of slavery in the accumulation frontier of capitalisation and the scholarly tree planted by the pioneering work of Eric Williams (1944).

The Hall-Colley debate revolved around the issue of freedom in this matrix of empire, exploration, slavery, captivity, colonisation, capitalism and war, and it involved two participants in a BBC radio broadcast in the early 2000s. Though the implications of the debate extend beyond the parameters of the programme to which the direct exchange was confined, the broadcast does condense fairly well the central terms of what is a much broader debate over the relation of freedom and captivity in the history of capitalism and empire. The exchange gives a good indication of how the issue of historical experiences of ‘unfreedom’ can become embroiled in the kind of historiographic meta-statements that are the backbone of both the 1619 Project and the New History of Capitalism, and which have come to form such a contentious terrain of discursive struggle today.

The specific assumption here is that the Hall-Colley debate succinctly encapsulates a moment in the conflict over the historic discourse of unfreedom, as well as how the ‘hierarchy of unfreedoms’ insinuates its way into our thinking on freedom through that conflict. It indicates how this hierarchy of unfreedoms animates the academic trajectory out of which the 1619 Project has drawn energy and inspiration, as well as how problematic the hierarchy of unfreedoms can be in practice for the enlargement of emancipatory space in the conceptual struggles of our century. Having explored the particulars of this debate, and I strongly recommend the interested reader listens beforehand to the radio dialogue for themselves, we can then return afterwards to some implications of the 1619 Project in light of the Hall-Colley exchange.

The Exchange

During a BBC Radio 4 episode of *In Our Time* (17th October 2002),⁸ for which the weekly topic chosen was *Slavery & Empire: Were Britons Also Captives?* Professor Linda Colley discussed her 2002 book *Captives: Britain, Empire, and the World, 1600–1850*. In this work on memoir and social history, Colley explores the thesis that empire itself, as a form of social organization, a national enterprise or as a system of political domination, subjected certain Britons to relations of unfreedom in the social and historical framework of empire, irrespective of their otherwise advantageous positions in the social relations of that formation. Enlisting the figures of *Crusoe* and *Gulliver* (Colley, 2003a: 1–3), the book’s contribution has been to question the conventional categorization of ‘captive’ in the experience of British empire,

⁸ “Slavery & Empire: Were Britons Also Captives?,” *BBC Radio 4: In Our Time*, 17 October (2002) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00548jd> (Official BBC Radio 4 Website). As of June 2023, an alternative version can be found via following link: <https://www.scribd.com/listen/podcast/418259836>

seemingly in an attempt to move somewhat from an emphasis on individual agency in historical understanding of empire onto the importance of structure.⁹

In her work ‘both of individual recovery and of imperial revision’ (Colley, 2003a: 3), Colley’s ‘captives’ are not just ‘captives in uniform’ (2003a: 308, 312). They are ‘men, women and children from widely varying social and ethnic backgrounds, of different ages, religious denominations, politics, occupations, education, outlook and even language’ (2003a: 12), but who constituted the ‘underbelly of British empire’ (2003a: 4). Though not exclusively so in the early years before 1730, these captives are mostly ‘poor, mundane and miscellaneous, or private civilians from only modest backgrounds, merchant seamen, private soldiers, traders, male and female settlers, farmers, stray travellers and the like, typical representatives of the bulk of early modern humanity’ (2003a: 289). Further examples might include pressed-ganged mariners, galley slaves, shipwrecked survivors absorbed into native populations, colonial soldiers or junior officials unable to return to the metropole for contractual or economic reasons, minor traders, camp followers and all manner of individuals who were ‘trapped in the empire by serving it’.¹⁰ Many of these individuals were subject to a kind of ‘double captivity’, meaning they were ‘captives of their own states’ (‘Slavery & Empire’; see also Colley, 2003a: 312).

But the book contributes so much more to our comprehension of empire and unfreedom than simply the indication of structural constraints. The book destabilises many of the assumptions that have become almost doctrinal in our public discourses and historiographic memorialisation. There is the reiterated vulnerability of Europeans in the early-modern period, whether as individuals or various types of collective or group. There is the heterogeneity that belies the very categories through which we speak and write historiographically on empire with so much ease. There is the messy plurality in attitudes to be found among captives’ narratives, accounts and memoirs, as well as the problematic and often unanticipated lines of identity expressed in them. There is the inconsistent, and sometimes almost absent, ‘othering’ of both European and non-European peoples, groups, populations and individuals, in direct contradiction to the way that we now assume ‘othering’ to have existed definitionally through the blanket term ‘orientalism’. There is also the temporal unevenness of empire and the morphology in social form in all of the above as the circumstances of empire changed for those living through it, under it and in various relationships to it. But what is most salient for our purposes here is how ‘the British state [particularly in the period 1750–1830] markedly increased the number of its own people exiled overseas for long periods of time’, and how ‘[m]any of these

⁹ John Clegg is just one historian for whom ‘questions of political agency and possibility have been replaced by a largely moralistic concern to identify the ways that modern American capitalism is still haunted by an evil legacy’ (Clegg, 2020: 76).

¹⁰ Colley has drawn attention elsewhere to the plight of sailors press-ganged into the British Navy, thousands of men often effectively kidnapped from littoral settlements when the Impress Service “invaded communities and seized men by force” to be confined in wooden hulls for years on end, often to the death (Colley, 2003b: 286, 303).

exiles were working-class men and women dispatched to imperial locations and set to labour there under a substantial degree of discipline, and with little say over when or where they would ever return' (Colley, 2003a: 312).

The thesis provoked quite an insistent response from another panellist, the cultural historian Professor Catherine Hall, who seemed to object to the very basis of Colley's thesis. But what was most telling was how it was not particularly the technical historical scholarship, but rather the indirect political meta-statement of the thesis, that motivated the persistent objections emanating from Hall.

Professor Hall evidently objected to what she took to be the equilibrations of the Colley thesis, principally with respect to transatlantic slaves and colonised subjects, claiming that the political outcome of such revisionism in the Colley thesis would effectively be to render the fundamental asymmetries of colonialism and empire into a kind of moral *smörgåsbord* bereft of any clear schema of oppression, dispossession, annihilation and culpability. Regarding those circumstances where white Europeans were captured in war, exploration and commercial travel, Hall asserts that 'their status as "captives of war" was different from the status, for example of those who were enslaved. It is a very different situation to be a slave from being a captive'. Turning to the notion of individuals being 'captives of their own states', Hall emphasises that there are different 'forms of unfreedom'. She is unwilling to entertain Colley's parallel discussion of chattel slaves and early industrial miners or textile workers in the European cores states. She mounts an immovable defence of the unique status of unfreedom in New World slavery that denies equation with other subaltern classes, groups or fractions to be found across the great social landscape of empire. However, it has to be said that Colley does not seem to be making an explicit attempt at direct equation, as she elucidates in her book.

Let me be clear what I am arguing here. I am not suggesting that Barbary captivity and slaveries were comparable to black slavery in the Caribbean and North America. Clearly, they were not (2003a: 63-64).

Suggestions made at the time, and occasionally since, that Barbary corsair assaults and the enslavements of whites that sometimes ensued were comparable to the transatlantic trade in black slaves are, for instance, unsustainable... white corsair victims were increasingly allowed a hope of redemption and return, as black slaves shipped across the Atlantic in this period never were (2003a: 62).

Just as Catherine Hall has done excellently elsewhere in her attempts to render visible the relatively forgotten stories of metropolitan British slave-ownership and the ownership of slaves by 'free people of colour' (Hall, 2002, 2014a; Hall et al., 2014; Hall & Pick, 2017), it is Colley's principal aim to restore the visibility of subaltern groups in the narrative of Empire, which she argues has largely been expunged in the conventional 'elitist view of empire' that remains preoccupied with 'the proconsuls, the generals, the great intellectuals, the great explorers and missionaries'. The subjects of Colley's book are not the sort of texts, individuals, narratives or experiences 'with which conventional imperial histories – or even post-colonial histories – normally concern themselves' (Colley, 2003a: 241). Colley is trying

to enlarge our appreciation of the great social range in the experiences of slavery, captivity and other forms of unfreedom without reduction, exclusivity, or competitive hierarchy, and that ‘while it is wrong to draw comparisons between the North African system of seizing and exploiting human beings and the triangular trade in black slaves, it is no less inappropriate to marginalise Barbary depredations and the slave-systems they serviced, or to suggest – as some have done – that Barbary captivities were simply invented or exaggerated by Europeans as a means of vilifying Islam’ (2003a: 62–63). When reminding us in Part One of her book how ‘the diversity of captive experiences is a warning against any simple monochrome judgement on the quality and significance of this Barbary threat’ (2003a: 62), Colley is making a broader historical point about ‘captivity’ and unfreedom in general, which she then goes on to develop in a number of other spatio-temporal locations of empire from the Hudson Valley to the Coromandel Coast.

As the broadcast progresses, Catherine Hall seems to recognise in some sense that there is a problematic ambiguity, possibly even contradiction, couched in her own position. This crystallizes around the old problem of free vs. unfree labour. Regarding the comparisons made *en passant* in the programme between early industrial British ‘wage-slavery’ and transatlantic enslavement, Hall does recognize the unfreedom in what she critically calls ‘so-called free-labour’ and goes on to recognize further the time-honoured anti-capitalist objection – ‘what’s free about labour that you have to engage in because you can’t survive if you can’t do it?’ She clearly holds the radical, critical and even Marxian view that such labour—excluded from the means of production and rendered totally dependent upon the will of those who own it—entails a denial of freedom, irrespective of the apologia of classical political economy regarding free contract and ‘choice’ (see Rockman, 2009: 11).

However, immediately following this recognition, there is an apparent *volte-face*, as she goes on then to deny any fair analogy of early industrial proletarians and New World slaves regarding freedom in the manner that she seems to believe is implicit in the Colley thesis. This comes in the following problematic statement: ‘... but supposedly it’s a free contract’ (regarding wage-labour). Hall’s strange quasi-acceptance of the free-market ideological assertion that she had just criticised moments before is now mobilised in her second assertion that there is only a marginal diminution of freedom to be found in the case of the wage labourer, making the phenomenon therefore not as much of an affront to liberty as New World slavery. In committing to this quantitative view, along with the calculus of freedom it implies, she oddly affirms the ideological acceptance of the free-labour argument typical of capitalist apologetics, even though she has just demonstrated her profound scepticism of it. She falls into this confusion, it seems to me, in order to maintain her original position that wage labour can never entail the same loss of freedom as New World slavery. Understanding this position, as well as the political objectives that require one implacably to defend this position, is essential for understanding the deeper problems with the New History of Capitalism through to the 1619 Project.

This problem of free vs unfree labour is as deeply murky as it is longstanding. The literature around the topic is vast, and defining the proper relation between the two can sometimes resemble theological debates over the mysteries of the Trinity. Matters are not helped by the phraseology of Marx himself, for whom ‘the veiled

slavery of the wage-earners in Europe needed, for its pedestal, slavery pure and simple in the New World' (Marx, 1990: 803). In this characteristically early recognition from Marx of how essential the global division of labour was for capital accumulation, he clearly 'placed metropole and colony in one analytic frame' (Hall, 2007: 122), but the relative juxtaposition regarding freedom and exploitation is not analytically clear. All we can say is that there is a discreet yet inextricable social interrelation between the two. We have both identity and difference, implied similarity and stated contrast. In the last analysis, how does one equate the seemingly incomparable, especially when there persists the sense of a common substrate.

There are valid reasons for maintaining a clear distinction between the two, just as there are valid reasons for minimising the distinction. Jeffrey Sklansky seems to be building on Marx's formulation above when he recounts how 'industrial capitalism relied from the start on the labor of a heterogeneous array of paupers, prisoners, "coolies," peons, sailors, servants, contract laborers, sharecroppers, and many others who worked the wide borderland between freedom and slavery alongside the rising ranks of wage earners' (Sklansky, 2012: 237). Consequently, the broad working class (if such an expression is legitimate for the early-modern period, see Elliott, 1985) is 'defined less monolithically by the earlier binaries of "freedom of contract" as opposed to bound servitude, paid as opposed to unpaid labor' (Sklansky, 2012: 237). In his view of antebellum slavery as undeniably capitalist, John Clegg goes further.

The distinction between slaves and wage laborers, then, does not consist in whether their labor-power is bought and sold. Rather this is what unites them, whilst simultaneously distinguishing them from all other forms of labor, whether it be the labor of peasants, serfs, or members of the family or tribe. The fact that both slave and wage labor are commodified is precisely what makes them suitable to capitalist accumulation (Clegg, 2020: 83).

However, he then goes on to make a crucial distinction.

To say that both Southern [US] slaves and Northern [US] wage laborers were subject to labor processes governed by capitalist constraints is not to identify their conditions. Workers under capitalism experience a broad range in the extent and form of exploitation, and there is arguably no greater difference than between slaves and wage laborers (Clegg, 2020: 85).

Where do these problematising views on the distinction between free vs unfree labour bring us? Though he himself does not juxtapose the terms, it seems that Clegg arrives at a salient distinction, that between *condition* and *conditions*. The subtle difference between the two is that the former consists of a *relation*, whilst the latter alludes to the *degree* of something experienced. To this we shall return.

On the one hand, one cannot but sympathise with Catherine Hall in that there does seem intuitively to be something superlative and exceptional in the condition of the New World chattel slave that evades equivalence with the experiences of other social categories who lived in varied states of unfreedom. On the other hand, in the radio discussion, we are left sceptical of any monopoly over unfreedom arrogated to New World slavery and uneasy with the potential marginalisation of

other experiences of unfreedom entailed by that historiographic monopoly. Rather than solve this Gordian knot with a simple stroke, a more constructive line of analysis would be to consider what the participants are *doing* in this exchange. This means we have to identify exactly what the motivation is for Hall's original position, because it is for the sake of this position that her consistency of argument is apparently sacrificed in contradiction as the dialogic encounter with Colley, as well as with Felipe Fernández-Armesto, continues. What is she trying to achieve in her opposition to the Colley thesis, which seems to bring her into such contradiction in the free vs unfree labour distinction?

Of course we cannot read anybody's mind, but the answer to this problem I believe is revealed as the programme goes on, during which it becomes evident that it is not the question of freedom per se that lies at the heart of Hall's opposition to the Colley thesis, but the question of *suffering*, and it is with the implied relative diminution of suffering in New World slavery resulting from Colley's thesis that she is so apparently displeased. The conceptual confusion that arises in her differentiation of various forms of unfreedom seems to stem actually from a need to retain a privileged discursive position for certain social, cultural and racial categories in a hierarchy of world-historic suffering, and therefore *victimhood*. Hall finds herself drawn into a contradiction between a meta-statement on liberty, the loss of which numerous categories of people experienced, and the highly differential experiences of *injustice* as understood principally through the metric of suffering, which must remain the privileged historiographic property of the New World slave in her cultural politics. This seems to be not unconnected to the implicit distinction recognised by John Clegg, that is to say between the common *condition* in a certain kind of relation (i.e. commodification, dependence, incarceration, unfreedom) and the variable *conditions* of injustice through the lived experience of suffering and exploitation. How can we differentiate what might be common to the relation of unfreedom across the variable experiences of unjust suffering?

The Condition of Unfreedom: the Conditions of Suffering

To grasp the subtle distinction between the *condition* of unfreedom and the *conditions* that can be experienced in being an unfree person, and in order to appreciate the significance of the distinction for the Hall-Colley exchange, we will have to make a small excursus into the concept of liberty, after which we can return to the hierarchy of unfreedoms. What we need is a way to distinguish a common substrate to the liberty concept that will neither be lost in the heterogeneity of concrete experiences nor conflated with other concepts. To do this efficiently, we will have to look briefly at the contrast between the liberal and the republican concepts of liberty in the history of political thought. As we shall see, the importance of this historic distinction lies in its ability not merely to cast some light on the confusions of the Hall-Colley exchange, but in its capacity to set out for us a framework through which we can understand how freedom and suffering, or freedom and justice, coexist in our

discourses around liberty and servitude. The distinction will also allow us to expose the propensity in Catherine Hall's conflation to hinder the expression and subsequent consideration of previously dismissed, marginalized and forgotten stories of unfreedom of the kind brought out by Colley's *Captives*. Instead of exploring the innumerable and insufficiently recognized ways in which human beings are rendered unfree, as much in the present and future as in the past, we are left with a tendency toward exclusivity and closure.

While some might find it both unusual and unnecessary here to wander off the path of historical materialism into the byways of early-modern political thought, there is good reason for such a manoeuvre. The *Republican*¹¹ and the *Marxian* traditions of political thought might admittedly seem strange bedfellows (O'Shea, 2020: 549), but the case has been made for a constructive coproduction around the conceptualization of freedom (Isaac, 1990). This seems to be especially true, if one's objective is to deconstruct historiographically the dominant grand narratives of liberal capitalism (Isaac, 1990: 461–462). At the very least, the existence of commonalities, shared presuppositions, points of contact and overlapping planes suggests that a non-syncretic framework can credibly coordinate the two traditions for the critical analysis of modern liberty in advanced capitalist societies (Leipold, 2020; Muldoon, 2022; Thompson, 2013, 2018), particularly in matters of dependence, domination and servitude (Gourevitch, 2011; Welsh, 2018). In fact, no less a figure than Quentin Skinner has explicitly noted how '[t]he vocabulary of Roman legal and moral philosophy is strikingly prominent, for example, in Marx's analysis of capitalism, especially in his discussions of wage-slavery, alienation and dictatorship' (Skinner, 1998: x; see also Gourevitch, 2013, 2015; Leipold, 2022). Contrasting the republican or Roman concept of liberty with the liberal concept can provide an instructive base for the main critical analysis.

The liberal understanding of freedom that predominates in anglophone societies is derived historically from the austere materialist ontology of Thomas Hobbes (Skinner, 1998: 4–10, 59–60; Pettit, 2001: 46; Laborde & Maynor, 2008). In this social ontology, there is nothing in existence but bodies that are in perpetual differential motion. Freedom in this ontology can only be the freedom of a body, whether that be a molecular body, a body of water, a personal body or a body politic. The implication of the Hobbesian liberal conception is that freedom is simply the absence of constraint on a body. Freedom cannot concern the freedom of a will (*arbitrium*), for the will is not a body, and therefore to coerce the will is not to deprive a person of their liberty, that is to say, their freedom to choose or 'de-liberate' (Skinner, 2008a: 44; Pettit, 2005: 133; Pettit, 2012a: 120). For Hobbes, even were a highwayman to offer you the choice at gunpoint of surrendering your money or your life, you are entirely at liberty to choose to give your life. It is therefore a fundamentally free choice entailing no loss of liberty. Concerned less with the will than with the hindrance or constraint on bodily action, this emphatically somatic

¹¹ It ought not need saying, but the confusion seems to persist. This tradition has nothing to do with the *Republican Party* (GOP) and its politics, but to a long tradition of political thought around what, in the English-speaking world, used to be called the *Good Old Cause*.

conception of liberty has nothing to say regarding the condition or status of *dependence* and the generalized effect of dependence on an individual's *capacity* to act as a result of the social relations to which they are subjected.

This contrasts with the republican or neo-Roman tradition of liberty, as made famous by Quentin Skinner and Philip Pettit's studies on the liberty concept from Antiquity, through the early-modern period, right up to the present (Lovett & Pettit, 2009; Pettit, 1997; Skinner, 1998). This generally less appreciated, though ever-present, understanding of liberty derives from the distinction in Roman jurisprudence between the *liber homo* (free person) and the *servus* (slave). For the republican, who draws on the depths of Roman jurisprudence and Justinian's *Digest* of Roman law, freedom in its deep background pertains to the 'status' of free persons (*de statu hominum*). In particular, the term 'free' can only be applied to a person who is not placed under the will (*arbitrium*) of another, that is to say, the arbitrary will of another (Skinner, 2008b). To be so placed is to be unfree, and thus a *servus*. Freedom is then the status of not having a 'master' (*dominus*), upon whose will one is dependent, meaning that freedom is for a person to live in a status of *independence*. This is sometimes paraphrased by Philip Pettit as 'non-domination'. To the republican, one can have one's bodily freedom to move hindered, but still remain a free person. Likewise, one can be totally unhindered bodily, but still be a *servus* by virtue of one's subjected condition to potential arbitrary interference on the part of a master who might in actuality turn out to be benign, absent, or incompetent (Pettit, 1997: 21–22, 32). The question of suffering, or justice, is then irrelevant to this definition of liberty, in which suffering can be entirely present or wholly absent, as in the recurrent trope of the 'free slave' in Roman comedy (Skinner, 1998: 40).

The purpose in presenting these two very deep historical traditions of thought on liberty is not to ascribe either one respectively to the participants in the Hall-Colley debate, for both concepts are clearly at work in the discussions about captives, chattel slaves and other forms of unfree persons. The point is to clarify the terms in which one might understand how freedom can be distinguished conceptually from suffering, but more specifically how the degree of bodily intervention does not define freedom. This framework for approaching the problem of liberty allows us to see past physical confinement to another way of understanding liberty that can explain the lingering sense of there being a common substrate to diverse experiences of unfreedom beyond our immediate intuition that unfreedom is limited to the somatic.

Perhaps the most striking feature distinguishing the neo-Roman from the liberal conception of freedom is the obvious categorical opposition internal to the former. Whereas the liberal understanding of freedom as the absence of constraint recognizes gradations therefore of freedom, according to the degree of bodily hindrance actuated on a person's freedom of movement ranging from slight to absolute, the neo-Roman admits no such continuum. Referring as it does to the status or condition of persons, rather than to a range of phenomenal experiences, the neo-Roman tradition posits either the status of the *liber homo* or that of the *servus*. A person is either one or the other (Pettit, 1997: 31), there is no intermediate position in this analysis (Skinner, 2002a: 248), and the categories are exhaustive. One cannot be placed

somewhat under the arbitrary will of a master or be *somewhat* independent. However, as the categorical dyad refers to *relations*—political, social, economic, etc.—a person might be free regarding one relation and unfree regarding another. This means that whilst the categories are exhaustive, they do not exhaustively describe the totality of relations in which a person is situated, and which of course are multiple in a person's life (Pettit, 1997: 58). For instance, one might be a *servus* in one relation, such as subordination to the arbitrary will of an employer or parent, and independent in another, such as regarding the limited will of one's Monarch in a constitutional monarchy.

The implications of this categorical differentiation are quite significant. Whilst the gradations of liberal freedom can be more felicitously alloyed, compromised or traded-off with other conceptual virtues in the act of conceptualisation, and thus be capable of integration into a calculus of moral judgement in political and social theorising, attempts to effect the same operation in the case of the republican notion encounter greater difficulty. I suspect that *this* is what lies behind our problem of trying to speak simultaneously of justice and liberty, or suffering and freedom.

It is worth bearing in mind at this point two crucial insights into the republican tradition, based on what has just been set out regarding the categorical nature of the liberty concept. First, freedom is indivisible (Jordan, 1994: 190–191). One will read frequently about 'forms of enslaved, bonded and coerced labour' (Harvey, 2019: 70), but what is being expressed is the relationship between plurality and a common substratum. Whilst unfreedom can take various circumstantial *forms*, freedom itself is invariant. Second, freedom cannot be hierarchized. This means that it is not compatible with a calculus, which perhaps helps to explain why republican thought was so loathed by Jeremy Bentham and how it has stood in particular contrast to Utilitarian calculus ever since.

My juxtaposition of liberty and justice might seem arbitrary, but there is a reason for its enlistment here beyond mere verisimilitude. Within the historic conflict between the liberal and republican traditions of political thought, there is a divergence in the propensity to foreground the concepts of justice and liberty in their respective constellations of meaning (Skinner, 2012; Forst, 2013: 155). In the liberal tradition, justice seems to be greatly influenced by the notion of suffering, in addition to the more conventional notions of equity, proportionality and commensurability that are usually anticipated in this classical concept. In other words, *sentiment* is integral to the understanding of justice in the liberal tradition, along with other notions of course, and seems to have been incorporated into the genealogy of justice in its passage through the Enlightenment (Frazer, 2010). This is in stark contrast to the specifically neo-Roman historical discourses of Renaissance republicanism, in which sentiment has been accorded an unsurprisingly parsimonious consideration (Shaw, 2003; Skinner, 1992).

Whilst liberty is a key concept in both traditions of thought, it is therefore ironically more pre-eminent in the republican than in the liberal (Skinner, 2013). For the latter, consideration of liberty has been tempered by coterminous considerations of justice, to which it is alloyed in greater or lesser proportion. From Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) to Rawls' *Theory of Justice* (1971), a recurrent preoccupation with just, fair, equitable conduct is integral to the liberal concept of freedom

and what it means to live in a free society. A great legacy of eighteenth century European thought is the ‘tendency of the moral to become political’ (Palonen, 2002: 93), with sentiment at the very core of this moralization of the political. Whilst recent republican theorists have made more explicit attempts to integrate justice or ‘legitimacy’ into democratic theory (Lovett, 2010; Pettit, 2012b: 59–82; Forst, 2013: 154–168), republicanism, from the Renaissance through the English and American revolutions (Skinner, 2002b: 210; Skinner, 1978: 183; Skinner, 2013), tends to be characterised by a relative marginalisation of humanist and Ciceronian justice in favour of liberty as the central and pre-eminent concept, with justice being treated in the main either as a meaningless concept, as a subordinate concept, or just as a corollary of living freely.

All this is not to deny the centrality of both concepts to how we approach slavery, servitude, captivity and the ranging historical experiences of unfreedom, but simply to achieve some clarity over our historiographic conflicts by disentangling freedom from suffering. This brief excursus has the potential to clarify how freedom and suffering can be, and have been, related to one another in diverse ways, as well as how the way in which they have been related to one another in historical discourses can become confused. With this clarification, we can go on to see how muddling one into the other does not just result in mutual misunderstanding in debate, but can have unappealing consequences socially and politically. These consequences include the insinuation of a ‘hierarchy of unfreedoms’ into discourses on freedom, as well as the unreflexive politics of unfreedom that flows from precisely the lack of clarification to which I have tried to bring light. We can now elucidate exactly what is meant by the ‘hierarchy of unfreedoms’, and how it pertains to this discursive relation between liberty and justice.

A Historiography of Suffering

Returning to the Hall-Colley exchange, a confusion seems to persist throughout the dialogue between what it means to be a free person and the conditions of suffering that are experienced in the condition of being an unfree person. Far from being either benign or insignificant, the potential problems that can arise from such a confusion are in fact quite daunting. By conflating those operations in the same moment, Professor Hall is drawn into a contradictory confusion, a confusion that arises from a fear that to reassess the relation of unfreedom historically is a threat to the conventional historiographic recognition of suffering on the part of the *colonised* at the hands of *colonising* oppressors, when it does not necessarily pose any such threat.

This problematic tendency is not confined to the works of Catherine Hall, but seems to be more widespread. Pulled once again into the free vs. unfree labour problem, Professor Mark Harvey seems to fall into a similar confusion when he argues that ‘industrial capitalism drove the expansion conjointly both of unfree labour and of industrial wage labour’ (Harvey, 2019: 68), which of course implies that industrial wage labour is not unfree. However, we once again encounter contrasting formulations throughout the same text: ‘free wage labour’ (pp. 66, 70, 76, 84) and “‘free” wage labour’ (pp. 76, 81), expressions which just as obviously imply both an

underlying scepticism over the putative freedom of wage labour and a recognition of its centrality to the capitalist ideology that he is critiquing. We are left with the same vacillation as we witnessed in the Hall antithesis. Is wage labour then free or unfree? As with Catherine Hall, Professor Harvey seems drawn into this inconsistency because it is subordinated in his article by what appears to be its central motivation (entirely legitimate in its own right): to counter the Whiggish proclivity to disentangle British society unjustifiably from the suffering colonial slaves off whose backs that society owed much in its industrial development. In this article on 'Slavery, Indenture, and Development in British Industrial Capitalism', Harvey mentions neither 'liberty' nor 'freedom' even once, but in the first paragraph alone emphasises the 'original violence of capture', the 'subsequent violence of taking slaves to market', the 'violence of the cotton plantation regimes', and the more general 'violence of colonization' (p. 67). Preoccupied rightly with the injustice, violence and suffering in the colonial context, sufficient care is nevertheless not taken to conceptualise liberty clearly, in both senses of the word, and the result is conceptual conflation and confusion of the condition of unfreedom with the conditions of violence and suffering.

It will by now be of no surprise to learn that this emphasis on suffering can also be found in the key texts of the New History of Capitalism. As Peer Vries has noted in the case of Sven Beckert's *Empire of Cotton*, the greatest emphasis is placed upon the 'importance of violence and coercion in the economic history of the West'. However, whilst Vries concurs that the incorporation of the 'violent aspects of Western economic history' into the narrative of capitalism is indeed necessary, the equally important ways in which 'they relate to other constituent elements of capitalism' is something he finds pushed aside by the monochrome and stentorian emphasis on violence in the somewhat reified expression 'war capitalism' (Vries, 2017: 135; see also Coclanis, 2022: 490). Most notoriously, in Edward Baptist's 'torture-led growth thesis' (Olmstead & Rhode, 2018: 8–11), suffering is the absolute focus for his handling of the slave experience (Baptist, 2014; see also Baptist, 2016). My point is not to criticise the concentration on suffering and violence in either slavery or the history of capitalism. Gavin Wright is correct that 'reminders of the human reality of slavery are valuable for economic historians, who can easily become preoccupied with analytical abstractions and conventional quantitative measures' (Wright, 2014: 878). The point here is that there is a definite focus on suffering running through the New History of Capitalism to the 1619 Project from its 'prehistory', such as exemplified in the Hall-Colley debate, and that this has significant ramifications for how freedom is handled both conceptually and experientially.

The further point is that such a preoccupation with suffering can have unintended but general consequences for adjacent academic discussions around other experiential categories of the human condition, such as that around human freedom. Returning to Catherine Hall, the primary concern in much of her considerable scholarship is similarly with the 'violence, pain and shame' of New World slavery (Hall, 2013). The consistent preoccupation is (right and fairly enough) with 'the horrific nature and scale of the violence, killing and physical abuses' in colonial slavery (Hall & Pick, 2017: 15), where 'there were no restraints and the violence was terrible' (Hall, 2014b: 29). The main thrust iterates how 'terror and coercion, the presence of the

whip and the threat of death, were at the heart of plantation society' (Hall & Pick, 2017: 3), and how the 'liberty of the whites... was predicated on the symbolic and real infliction of terror on the bodies and minds of the enslaved' (Hall, 2014b: 30). In short, the object is the colonial 'theatre of cruelty' (Hall & Pick, 2017: 4),¹² and though the question of liberty is implicit in the discourse it is rolled into the concern with suffering and victimhood without adequate consideration of the subtle and distinct relation between liberty, justice, coercion and suffering.

There is much to commend in the antithesis of Catherine Hall. Her critique is entirely legitimate in its aims, as well as in the contribution it makes to the project of critical enlightenment. Its agenda is 'the repair of relations damaged by historical injustice' (Hall, 2018: 12). To achieve this, we must 'undo the forgetting' (Hall, 2013) and remind ourselves that 'those of us living in the rich societies of the West have all, albeit profoundly unequally, enjoyed the fruits of racial capitalism' (Hall, 2018: 9). As 'disavowal and distantiation have been crucial mechanisms facilitating avoidance and evasion' in the collective memory of colonial slavery (Hall, 2014b: 24–25; Harvey, 2019: 67; Hall et al., 2014: 17), there is admittedly a real danger in 'disavowal of the past' (Hall, 2013, 2018: 12–19; Hall & Pick, 2017). Revisionism can threaten with disintegration those critical narratives upon which emancipatory trajectories for subaltern groups have relied. World-historic asymmetries can be erased from History through revisionist historiographies that however unwittingly can often legitimise the reinstatement of past asymmetries and subjugations into the present (Said, 2003: 3–6). It is a perennial possibility that 'new legitimations for inequality' can be re-forged out of 'the legacy of Britain's colonial past' (Hall, 2013). As a famous Frenchman once pointed out, one must beware the 'open-ended eclecticism' that can 'serve as a cover for all sorts of manoeuvres' (Foucault, 1980: 134). Likewise, for historians of colonialism and imperialism such as Catherine Hall, the Colley thesis could very well conjure up memories of the opportunistic enlistment of Parliamentary republican rhetoric in the seventeenth century made by colonial slaveholders in the eighteenth century, who mobilised the neo-Roman discourse of the slave in their own struggle against abolitionist metropolitan authority (see Hall & Pick, 2017: 3–8; see also Skinner, 2002c, 2008c, 1998: 50; Morgan, 1975; Luban, 2018; Hannah-Jones, 2019: 18). The door of reflexive awareness goes two ways.

The intention here is neither to marginalise nor to banish suffering, violence, cruelty or injustice, from how we define or discuss slavery, servitude or captivity (see Hilt, 2017: 518). In fact, the explicit association of 'sentiment' and 'slavery' in the history of abolitionism has been a central one in constructing discourses of emancipation since the eighteenth century (Carey, 2005; Levecq, 2008). It is rather that the conceptual handling of liberty needs to be undertaken in clear distinction to other relevant concepts within the discourse around forms of unfreedom, so as to avoid the deleterious consequences of conflation and confusion. A careful, and sometimes explicit, positioning of concepts in discourse is helpful to avoid unproductive

¹² This has more recently been echoed in Baptist (2014), wherein 'systematised torture' of southern American slaves is effectively credited with being the 'ultimate cause' of the Industrial Revolution (pp. 135, 141, 413).

exchange. This necessity becomes all the more acute, when the condition of unfreedom itself is at issue. In which case, it becomes imperative that it be treated in a manner distinct from the great variety and asymmetry of conditions that are experienced as a result of being unfree.

This brings us to the question as to why a failure to do this might be an especially worrisome prospect. The cumulative effect of a historiographic politics of suffering and victimhood, when combined with an inadequately clear and discrete positioning of liberty, is a conceptual conflation that equates attempted reconceptualization of liberty in social historical contexts with revisionist distantiation, denial and disavowal of that suffering and victimhood. If we can separate the two for the purposes of discussion and social analysis, we can perhaps avoid the competition between the two whereby rethinking one threatens the status of the other and in so doing prevent conceptualisation of one from being perceived and received as self-serving denialism that must be resisted implacably. Consider the following extract from Catherine Hall.

New understandings can never undo the devastation and loss that was suffered in the past and that lives on for descendants in the present. But thinking differently can perhaps awaken a sense of the responsibilities of “implicated subjects” who have benefitted culturally, economically and politically from the hurts inflicted on others (Hall, 2018: 15).

Aside from nailing my point about the implicit centrality of suffering in Professor Hall’s thinking, this extract also communicates her fear of revisionism. However, this entirely undialectical remark also indicates how ahistorical anti-revisionism can sail close to the wind of censorious condemnation regarding those ‘new understandings’ that do not fit neatly into the trajectories now hegemonic in certain quarters. Not all questions posed by ‘implicated subjects’ are acts of ‘distantiation’. There is the potential here for a worrying asymmetry in the discourse, whose rightness is taken for granted, and according to which the acceptability of one’s contribution to that discourse is judged. If one listens again to the Radio 4 broadcast, especially in light of this excerpted quote, one senses an increasingly familiar kind of reaction in Catherine Hall’s objections to the Colley thesis. It is a reaction that is being reproduced across our academic discourses—the conflicts around the 1619 Project being but one instance—and that seems overly hostile to fresh ramifications in the historical analysis of liberty when those ramifications are not immediately confluent with the particular agenda being favoured by the person who objects, even when those ramifications are sensitive and enlarge rather than contract our understanding of human unfreedom. It is this reaction that is troubling, and which contributes to the reproduction of what I will set out momentarily as the ‘hierarchy of unfreedoms’.

The Hierarchy of Unfreedoms

From the effort to secure privileged positions of victimhood in a world-historic calculus of suffering, there flows the *hierarchy of unfreedoms*. What is fascinating about this manoeuvre is how heartfelt empathy quickly calcifies into pious

sentimentality in the hierarchy of unfreedoms. As we saw in the Hall-Colley exchange, the intuitive move made by critical, thoughtful and progressive individuals to block what they perceive to be revisionist propositions and intimations is entirely understandable. But what is sometimes missed is how such a move itself can become the kind of dogmatism that it was intended originally to challenge and how it is therefore necessary to identify this possibility and to attempt a framing of how and why it comes to pass.

The act of affirming a privileged scale of unfreedom begins with the admirable intention of safeguarding the received experiences—historical and contemporary—of the vulnerable, the downtrodden, the speechless, the destroyed, the subordinated and the dominated from reactionary strains of revisionism that seek opportunistically to equalise the range of human experiences and that risk leaving behind a complacent and relativistic indifference based upon the self-serving and cynical assumption that we all exist equally in a universal condition of injustice and oppression. This is the fear that motivates the moral outrage arising in response to historical revision, and it is understandable. To defend the historiography of oppressed and annihilated categories of humanity from Whiggish revisions of history is necessary and laudable. But what one often finds is that the effort to defend a history of oppression and injustice gravitates towards a calculus of suffering, and it is with a hierarchy of *suffering* that we are left, rather than one of freedom. People X suffered more than People Y, and therefore Z. This leads to serious problems when we want to talk about liberty as a concept, and when we want to isolate the concept so as to say something about it as a relation or categorical status common to diverse group experiences in a way that does not become occluded by conflation with other kinds of experience.

This is especially true, for reasons outlined earlier, in the case of the neo-Roman concept of liberty. As we move from the horror of chattel slavery, through the enslavements of Barbary corsairs and the pressganging of unwilling seamen, to the drudgery of early industrial textile workers and those who reproduced them domestically, as well as to soldiers of the line and their camp side retinues, we see that unjust suffering is omnipresent but arguably attenuated as we move through these conditions. However, according to the neo-Roman understanding, the isomorph of liberty arguably remains unaltered in each instance. There can be no calculus of liberty when understood in the categorical terms of the neo-Roman tradition. The beneficial effect of this is to draw attention to places of unfreedom hitherto unacknowledged by liberal emphasis upon somatic hindrance and ‘free choice’. The movement through these social forms of unfreedom seems like a move from matters of world-historic profundity and meaning for humanity to relative triviality and irrelevance, but this is simply because of the preoccupation with a calculus of suffering and the mode of *pathos* in which it is embedded. However, as rhetorically potent as it might be, the *pathos* of suffering has no priority in the republican concept of liberty, particularly in the (highly juristic) Roman strain of the concept, which rather relies much more in its rhetorical construction on the tropes of *logos* and *ethos*. Perhaps most intriguingly, and most usefully, we should consider how the calculus of suffering might compromise our thinking on liberty over emerging social problems today, a calculus that is at odds with the categorical terms of the

republican concept of liberty that some are valiantly attempting to bring into critical sociological analysis,¹³ so as to enlarge our comprehension of contemporary unfreedom from sex-trafficking to pop-up carwash work.

The conclusion of this analysis can be summarised in this way. The insistent inclusion of the sentiment of suffering in the act of conceptualizing liberty, which presents in discourse through the kind of muted moral outrage we witnessed in the Hall-Colley exchange, might well be a necessary constituent element of a free society in the struggle against oppressions and dominations of subordinated categories. However, when it is deployed in conceptualisation, and so also insinuated back into the critical discourses that breathe life into this activity, it tends to engender an implicit hierarchy of unfreedoms, whether in historical analysis or in the empirical treatment of contemporary social problems. This hierarchy does not necessarily tend towards the historiographic sacralising of certain forms of unfreedom (e.g. chattel slavery), thus ring-fencing them as taboo and beyond the pale of re-evaluation, as is intended by its creators. What it does do is facilitate the trivialising of other forms of unfreedom as experienced by others, subordinating other struggles for autonomy and self-government to that which one has decided to privilege, and thus undermining the zero-level of equality upon which freedom indivisible is predicated.

The emergence of 'victim culture' is a particular case in point (Campbell & Manning, 2018). It has had the implication that 'your catastrophe, unlike ours, is ordinary; unlike ours is comprehensible; unlike ours is representable' (Novick, 1999: 9). In short, the outcome of the historiographic hierarchisation of suffering is not simply an elevation of one identity group into prime and privileged place, but also a diminution of the suffering and thus apparently legitimate claims to consideration on the part of other groups. Charles Maier referred to this as a societal 'competition for enshrining grievances' on the part of various groups (1993: 147).

That the enlistment of sentiment has shielded unacknowledged political and social assumptions from proper scrutiny and contestation ought not to be surprising, and this has by no means been an unusual feature of historic discourses on slavery and unfreedom. In her analysis of the eighteenth and nineteenth century transatlantic literature on slavery, Christine Levecq observed how the 'presence of sentiment in a text was not just about eliciting feeling from the readers', but '[i]t inevitably revealed a particular political ideology, and induced an acceptance of its aims and limitations' (Levecq, 2008: 21). One ought both to beware and be aware of the ways in which readers might be 'predisposed by political ideologies to respond to different emotional situations' (2008: 22), predispositions that one can see determined by the hierarchy of unfreedoms and the surrounding contours of a static and normative discourse of identity dried out and solidified in its present configuration. It is but a small concomitant step to moral censorship and social conformity induced in the manner so notoriously feared by John Stuart Mill.¹⁴

¹³ Examples include Snir and Eylon (2016); Dumitru (2018); Breen (2017); Bogg (2017); Boseley (2019); Hoye (2021).

¹⁴ Levecq notes how 'sympathy and sentiment in antislavery texts were not just about slavery, or even about the particular thoughts and feelings of black men and women, but about conveying an encompassing political ideology' (2008: ix).

The moralization of politics, alluded to earlier in the Enlightenment preoccupation with sentiment as a necessary component in the concept of justice, has left an enduring legacy throughout Modernity, and the persistent and recurrent emergence of a hierarchy of victims seems to be one of them. As early as the French Revolution, the outraged reactions among supporters of the *ancien régime* gravitated quickly into a strategic discourse of victimization, introducing its logic into modern political discourses. Sophie Wahnich has argued that ‘Thermidor inaugurated for our age the reign of emotional victimhood. If there was competition, it was no longer to produce a hierarchy of heroes and martyrs, but rather a hierarchy of victims’ (2015: 93). We can see here how, regardless of progressive or emancipatory intent in how one militates through hierarchisation, such hierarchies emphasise victims rather than heroes, spark off a race to the bottom, ending in a situation where the unfreedoms of others end up making way for the unfreedoms of one’s own in the discourse.

In a discursive field, such as is the cult of the victim, the ‘voicing of pain and outrage is alleged to be “empowering” as well as therapeutic’ (Novick, 1999: 8). Thus, it offers a means of altering the relations of power in contemporary society, doubtless in the pursuit of justice and redress, but also in turn as a technique for the securing of liberty, autonomy and self-government. But what is often missed is how such endeavours undermine other discourses of unfreedom experienced by others in the same historical events, conjunctures and contexts that are being explored historically, and whilst it might in effect secure greater liberties for some, it often does so at the expense of others.

The destructive and regressive potential inherent to the hierarchy of unfreedoms transcends the narrow confines of academic debate. It is so much more important than a pedantic matter of intellectual neatness. It bears upon our capability to coordinate critical analysis, practice and ultimately organisation. It threatens to frustrate the increasingly fruitful and effective coordinating tendencies in critical theory, and instead enhances divisions among the subjugated along the fault lines of identity grouping (Gitlin, 1995: 33–36). In place of sophisticated and innovative analysis that coordinates critique from subaltern positions toward a genuinely universal horizon, it promotes ‘false concreteness’, intellectual civil war, pillarization and ironically retards the cross fertilisation of emancipatory concepts (Gandehsa, 2020; Mohandesi, 2017). This is where we have arrived in the 1619 Project.

Conclusion

Beyond the 1619 moment, we have to navigate through the sectional bombast and internecine gambits to a more enriched and coordinate understanding of freedom and justice in the discursive conflicts ongoing in the genealogy that I have outlined. If there is a commitment, surely it is to promote a more sensitive appreciation for the great range of subaltern experiences of unfreedom across our societies, and thus the acquisition of an analytical repertoire blessed with greater potential to enlarge freedom’s domain regardless of section, party, category, identity or group.

I must say that my own Marxian proclivities draw me toward the ‘concrete universal’ as a credible way to escape this impasse (Welsh, 2023), and so to a greater

sympathy for the more sophisticated strains of universalism now out there. Though it might be romantic to adhere unreservedly to Sean Wilentz's possibly presumptuous view that 'the fight for black freedom is a universal fight; It's a fight for everyone', movement in the other direction surely is 'bad for understanding the radical tradition in America' (Quoted in Serwer, 2019). The contrary view has prevailed for decades now among what Todd Cronan calls the 'new post-Marxist Left' (2017: 74), which long ago replaced 'the early New Left politics of universalist hope' with 'the late New Left politics of separatist rage' (Gitlin, 1995: 146; see also Jacoby, 2022). Recognizing that 'the calculus of a people's suffering is a poor basis for organizing a society in real time' (1995: 229), Todd Gitlin saw in the early 1990s that 'to recognize diversity, more than diversity is needed. The commons is needed. To affirm the rights of minorities, majorities must be formed' (Gitlin, 1995: 236; see also Lilla, 2016: 225). If this is the case, then any move to monopolize historical victimhood should be resisted, not with denial or distanciation, but with a comradely recognition that, as cathartic as it might be, the hierarchy of unfreedoms provides no sound basis for a social politics of intellectual critique, solidarity in action and progressive social transformation in an advanced capitalist context.

The historiographic trajectory that has brought us to the 1619 Project takes us deeper into something that threatens to become an anti-materialist idealism (Niemuth et al., 2019), or just an 'easy cynicism' (Wilentz, 2019), and which certainly has little capacity to get us past the 'the born-to-lose protest spirit of the late 1960s' (Gitlin, 1995: 231). It is strange that Matthew Desmond can remark on how '[c]apitalists leveraged slavery and its racial legacy to divide workers – free from unfree, white from black – diluting their collective power' (Desmond, 2021: 181), but fails to appreciate how the Project to which he is a contributor risks achieving the same effect – 'the same soft apocalypse to which Americans have apparently grown inured: more inequality, more punishment of the poor, more demoralization and pathology among them, the slow (or not-so-slow) further breakdown of civil solidarities' (Gitlin, 1995: 230).

Irrespective of the relative merits or demerits of the 1619 Project, by situating it in a longer genealogy back through the New History of Capitalism to the social and cultural history of the later twentieth century, we can begin to ask what is perhaps the most pertinent question. In Foucauldian-Epicurean vein (Foucault, 1980, 2000: 11–16), what kind of knowledge is most suitable for the way in which we wish to govern ourselves (see also Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018; McWhorter, 2021)? It is interesting to note how the genealogy I have identified in the preceding pages coincides with the broad arc of our present Kondratieff b-phase downturn (Arrighi & Moore, 2001; Wallerstein, 2000, 2010). The question we have to ask ourselves is whether or not this kind of ideological and discursive trajectory is desirable in such a world-historical context (see Reed, 2022). At the very least, a more comradely tone is imperative (see Dean, 2019; Reed, 2022). As Wallerstein entreated, we must try 'to hear those we deem of good will, even if they do not share our views', because '[o]pen debate will surely build greater camaraderie, and will perhaps keep us from falling into the sectarianism that has always defeated anti-systemic movements' (Wallerstein, 2010: 142). Given the tremendously fractious forces that are inevitably brought to bear already upon the growing ranks of dispossessed in the asymptote of this our b-phase (Welsh, 2020),

should we not resist the sectional temptations of inter-category competition and the lures of identitarian victim culture in what some see as a ‘postmodern 1930s’ (Varoufakis, 2016: 238)? If Rockman is right that ‘in many ways, the postindustrial economy of the United States looks surprisingly like the preindustrial economy of early republic Baltimore’ (Rockman, 2009: 15), then his description of that city’s dependent, mastered and working poor could apply once more to our own time of high neoliberal sclerosis.

Collectively, their labor animated the cities of the new United States in the decades following the American Revolution. Whether male or female, native born or immigrant, Euro-American or African American, enslaved, indentured, or free, these working people struggled to scrape by. All “lived poor” – a hand-to-mouth existence characterized by minimal control over their own labor, periodic spells of joblessness, and severe privation. Their living situations were precarious and easily jeopardized by external forces (Rockman, 2009: 2).

In our treatment of the liberty concept, we need not depart from ‘a history of capitalism predicated on the polyphony of multiple workers’ voices and experiences’ (see Rockman, 2009: 15). But might it not be better to return to Rockman’s earlier position on the labouring poor in *Scraping By*, that ‘what a free black sawyer, a German-born seamstress, an enslaved hod carrier, and the wage-earning street scrapers shared were lives of arduous labor that netted no economic security in return’ (see Rockman, 2009: 15)? This is not to re-centre labour in the discourse, but rather the substrate of dependence and subordination to the condition of domination beneath the arbitrary will of others. If the post-2008 radicalisation that has spawned the New History of Capitalism is to be truly sensitive to the social and cultural implications of financialised capitalism—and still recalling the sympathies I expressed for Caitlin Rosenthal’s take on knowledge production—then the pressure that the accumulation regime places upon solidarities among the subaltern of the Atlantic world needs to be recognized accordingly and an appropriate knowledge-complex developed. Whilst paying due regard to the unevenness of experience across and between groups, this requires a greater emphasis on the isomorph of unfreedom in the social relations of our mode of production and its historically particular accumulation regime, as well as resistance to any temptation to monopolise a hierarchised discourse based upon personal identity, such as we find embedded in the 1619 Project.

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