

**Comments on *Scraping By:*  
*Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore***

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Last summer I spoke at a major labor and working class history conference in Chicago and then commented on a session later in the proceedings. At that session a scholar remarked in presenting that his paper, on free black history in antebellum St. Louis, was the closest thing to any discussion of slavery at the entire large gathering. He was young enough to be surprised, and I'd been around long enough not to be. The gap between what is called working class history and that of racial slavery remains very wide with both the content and the methods of slavery studies making little impact on how labor is studied.<sup>1</sup> As some one who has worked in both of these areas I have long lamented this reality and long accepted that it would not change. Seth Rockman's fine book so forcefully challenges, from its subtitle to its forceful final lines, such artificial separation of free from unfree labor—even as it foregrounds profound racial differences in the experience of oppression--that I'm going to allow myself to hope again for change. In reading the book I ceased marking passages in which I thought oppression of the poor was being too flattened across racial lines because those passages were so unfailingly

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<sup>1</sup> Noteworthy exceptions include W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in American 1860-1880*, New York: Free Press, 1988 [originally 1935], Ch. 1-2; Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon, 2000).

balanced by those taking the measure of former Baltimorean Frederick Douglass' fierce announcement to white workers wishing to equate slavery and wage slavery by asking if any of them wanted to apply for his old job as slave ( see pp. 47, 50, 50, 56, 72, 74, 106, 171 and, crowningly, with Douglass, at 258, though such precision will not prevent some readers from thinking the book simply shows the primary importance of class).

I am thus delighted to help celebrate the appearance of this terrific book. My remarks will begin with some explicit praises of its particular virtues and move to the brief enumeration of points on which some discussion might be fruitful, ending with an extended discussion placing *Scraping By* within a growing literature on the antebellum South that generates exciting context for a direct engagement with the questions of capitalism, and especially of slavery and capitalism, but pulls up just short of pursuing those matters to their full conclusions. Perhaps because I was so taken with Rockman's 2001 essay "The Unfree Origins of American Capitalism,"<sup>2</sup> I was sorry to see the book's title lose the word "capitalism," but it still teaches a great deal on that score. Indeed even at its most critical, this review essay is thus not very much so. It is deeply admiring of Rockman's work, and most of the issues I raise with the book's interpretations grow as much from its strengths as from its deficiencies. Others fit under the heading of expecting more because the book delivers so much, including much on capitalism. Indeed, to remove all possibility of a cliffhanger ending, I am even somewhat persuaded that the choice to center analysis on the categories of free labor and slavery, rather than capitalism *per se*, yields important insights that a more frontal analysis of capital might not deliver at this point.

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<sup>2</sup> Seth Rockman, "The Unfree Origins of American Capitalism," Library Conference of Philadelphia Program in Early American Economy and Society Inaugural Annual Conference (April, 2001) at <http://www.librarycompany.org/Economics/PDF%20Files/Rockman%20paper.pdf>, esp. 33-34.

Style is no small part of the success of *Scraping By*. For years I've hoped to work the great word "lollygagger" into an academic book and Rockman has done so (p. 209) here first time past the post. (My new goal is to use "jinxed" in formal writing—there I did it.). The praise here is not entirely funny business. An ability to write loosely speaks to the accessibility of Rockman's book and its certainty that compelling ideas will ensure its being read as weighty. *Scraping By* chooses the most telling human evidence not in opposition to structural analyses but rather to exemplify and undergird such analyses. It mixes past and present well, letting contemporary discussions of the welfare state permeate, but not overwhelm, the chapter on the almshouse and allowing a bit of apt Baltimore boosterism into the revisionist sections rooting the concept of the living wage specifically in the struggles to survive of the city's women workers. While supported by a wide array of primary sources, the book's best chapters seize on fabulous unexpected troves of source materials, turning them over and over to see segments of working class experience from many angles. It generates an infectious excitement not only about what we learn, but also about how much we can learn about the poor.

The section on mudmachinemen exemplifies the payoffs of such detective work. Oddly named and uniquely situated, these workers made Baltimore's commerce possible and, because of their social power and relation to the state, their working lives were remarkably well-documented in certain aspects. Existing at the margin of land and water, they fascinatingly emerge as if from *Harry Potter*, speaking to the worlds of trade and the state. In particular the perilous and dirty work of the mostly (perhaps entirely) white, sometimes Irish mudmachinemen remind us of categories of labor degraded by proximity to grime and ooze and the ways in which these vex patterns of racialization by making all

workers on those jobs be seen as marked by their “dirty work.” Indeed in Russian the word for dangerous, unskilled and filthy work is translated as “black work,” brought to the U.S. by immigrants long before they encountered an African American working class.<sup>3</sup>

The mudmachine also generates a set of cruel ironies regarding slavery, race and labor competition. From Frederick Law Olmsted’s travelers’ accounts forward, it has been taken as an index of the oppression of Irish immigrants to the South that they were deployed on dangerous jobs, especially involving dredging and otherwise building infrastructure, as slaves were too valuable to be endangered. Where the risk of tripping and drowning was concerned, Bernard Mandel joked bitterly, Irish immigrants were “fall guys” for the rich. But if it is true, as Rockman reasons and speculates (pp. 94-95), that masters hesitated to rent slaves in perilous mudmachine work, such a policy also improved the labor market position of immigrants on those jobs and kept them from being in competition with slaves directly in this instance.<sup>4</sup>

The closing passages, moving from a consideration of the lyric on the “hireling and the slave” in the “Star-Spangled Banner” to a consideration of the combinations of hired and owned Baltimore labor making the giant flag and the battlements on which Francis Scott Key reflected in writing the national anthem (pp. 260-62) capture the ability of *Scraping By* to register the national importance of a textured local story. Indeed in a curious way the absence of slaves makes the city’s early Republic and antebellum history speak broadly to how slavery and capitalism intersected in an urban place ranging during

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<sup>3</sup> Jerome Davis, *The Russian Immigrant* (New York: Macmillan, 1926), 18; Martin Oppenheimer, “The Sub-Proletariat: Dark Skins and Dirty Work,” *Critical Sociology*, 4 (1974), 7-20.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Mandel, *Labor, Free and Slave* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007, originally 1955), 35; Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States: With Remarks on Their Economy* (New York: Dix and Edwards, 1856), 90-91.

the period covered from the fifth to second largest in the U.S. Baltimore's population was only 9% enslaved in 1790 and that proportion declined to 3% by 1840 heading towards about 1% in 1860. The comparisons are not so much with slave South cities like Charleston, Richmond, or New Orleans in terms of relative numbers of slaves at the point of production of goods and service. For 1790, New York City and the waterfront in Brooklyn perhaps most resembled Baltimore's demography regarding slavery and free labor, though slaves actually bulked larger in the northern city's working class than in the southern one in this comparison. (Indeed the demographics of slavery in Baltimore from 1830 to 1860 curiously mirrored those of the first thirty years after gradual emancipation in New York City.) By the 1840 to 1860 period the western (and northern, and southern) city of St. Louis held a similarly small and dwindling (though still greater) percentage of slaves as compared to Baltimore.<sup>5</sup> As Rockman observes it was not the absolute number of slaves who labored in Baltimore that made the "hireling and slave" line resonate so powerfully. It was the daily presence of history, of proximity to agricultural slavery, and especially of large, partly interregional, markets of slaves. These gave constant reminders of the instrumental approach to labor in the logic of capital and of the ways in which racial slavery degraded all workers, albeit in such different manners as to produce more disunity than unity. Those slaves' sales provided not so much a labor force within

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<sup>5</sup> Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland During the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 62 and 40-62 passim; Eric Homberger, *The Historical Atlas of New York City* (New York: Henry Holt, 2005 edition), 55; <http://www.usgenet.org/usa/mo/county/stlouis/census.htm>; <http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0027/tab01.txt>; Craig Steven Wilder, *A Covenant with Color: Race and Social Power in Brooklyn* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 40; Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 3.

Baltimore as liquid, indeed oiled, capital for development in Maryland. (pp. 6-8 and 234-41)

I could fill the balance of my time continuing with such straight-up praises—the reminder that an employment agency was called an “intelligence office” (p. 218) reenergizes how I can teach the key chapter on labor in Melville’s *The Confidence Man*, for example.<sup>6</sup> But such exalting perhaps does not succeed in generating much material for discussion. My remarks will therefore turn to two ways in which the very strengths outlined above may inevitably carry their own limits and conclude with a section placing the book in a broader set of debates on capitalism. The first such area for discussion lies on the flip side of the discovering remarkable new sources and of so thoroughly and penetratingly wringing meaning from them. The attendant caution is that as we enter the worlds of the mudmachineman or the almshouse so magically we can forget how much lay outside them. I had to go back to remind myself that, as Rockman does specify, mudmachining was the work of 50 to 60 men (pp. 23 and 27, with the chapter on dredging workers at 75-99), nine months a year, in city with over 60,000 inhabitants during the period for which sources are richest. None of the virtues of the chapter on the mudmachine outlined above turn on their being very numerous but I needed more reminders of their very small numbers. Similarly with the almshouse, discussed over a period in which the city reached 100,000 in population, the numbers of admissions, ranging up to 1200 annually, tell a story of the reach of the institution into working class lives but the maximum numbers of residents at any one point in the worst depression years appears to be 400 to 600 (capacity was 800 to 900) making the institution

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<sup>6</sup> Herman Melville, *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade* (New York: Dix, Edwards, and Company, 1857), Ch. 22.

impressive and revealing but hardly a social safety net. This is especially so given the extent of social misery the book so searchingly details and the fact that the almshouse seems to have sheltered the ill, the bereft, the seasonally jobless, the disabled, and the chronically destitute (see esp. pp. 198-201 for the figures).

The second critique probably serves better to date me than to make a coherent set of points. I accept the need to make a clean break with the sometimes stultifying “artisans into workers” script of the “new [but forty years old] labor history,” but think *Scraping By* presents some baby-and-bathwater issues regarding the desirability of taking up selected old debates. In particular it could theorize more the meaning of working class more, in a city Rockman shows to be populated by successes and sliders and perhaps quantify social mobility taking the reorganization of craft labor into account. It may be that the author considers this ground already well-covered in Charles Steffen’s fine book on the revolution and early Republic and other studies, but those could then be drawn on more directly. The ten-hour day movement in Baltimore remains something of a mystery and, since that standard sometimes tended to give leisure to skilled and unskilled workers in the same workplace, might be a setting to look more at segmentation and unity within the working class. Similarly, the emphasis on survival seems at times to elbow out the focus on resistance, infrapolitically and otherwise, that is so much a part of classic debates within slavery’s historiography. Rockman’s picture of Baltimore likewise seems a world away from the revolutionary Atlantic of Linebaugh and Rediker’s *Many-Headed Hydra*. And I wished at times for more explicit interaction with historians of gender, including Gerda Lerner and the wonderful work of the late Jeanne Boydston, if only to

show differences between the lives of women at or below Baltimore's poverty line and those of middle class women and the Yankee textile factory working class.<sup>7</sup>

In the U.S. the question of the relationship of chattel slavery with the capitalist mode of production has been hesitantly and somewhat confusedly addressed, so that *Scraping By* offers an especially important opportunity to reopen and reorient existing literatures in a way that superb recent studies bearing on the issue have not so far managed to deliver. The roots of the question and of its vexations, as addressed by historians, are very long, dating back to the Southern proslavery historian U.B. Phillips and his pronouncements almost a century ago on affinities between large plantation slavery and industrial society, judgments endorsing for Phillips the modernity of masters alongside the alleged backwardness of slaves. While the late Kenneth Stampp loosely and implicitly characterized slavery as capitalist in his classic revisionist attack on Phillips, he nonetheless found a central goal of plantation management to be to make slaves "stand in fear," not simply to extract production.<sup>8</sup> Thus when Eugene Genovese ambitiously attempted to bring Marxism systematically to the study of U.S. slavery his various efforts to characterize slavery as "precapitalist," or "prebourgeois" or "seigneurial" seemed fresh, materialist and able to speak to contradictions. Genovese, at times writing with Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, lavishly praised Phillips, but soft pedaled the latter's views on slavery's affinities with capitalist industrial production. Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman's

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<sup>7</sup> Charles G. Steffen, *The Mechanics of Baltimore: Workers and Politics in the Age of Revolution, 1763-1812* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984); Bruce Laurie, *Artisans into Workers: Labor in Nineteenth Century America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Gerda Lerner, "The Lady and the Mill Girl: Changes in the Status of Women in the Age of Jackson," *Midcontinent American Studies Journal*, (10) 1: 5-15.

<sup>8</sup> See Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1963, originally 1929), 304; Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Vintage, 1984, originally 1956), esp. 78, 248-49, 394 and 141-91 passim.



*Time on the Cross*, undoubtedly the most publicized history of slavery yet written, managed to imagine slavery as a realm for the free play of capitalist market forces, though more by assuming than proving as much. Deft responses to *Time on the Cross*, especially that of Herbert Gutman, skewered the study's methods and math, but did not challenge its unsophisticated sense of slavery as a mode of production, allowing Genovese and Fox-Genovese to deride Gutman as a "bourgeois writer . . . occasionally referred to as a Marxist by people who could not possibly tell the difference."<sup>9</sup>

The tragically short life of Robert Starobin, and the early disability and then early death of George Rawick must be counted as contributing to the attenuation of debate on slavery and capitalism. However, even at the height of their great powers, and of radical writing on slavery in the 1970s, thorough discussion of slavery and capitalism proved very difficult to sustain, as correspondence in Rawick's papers shows. Those writers most in the debt of C.L.R. James, Rawick foremost among them, were well-positioned to see the factory-like modernity of some of U.S. slavery and the modernity of slaves. However, even they could also draw rigid lines between Southern and Northern political economies, perhaps in part because doing so meant that writers from the anti-Stalinist far left did not have to explain why Marx supported one section of capital against another by backing the Union and Lincoln during the Civil War, and in part because they so aggrandized the modern factory specifically as an incubator of revolutionary discipline, sociability, and ideas that seeing slaves as proletarians was difficult. That slavery is so

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<sup>9</sup> I rehearse this history in Roediger, "Precapitalism in One Confederacy" in *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and Working Class History* (New York: Verso, 1994), 47-54 where the citations are found. See also Herbert Gutman, *Slavery and the Numbers Game: A Critique of Time on the Cross* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003, originally 1975).

thoroughly marginalized in academic histories of management has further dimmed the possibilities of bringing slavery and capitalism into conversation.<sup>10</sup>

In any case, with Genovese and Fox-Genovese the foremost spokespersons for Marxism in academic slavery studies, the supposition was that Marxists regarded slavery as a challenge, however unpalatable, to bourgeois society, not a part of it. Such was certainly what I was taught, long before reading Marx himself explain that “the fact that we not only call the plantation owners in America capitalists but that they **are** capitalists” stems from their “existence as anomalies in a world market based on free labor.”<sup>11</sup> For good measure, of course, Fox-Genovese and Genovese soon themselves left Marxism behind, without delivering on their promise to finally engage Marxist proponents of the compatibility of slavery and capitalism at “another time and place.” The direct question “Was the Plantation Slave a Proletarian?” thus found its most productive expression in studies of nations and colonies elsewhere in the hemisphere far more than it did in the U.S.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> George P. Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1973), C.L.R. James, “The Atlantic Slave Trade and Slavery: Some Interpretations of Their Significance in the Development of the United States and the Western World,” in John A. Williams and Charles F. Harris, eds. *Amistad I: Writings on Black History and Culture* (New York: Random House, 1970), 119-64; Robert Starobin, *Industrial Slavery in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971); Martin Glaberman, “Slaves and Proletarians: The Debate Continues,” *Labour/ Le Travail*, 36 (Fall, 1995), 209-14; “Exchange between Martin Glaberman and Dave Roediger” *New Politics*, 13 ( Summer, 1992), 167-68; Bill Cooke, “The Denial of Slavery in Management Studies,” *Journal of Management Studies*, 40 (December, 2003), 1895-1918. The correspondence is in the George P.Rawick Papers, Western Historical Manuscripts Collection, Jefferson Library, University of Missouri—St. Louis, esp. Box 7, Folders 48 and 49.

<sup>11</sup> See Roediger, “Precapitalism in One Confederacy,” 47-54 and Ken Lawrence, “Karl Marx on American Slavery” at <http://www.sojournertruth.net/marxslavery.pdf>, esp. 11; Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume One (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1906), 260 ; the quotation is from Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (Middlesex, GB: Penguin, 1973), Notebook 4 found at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch09.htm#p471>, emphasis original.

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press , 1983), 427, n.8; Sidney Mintz, “Was the Plantation Slave a Proletarian?” *Review*, 2 (1978), esp. 97-8

The work of James Oakes, and more recently of Walter Johnson and Mark Smith, shows both the possibility of placing slavery within capitalist relations and the difficulties to date of pursuing the argument. Oakes, in *The Ruling Race*, begins with a frontal acknowledgment of Marx's own contention the with the rise of King Cotton, "the overworking of the negro . . . became a factor in a calculated and calculating system," directed toward and by "the production of surplus labor itself." Oakes sets this in contrast to Genovese, implying that he will stand with Marx, but then abandons much ground, putting matters in terms of the tendency of most planters to embrace "liberal democracy" over paternalism. Where the economic system is concerned, Oakes chooses to ask whether planters were impacted by "commercialism" and the "market economy" (both of which could have left them prebourgeois), and to argue (in a wonderful chapter) that they set up "factories in the fields." But he does not end up probing their relation to capitalism, which ultimately escapes even appearing in the book's index.<sup>13</sup>

Johnson's *Soul by Soul* made the market, and in particular the slave market, the center of antebellum Southern economy, society and urbanity, producing insights well-considered and usefully extended by Rockman. Moreover, Johnson demonstrated that paternalism itself in the nineteenth century South was far from precapitalist. Instead it was one considered strategy to extract production optimally in a society in which slaves' scars diminished their value. The paternalist moment of force, via sale, opted to leave marks on souls and families rather than skins. But Johnson makes these points as implicitly as he does elegantly, also eschewing the question of capitalism and expressing

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<sup>13</sup> James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders* (New York: Knopf, 1982), xiii (including the quoting Marx), 12, 135, 153-91 and passim.

disagreements with Genovese softly.<sup>14</sup> Smith's *Mastered by the Clock* finds rich evidence for a growing antebellum Southern "time obedience" more congruent than not to E.P. Thompson's descriptions of "time discipline" under industrial capitalism in England. But the slight discussion of political economy by Smith settles for seeing the South as possessed of an "engrafted . . . sporadic . . . muted, garbled, bastard capitalism," loosely linking this stance to Marx's putative views. Smith elsewhere finds planters "plainly born in the Atlantic capitalist marketplace" and then concludes that "by the end of the antebellum period they might as well have been of it." But Smith stops short of asking whether "bastard capitalisms" might have been central to the whole process of U.S. development.<sup>15</sup>

The point here is not to urge that Oakes, Smith, Johnson, or indeed Rockman join me among the last (for a while) Marxists or to urge a lets-you-and-him-fight scenario between any of them and Genovese, who in any case no longer holds the views he formerly defended (or at least the world-view in which they were founded). Nor is it perhaps desirable to frame the issue as simplistically as whether slavery in the early Republic and antebellum years was capitalist or not. Indeed Sidney Mintz, who posed the related question "Was the plantation slave a proletarian?" so sharply, observed in answering his own query that "It is not analytically useful to define 'proletarian' or 'slave' in isolation from each other," or from the ways that they were imbricated and

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<sup>14</sup> Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life in the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 86-88, 107-12, 127-28, 142-62 and passim. Cf. Walter Johnson, "A Nettlesome Classic Turns Twenty-Five: Re-Reading Eugene D. Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll*" in *Common-Place* ([www.common-place.org](http://www.common-place.org)) June 2001; Lacy Ford, "reconsidering the internal Slave trade: Paternalism, Markets and the Character of the Old South," in Walter Johnson, ed. *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), esp. 144-47.

<sup>15</sup> Mark M. Smith, *Mastered by the Clock: Time, Slavery, and Freedom in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), esp. 174-76.

produced each other as categories. James himself, in *The Black Jacobins*, settled for calling workers enslaved on large Haitian plantations the people most like a “modern proletariat” at their time of history.<sup>16</sup> The best work on this score, from Marx to Ronald Bailey, has perhaps been more likely to consider the contribution, rather than the relation, of slavery to capitalist development. In general, *Scraping By* joins itself to these apposite and nuanced approaches, and productively so (e.g. 6-8, 36-37 and 42). However, at times the very desire to show that slave and free workers were exploited at the hands of the same system, almost interchangeably given the exigencies of getting labor and cash, leads to a certain lack of attention to just how employers decided between slave and free labor, or among manumitting, hiring or selling slaves. Here too a more direct engagement with established arguments and approaches, from Starobin’s rehearsing of the preferences of Southern industrial employers to Fields on slavery’s decline in Baltimore, would perhaps be illuminating. None of these quibbles denies, however, that *Scraping By* is a marvelous study, full of capital ideas.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Mintz, “Was the Plantation Slave a Proletarian ?” 97-98; James, *The Black Jacobins* (New York: Vintage, 1963), 85-86; Ronald Bailey, “‘Those Valuable People the Africans’: The Economic Impact of the Slav(ery) Trade on Textile Industrialization in New England,” in David Roediger and Martin Blatt, eds. *The North and Slavery* (New York: Garland, 1997), pp. 3-31; Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Company, 1910) 121 and *Capital*, 1:823.

<sup>17</sup> Starobin, *Industrial Slavery in the Old South*, esp. 122-160; Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground*, 40-62; cf. Linda Upham-Bornstein, “Men of Families: The Intersection of Labor Conflict and Race in the Norfolk Dry Dock Affair, 1829-1831,” *Labor*, 5. ( Spring 2007), 65; Elizabeth Esch and David Roediger, “One Symptom of Originality: Race and the Management of Labour in United States History,” forthcoming in *Historical Materialism*, 17 (2009). On patterns of manumission in Maryland, Jessica Millward’s forthcoming book promises to open much new ground.