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Colonial Slavery and Divergent American Modernity: Reconsidering Labor, Freedom, and Capitalism Through Jacob Gorender

Bernd Reiter

Department of Classical & Modern Languages & Literatures, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX 79409, USA; bereiter@ttu.edu

Abstract

This article uses Jacob Gorender's theory of colonial slavery to challenge a core premise of modern social theory—that labor inherently generates freedom. In Hegel and Marx, productive activity enables recognition, consciousness, and ultimately emancipation. The article argues that this mechanism depended on a historically specific condition: the worker's juridical possession of labor-power. Plantation slavery abolished that condition. The enslaved laborer did not sell labor but was owned as labor, making alienation, recognition, and class formation structurally impossible. Building on Gorender's claim that colonial slavery constituted a distinct mode of production integrated into global markets, this article shows that plantation economies produced accumulation without proletarianization, commercialization without citizenship, and economic modernization without social emancipation. Drawing on institutional theory, it further argues that the legal and political arrangements created to manage coerced labor persisted after abolition and continue to structure inequality and coercive governance across the Americas. American modernity therefore followed a trajectory different from the European one: rather than emerging from the emancipation of labor, it developed from its permanent subordination, indicating the existence of multiple modernities.

Keywords: colonial slavery; labor; divergent modernities; decolonial theory; Jacob Gorender

1. Introduction: Colonial Slavery and the Failure of the Labor Theory of Emancipation

Modern social theory rests on the quiet but powerful assumption that labor humanizes. From Friedrich Hegel through Karl Marx to contemporary democratic theory, productive activity has been treated not merely as an economic process but as an anthropological one. Through labor, humans externalize themselves, recognize themselves in the world they transform, and ultimately become capable of freedom (Hegel [1807] 1977; Marx [1844] 1992; Honneth 1995; Jaeggi 2014). This claim structures the philosophical anthropology of modernity and gives it its universal character. In this view, there is only one modernity and one way to be modern—the European way, which is highly entangled with ideas about the content and deliverables of capitalism and development (Esteva 2022).

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Workers, in this narrative, are not only exploited—they are also historically destined to achieve freedom once he or she controls the fruits of their own labor. In this account, alienation generates consciousness, and consciousness generates emancipation and societal development (Marx [1844] 1992; Lukács 1971; Braverman 1974). This article argues that modern Plantation America falsifies that proposition. The problem is not empirical but theoretical, and it has far-reaching consequences, as a modernity founded on enslavement can account for many of the perduring inequalities today, still separating the formerly enslaved from the formerly enslavers, as this article will demonstrate.

The Hegel–Marx tradition presupposes the specific social condition that labor must be socially mediated yet personally possessed. The worker must own his or her labor-power even if they do not own the product. Only under this condition can externalized labor confront the worker as alien and thereby produce consciousness (Marx [1844] 1992; Jaeggi 2014; Honneth 1995). Yet the foundational economic institution of the Americas—plantation slavery—systematically destroyed precisely this condition. The enslaved laborer did not sell labor-power. He *was* labor-power (Patterson 1982; Johnson 2013).

The consequence is profound. If labor is not owned by the laborer, then alienation cannot operate as Marx theorized it, and recognition cannot operate as Hegel imagined it. Externalized labor no longer produces self-consciousness; it produces only accumulation.

The Brazilian author Gorender ([1978] 2016) provides the theoretical key to this problem. Far from being a regional study of Brazilian history, his book *Colonial Slavery*, first published in 1978, advances the radical claim that colonial slavery constituted a historically new mode of production, not a transitional remnant between feudalism and capitalism (Gorender [1978] 2016). For Gorender, colonial slavery was a *sui generis* mode of production and, as such, it produced a different type of society and culture, different from European feudalism or other, pre-capitalist modes of production and resulting societal developments. The implications of this argument, if true, are profound, as I shall show in this article.

Gorender shows that the plantation was not premodern. It was globally market-oriented, profit-driven, and structurally integrated into world commerce. Gorender states this with unusual clarity: “The colonial slave plantation is an economic organization oriented toward the market. Its primary function is not to provide the immediate consumption of producers, but to supply the world market. The world market brings it to life and gives it its reason for existence” (Gorender [1978] 2016, p. 121, my translation). In other words, American plantations were foundational building blocks of global capitalism and, as such, constitutive of American modernity.

At the same time, plantations rested on permanent coercion. The enslaved person functioned as a productive subject, not a mere machine—but this subjectivity was denied juridical personality, property in labor, and social recognition. Gorender underscores the conceptual point that matters most for the Hegel–Marx tradition: “The worker is always the subject of the labor process” (Gorender [1978] 2016, p. 215, my translation). Under slavery, the subject-status of the worker within production does not translate into legal personhood or recognized ownership of labor-power—it remains administratively managed and violently constrained (Gorender [1978] 2016, pp. 121, 272; Patterson 1982). This contradiction breaks the philosophical architecture of modern social theory.

In Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the servant (Knecht) transforms nature and thereby achieves self-consciousness: “Through work... the servant becomes conscious of what he truly is” (Hegel [1807] 1977, p. 118). Marx radicalizes this insight. He explains that alienation emerges when the worker’s product confronts him as an alien object: “The object that labor produces confronts it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer” (Marx [1844] 1992, p. 324). Both claims depend on the same precondition: the worker’s labor must be his own activity. But plantation slavery eliminates that possibility.

The enslaved worker cannot be alienated from his labor because he never possesses it. Alienation presupposes dispossession; slavery precedes it. Gorender writes: “The more pronounced the commercial character of a slave economy—as occurred especially in the American colonies—the stronger the tendency to intensify the reification of the slave.” (Gorender [1978] 2016, p. 97) The laborer is not estranged from the product—he is estranged from himself before production begins (Patterson 1982; Johnson 2013).

Accordingly, the plantation economy produces a form of accumulation that does not generate proletarianization, internal markets, or democratic citizenship. It generates hierarchy. Colonial slavery created world-market production without free labor, capital accumulation without labor mobility, and economic modernization without social emancipation. Industrial capitalism in the Americas did not emerge by overcoming domination; it emerged by reorganizing it (Du Bois 1935; Blackmon 2008; Beckert 2014).

This insight has implications far beyond historiography. Contemporary institutional economics, especially the work of Daron Acemoglu, argues that economic development depends on inclusive political institutions and that extractive institutions produce persistent inequality (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012). The plantation societies of the Americas created precisely such extractive institutions—systems of property, policing, political exclusion, and labor control designed to manage coerced populations (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012; Du Bois 1935; Blackmon 2008). The persistence of inequality in those parts of the Americas where slavery was the dominant mode of production is therefore not a failure of modernity but a consequence of its specific historical foundation. American plantation societies thus constitute a divergent path towards development and modernity, foundationally different from European and settler trajectories, thus indicating the possibility of different modernities and, relatedly, different analytical requirements to capture it. In short, European-derived theories, concepts, and analytical tools cannot fully capture American modernity, development, and societal trajectories (Escobar 2018).

The article advances three claims. First, Gorender’s theory of colonial slavery undermines the Hegelian and Marxian proposition that appropriated externalized labor can become the path to workers’ freedom (Hegel [1807] 1977; Marx [1844] 1992; Gorender [1978] 2016). Second, plantation economies structurally impeded industrialization by preventing the formation of labor markets and domestic demand (Gorender [1978] 2016; Beckert 2014). Third, the institutions built to sustain slavery constitute the deep structure of contemporary American societies (Du Bois 1935; Blackmon 2008; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012). American modernity, unlike European modernity, was not born from the emancipation of labor but from its permanent subordination. Formulated more drastically, Gorender’s work indicates that American modernity is divergent from European modernity.

If modernity in the Americas originates in organized coercion rather than emancipation, then its defining features—inequality, exclusion, and racial hierarchy—are not anomalies; they are foundational (Patterson 1982; Du Bois 1935; Johnson 2013). Furthermore, European modernity is but one possible modernity among others—and it might not even represent its dominant mode. If colonial slavery indeed produced a *sui generis* social formation, as Gorender argues, and if enslaving societies indeed constituted a different modernity, then the question becomes if other enslaving societies, outside of the Americas, equally represent a different way to be modern.

Approximately twelve million Africans were transported across the Atlantic to the Americas, yet roughly eighteen million were enslaved through trans-Saharan and Indian Ocean systems of enslavement (Gordon 1998). If Atlantic slavery produced a distinctive institutional modernity in the Americas, what social and institutional formations followed from the long history of Arab enslavement of Africans? The answer may determine whether the relationship between slavery and modernity applies only to the Americas, or

to a much larger slice of the world. If that is the case, then the dominant form of modernity must be considered racialized and based on domination and European modernity must give up its dominant and paradigmatic status.

By engaging in these questions, this article seeks to advance a decolonial agenda of provincializing Europe (Chakrabarty 2007) by recognizing divergent modernities forged from colonial slavery. To achieve this goal, I consider the implications of the theoretical work of Brazilian author Jacob Gorender's book *Colonial Slavery*, first published in 1978 and recently translated into English in abridged form (Gorender 2022).

2. Methodology and Contributions

This article seeks to contribute to the field of political theory by applying a comparative–historical perspective to the way modern enslavement, as it was practiced in the Americas after 1492, when Columbus started enslaving Native Taino People in Hispaniola, forged divergent foundations of labor relations and enduring inequalities in those regions of the Americas where enslavement became the dominant mode of production. I rely on the pathbreaking work of Brazilian scholar Jacob Gorender's theory of colonial slavery (Gorender [1978] 2016) as a conceptual lever to reassess a broader problem in modern social theory: the presumed relationship between labor, recognition, capitalism, and emancipation. I reconstruct the assumptions about labor that underwrite the Hegelian–Marxian tradition (Hegel [1807] 1977; Marx 1867, [1844] 1992), and I compare them to the institutional reality of plantation slavery in the Americas. The central question is not whether slavery contributed to capitalism—that point has been convincingly established by a large body of scholarship (Williams 1944; Beckert 2014; Tomich 2004)—but what kind of modernity was produced when capitalist accumulation depended upon the juridical negation of the laborer as owner of labor-power.

By “juridical possession of labor-power,” I mean the legally recognized status of the worker as the bearer of a capacity to work that can be sold, withheld, bargained over, or alienated through contract. This is the condition Marx (1867, [1844] 1992) presupposes when he analyzes wage labor: the worker does not own the means of production, but he formally owns his labor-power and must sell it in order to survive. Enslaved plantation workers occupied a different legal and social position (Patterson 1982; Johnson 2013). They did not enter production as bearers of labor-power but as persons legally transformed into property. Their labor was not alienated through contract; it was appropriated in advance through ownership. This distinction is crucial because it marks the point at which the Hegelian–Marxian pathway from labor to consciousness, and from consciousness to emancipation, breaks down.

This argument builds on, but also differs from, several existing debates. It aligns with Williams's (1944) argument that slavery and colonial extraction were constitutive of capitalism, with Beckert's (2014) account of “war capitalism,” and with Tomich's (2004) conception of a “second slavery” embedded within global capitalist expansion. It also resonates with De Genova's (2023) formulation of a “racial theory of labour,” which argues that slavery supplies capitalism with a defining horizon for labor in the abstract. Similarly, Fanon (1961), Buck-Morss (2000, 2009), Wynter (1995, 2003), Quijano (2000), Mignolo (2007), Boatacă (2014), and Ferreira da Silva (2019, 2022) have shown that the universal subject of European modernity was produced through colonial exclusions, racial hierarchy, and epistemic violence. This research demonstrates that the ideals of freedom, citizenship, and rationality often emerged through relations of domination rather than despite them (De Genova 2023).

The present article contributes to this lineage by specifying the institutional and philosophical mechanism through which colonial slavery generated a divergent modernity. Its claim is not simply that slavery was central to capitalism, nor that racial domination

contradicted European ideals of freedom. Rather, it argues that plantation slavery created a mode of production in which market integration, commercial rationality, and accumulation occurred without the formation of legally free labor, without broad citizenship, and without the emancipatory dialectic assumed by Hegelian and Marxian social theory. Gorender's importance lies precisely here: he allows us to see colonial slavery not as a moral failure inside modernity, nor as an archaic residue preceding capitalism, but as a coherent social formation with its own laws of reproduction.

The article also engages the literature on multiple modernities, especially Eisenstadt's (2000) argument that modernity should not be understood as a single European path later replicated elsewhere. However, the concept is used here in a more historically materialist and decolonial sense. The point is not merely that different civilizations adapted modern institutions in culturally distinct ways. The stronger claim is that modernity itself was produced through different labor regimes. European modernity was theorized through the figure of the formally free worker. American modernity, by contrast, was at least partially built through the enslaved worker, whose productive activity generated wealth while being denied recognition, mobility, and citizenship. In this sense, the divergence is not cultural but structural (Eisenstadt 2000).

Decolonial theory helps sharpen this claim. Quijano's (2000) concept of the coloniality of power shows that race became a basic principle for organizing labor, authority, and knowledge in the modern world. Mignolo (2007) similarly argues that modernity and coloniality are not separate processes but two sides of the same historical formation. This article accepts that insight but adds Gorender's more specific contribution: colonial slavery was not only an ideological or epistemic structure but a mode of production that organized property, law, labor, punishment, and political authority. The plantation therefore produced not only wealth but institutions. Those institutions outlived abolition and shaped post-emancipation systems of landownership, policing, domestic service, vagrancy law, convict labor, and racialized exclusion (Mignolo 2007).

Illustrative examples make the point clearer. In the U.S. South, cotton slavery generated enormous export wealth while suppressing industrial diversification and free labor formation (Williams 1944; Beckert 2014). After abolition, Blackmon (2008) demonstrates how convict leasing and debt peonage reproduced coerced labor under new legal forms. In Brazil, abolition in 1888 was not followed by land redistribution or full social incorporation; formerly enslaved populations were pushed into precarious labor, domestic service, favelas, and racially stratified citizenship (Fernandes 1965; Faoro [1958] 2001). In the Caribbean, plantation monoculture similarly produced export accumulation without broad-based internal markets or autonomous peasantries (Tomich 2004). Across these cases, one finds accumulation without proletarianization, commercialization without equal citizenship, and modernization without emancipation.

This framing also clarifies the article's relationship to institutional economics. Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) distinguish between inclusive and extractive institutions, while Engerman and Sokoloff (2002) show how factor endowments and inequality shaped divergent New World development paths. This article extends those arguments by locating the origin of extractive institutional persistence in the juridical structure of enslaved labor itself. Plantation institutions were not merely unequal; they were designed to solve a specific problem: how to extract labor from persons who were indispensable as productive subjects but excluded as legal and political subjects. The afterlife of slavery therefore lies not only in racial attitudes or cultural prejudice but in durable institutional arrangements built to manage laboring populations without incorporating them as full citizens.

The originality of the article thus lies in bringing Gorender ([1978] 2016) into dialogue with Hegel ([1807] 1977), Marx (1867, [1844] 1992), Eisenstadt (2000), Quijano (2000), Mignolo (2007), De Genova (2023), decolonial theory, racial capitalism scholarship, and in-

stitutional analysis. It argues that the Americas do not simply reveal the hypocrisy of European modernity. They reveal a different modernity: one in which labor did not become the ground of freedom because enslaved laborers were denied the legal standing required for alienation, recognition, and class formation to operate in the ways assumed by European theory. Colonial slavery therefore does not merely complicate the history of capitalism. It forces a revision of the philosophical anthropology of modernity itself.

Labor, Recognition, and the Philosophical Architecture of Modern Freedom

Modern social theory did not begin as economics. It began as anthropology. The central question for Hegel and Marx was not how wealth is produced but how human beings become capable of freedom. German idealism, with its intimate commitment to evolutionary and teleological thought expressed in such ideas as a growing and evolving “Zeitgeist” headed towards increased rationalization and reason, provides the epistemological ground upon which both Hegel and Marx built their theoretical edifices (Popper 1945). Central to Hegel’s and Marx’s thought was their treatment of labor.

Labor occupies this position because it mediates between consciousness and world. Through labor, humans do not merely survive; they objectify themselves, meaning that they encounter their own activity in material form. Freedom, therefore, is not given. It is produced (Hegel [1807] 1977; Marx [1844] 1992; Honneth 1995).

Hegel’s master–slave dialectic is frequently read as a metaphor for domination. It is not. It is a theory of subject formation. The master consumes; the servant (Knecht) works. The master depends on recognition from another consciousness, but the servant confronts the material world. By shaping external reality, the servant learns that the world is not fixed but transformable. Fear initiates the process, but labor completes it. The servant acquires a mediated relation to nature and, through that mediation, to himself. Work disciplines desire, stabilizes consciousness, and produces the conditions for autonomy. Recognition ultimately emerges not from status but from productive activity. As Hegel writes, “Through work... the servant becomes conscious of what he truly is” (Hegel [1807] 1977, p. 118).

Marx retains this structure but relocates it historically. The Hegelian drama becomes a social relation. Capitalism creates a class of workers who possess only their labor-power. Because they must sell this capacity, they experience alienation. Their activity appears in the form of commodities owned by others. Yet this alienation is not purely destructive; it is also generative. The worker confronts the social character of production. Many produce together, but few appropriate the results. The contradiction produces class consciousness. For Marx, the proletariat becomes the agent of emancipation precisely because it experiences universal dispossession. Alienated labor becomes the path toward collective freedom. In Marx’s formulation, “The object that labor produces confronts it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer” (Marx [1844] 1992, p. 324).

Both arguments depend on the decisive assumption: that the worker must be the bearer of labor-power. Alienation presupposes that the worker’s activity is originally his own. Only then can its appropriation appear as injustice. Without prior possession, there can be no estrangement. Without estrangement, consciousness cannot form. Without consciousness, emancipation cannot emerge (Jaeggi 2014; Honneth 1995). The plantation economy eliminates this condition entirely.

On the plantation, the laborer does not sell labor-power; he is owned as labor-power. Production is social, disciplined, and oriented toward the world market, thus modern. Yet the worker has no juridical existence within it. The enslaved person cannot be alienated from his product because he has no recognized claim to his activity. His labor is not appropriated after production; it is appropriated before production begins. The social relation that Marx identifies as historically specific to capitalism appears here in a more radical

form, not as the commodification of labor, but as the commodification of the laborer (Patterson 1982; Johnson 2013).

This distinction is decisive. The Hegelian servant becomes conscious through work because he can recognize himself in what he produces. The Marxian proletarian becomes revolutionary because the product confronts him as alien property. Enslaved plantation workers do not encounter either experience. The product does not confront them as alien because it never belonged to them; the world they shape does not appear as their own because they cannot claim participation in it. Labor ceases to be self-formation and becomes permanent dispossession.

For the enslaved, labor does not promise freedom. To the contrary, resistance to work, sabotage, and even slowing down the labor process, perceived and labeled by the master as “laziness,” become acts of pursuing freedom. The human being transformed into a tool achieves freedom not through being used as a tool, but by refusing to be used as such.

Gorender’s ([1978] 2016) intervention lies precisely here. He insists that the enslaved worker is a real participant in production rather than an inert instrument: “The slave is always the subject of the labor process” (Gorender [1978] 2016, p. 215, my translation). Yet this subjectivity does not lead to emancipation. The plantation integrates coerced labor into global markets while preventing the emergence of labor as a social right. Production occurs without the institutional recognition necessary for workers to become historical agents (Gorender [1978] 2016). The result is accumulation without proletarianization.

The philosophical consequence is stark. Hegel and Marx identify labor as the universal medium through which humans achieve freedom. The plantation demonstrates a different possibility: labor can also stabilize domination. Externalized activity need not produce recognition; it can produce hierarchy. The transformation of nature does not automatically generate the transformation of social relations. Under conditions of slavery, work educates not the worker but the system that exploits him.

The modern idea that economic development carries within it the seeds of emancipation therefore rests on a geographically specific experience—European industrialization (Polanyi 1944; Wood 2002). When applied to the Americas, the theory misfires. Here, large-scale market production expanded not by dissolving coercion but by organizing it. Labor did not create citizens. It created property relations designed to prevent citizenship (Du Bois 1935; Beckert 2014; Blackmon 2008). In the Americas, labor never organized itself into guilds strong enough to wrestle power from aristocrats. Here, an enslaved labor force was dehumanized and stripped from its humanity.

After emancipation, the formerly enslaved were not integrated into an emergent bourgeois class; they continued to be marginalized and pushed into the fringes of American societies—be it Brazilian favelas, Caribbean shanty towns, or US ghettos (Faoro [1958] 2001; Fernandes 1965). Instead of pathways towards integration, they were targeted by loitering and vagrancy laws, and pushed into servitude, both domestic and industrial. In many places, the formerly enslaved were targeted by police, incarcerated, and pushed into forced labor or prison labor (Blackmon 2008). For most of 20th-century Brazil, some 50 percent of black women worked as domestic servants during the century following emancipation, in 1888 (Lima 1995; Carneiro 2003).

The implication is not merely historical. If the social experience that grounds the theory of emancipatory labor is absent, the theory cannot explain the political trajectory that follows. Where labor markets never formed before accumulation, the working class does not emerge as the universal subject of democracy. Instead, societies develop mechanisms to manage laboring populations excluded from the political community. Coercion becomes institutional rather than transitional (Patterson 1982; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012).

Gorender's ([1978] 2016) concept of colonial slavery thus forces a revision of the philosophical anthropology of modernity. The path from labor to freedom is not universal. It is contingent upon a specific property relation—ownership of labor-power. Remove that condition, and labor ceases to be emancipatory. It becomes administrative.

3. Colonial Slavery as a Mode of Production

The central claim of *O Escravismo Colonial* is deceptively simple: plantation slavery in the Americas cannot be understood as a residue of antiquity or as incomplete capitalism. It constitutes a distinct mode of production (Gorender [1978] 2016).

This argument overturns two entrenched positions. Liberal historiography traditionally treated slavery as morally abhorrent but economically backward—a premodern survival destined to disappear once markets expanded. Orthodox Marxism, by contrast, often forced colonial societies into a European sequence of stages. If capitalism requires free labor, then societies based on slavery must be feudal, semi-feudal, or transitional. In both interpretations slavery occupies a temporal past relative to modernity (Williams 1944; Fogel and Engerman 1974). Gorender rejects the chronology itself.

He shows that the plantation is neither archaic nor transitional. It is globally modern from its inception. According to Gorender: “Capital dominated mercantile circulation, but it did not dominate the slave process of production, which followed the specific laws of the colonial slave mode of production.” (Gorender [1978] 2016, p. 271, my translation) Its production was oriented toward the world market rather than local subsistence. The plantation existed because of long-distance trade and price formation beyond the colony. As Gorender shows, “The colonial slave plantation is an economic organization oriented toward the market. The world market brings it to life and gives it its reason for existence” (Gorender [1978] 2016, p. 121, my translation). The plantation, in other words, is a modern phenomenon structurally connected to global capitalism from its very inception. At the same time, its labor relation is structurally incompatible with capitalism.

Capitalism presupposes the separation of workers who are legally free yet separated from the means of production, forcing them to sell labor-power. The plantation eliminates this duality. The worker is not free from domination; domination is the condition of production. The laborer is purchased together with the capacity to work. Consequently, the central economic transaction of capitalism—the wage contract—does not exist. Production is organized not through labor markets but through ownership of persons (Patterson 1982; Beckert 2014).

For Gorender, the plantation form becomes the defining institutional arrangement of this system. It is not merely an agricultural unit but a formative social structure. It combines export production and subsistence reproduction simultaneously. He describes this as a “bisegmented structure of mercantile economy and natural economy” (Gorender [1978] 2016, p. 272, my translation). The first integrates the colony into world commerce; the second reproduces the labor force internally.

The crucial point is structural. This system produces accumulation without generating the social relations necessary for capitalism's internal development. Because laborers are not wage earners, they do not constitute consumers. Because they cannot move freely, labor markets cannot form. Because production is directed outward, domestic markets remain weak. For Gorender, “The rigidity of slave labor required its total utilization” (Gorender [1978] 2016, p. 271, my translation). As a result, because status is inherited, social mobility is blocked (Gorender [1978] 2016; Polanyi 1944; Beckert 2014). In a country like Brazil, where plantation slavery was the dominant economic model from the 1530s to 1888, colonial slavery became the dominant structuring force of society. The same is true for other parts of enslaving plantation America, thus particularly for the US South, the Caribbean, Central America, and the northern parts of South America—today's Panama,

Colombia, and Venezuela. Other parts of the Americas were structured by colonial slavery in those regions were plantation economies dominated, such as coastal Peru and Atlantic Mexico.

In Europe, capital accumulation required the dissolution of feudal ties and the creation of legally free workers. In the Americas, accumulation depended on maintaining unfreedom. The success of the plantation inhibited the emergence of a wage-labor society. Industrialization did not fail because slavery was inefficient; it was delayed because slavery was effective (Williams 1944; Beckert 2014).

This is the theoretical core of Gorender's intervention: colonial slavery was not an accidental obstacle to modernity. It was a coherent economic system whose logic organized hierarchy. The plantation required specific institutions—property laws, surveillance, racial classification, and political exclusion—as conditions of production (Gorender [1978] 2016; Du Bois 1935). In fact, Gorender argues that “slave legislation was forced to reconcile the condition of property with the condition of human personhood in the slave.” (Gorender [1978] 2016, p. 96, my translation)

The result is a different developmental trajectory. European capitalism replaced inherited status with contract. Plantation societies institutionalized status as an economic requirement (Faoro [1958] 2001). Modernity here began not with the emergence of equal legal subjects but with the legal codification of inequality.

The implication is theoretical as much as historical. If capitalism in Europe depended on freeing labor, capitalism in the Americas depended on fixing labor. The first required mobility; the second required immobility. The first generated citizens; the second generated populations to be administered (Patterson 1982; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012).

Under such conditions the emancipatory narrative attached to labor collapses. Work does not transform the social status of the laborer. It reproduces it. Productivity becomes evidence not of autonomy but of control. Instead of creating a proletariat capable of collective action, the system creates a hierarchy whose stability depends on preventing precisely that possibility.

Colonial slavery therefore forces a reconsideration of modernity itself. A society may be fully integrated into global commerce, commercially rational, and economically expansive while simultaneously structured by coercion. Modernity does not guarantee freedom. It can organize unfreedom on a global scale.

4. Plantation Economy and the Problem of Industrialization

If colonial slavery generated large-scale accumulation, why did it not generate early industrialization in the Americas? The question is decisive because classical political economy and Marxism alike presuppose a developmental sequence: commercial expansion produces capital; capital produces industry; industry produces the modern working class (Smith 1776; Marx 1867). The plantation appears, at first glance, to satisfy the first condition. It was profitable, export-oriented, and integrated into international trade. Yet the second and third conditions repeatedly failed to materialize.

Gorender's answer is structural. The plantation economy did not merely coexist with delayed industrialization; it actively inhibited it (Gorender [1978] 2016).

Industrial capitalism requires three social mechanisms: a labor market, an internal consumer market, and incentives for technological innovation. Each depends on legally free workers. Wage earners both supply labor and create demand. Mobility allows labor to shift sectors; wages generate purchasing power; and competition encourages mechanization (Polanyi 1944; Marx 1867). The plantation reverses each of these processes.

First, coerced labor prevents the formation of labor markets. Enslaved workers cannot relocate in response to wages, cannot bargain collectively, and cannot change occupations. Production decisions are therefore not mediated by price signals in labor supply but

by direct command. Economic rationalization occurs through discipline rather than competition (Gorender [1978] 2016; Patterson 1982).

Second, slavery suppresses internal demand. Because enslaved laborers receive subsistence rather than wages, they do not participate meaningfully in commodity consumption. The economy orients outward toward export markets rather than inward toward domestic development. Wealth accumulates but does not circulate internally (Williams 1944; Beckert 2014).

Third, technological innovation becomes less necessary. Where labor is coerced and abundant, mechanization offers fewer advantages. Productivity can be increased through supervision rather than machinery. The incentive structure therefore favors control over invention (Marx 1867; Beckert 2014).

Gorender identifies a key structural feature in the rigidity of slave labor. Because the workforce cannot expand or contract according to market fluctuations, producers must maintain a fixed labor force independent of seasonal needs. He explains that the productive unit “bears the variations in the utilization of the labor force across the different seasonal phases of production” (Gorender [1978] 2016, pp. 245–46, my translation). Economic adjustment therefore occurs not through labor mobility but through administrative management.

The consequence is a paradox. The plantation is commercially modern but industrially conservative. It generates profits sufficient to sustain long-distance trade and finance but insufficient social pressure to transform production relations. Capital accumulates, yet the social environment necessary for industrial capitalism fails to emerge (Gorender [1978] 2016; Beckert 2014).

This observation challenges a persistent assumption in development theory, namely that participation in global markets automatically produces modernization. Plantation societies demonstrate the opposite. They demonstrate that external trade can stabilize specialization rather than diversify it. Export monoculture becomes rational precisely because coerced labor reduces uncertainty (Frank 1967; Wallerstein 1974).

The implications extend beyond economic history. In Europe, industrialization produced political consequences because it created a class capable of collective organization. Urban workers demanded representation, legal protection, and citizenship (Thompson 1963). In plantation societies, however, the laboring population was legally excluded from the political community. Economic growth therefore failed to generate democratic pressure (Du Bois 1935).

Instead, political institutions developed to manage inequality. Surveillance, coercion, and legal hierarchy were not temporary mechanisms awaiting replacement by contract; they were necessary conditions for economic stability (Patterson 1982; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012).

The persistence of this structure after abolition is revealing. The end of legal slavery did not automatically produce a wage–labor society. The plantation order reorganized itself through sharecropping, peonage, labor vagrancy laws, and restricted mobility (Du Bois 1935; Blackmon 2008). The legal form changed, but the institutional objective remained: securing a dependent labor force.

Industrialization in the Americas was thus not simply delayed relative to Europe; it developed within a different institutional matrix. Instead of dissolving hierarchy, it adapted to it. Economic modernization did not erase the legacy of slavery because the modern economy grew out of its institutional framework (Gorender [1978] 2016; Faoro [1958] 2001; Fernandes 1965; Beckert 2014). Modern industry, in this context, did not replace domination; it reorganized it.

5. Multiple Modernities: Emancipatory, Extractive, and Possible Others

The divergence produced by colonial slavery forces a reconsideration of what the term modernity actually describes. In social theory, modernity is typically defined by a cluster of transformations: the rise of markets, the decline of inherited status, the emergence of citizenship, and the expansion of legal equality (Weber 1978; Marshall 1950; Polanyi 1944). Economic change dissolves feudal hierarchy, individuals become juridical persons, and political participation gradually widens.

This account describes the European experience. It does not adequately describe the American one. In Europe, capitalist development required freeing labor from personal domination. Workers had to be legally mobile to participate in wage labor. Property relations became impersonal; law increasingly applied to abstract individuals rather than estates or corporate orders. The legitimacy of the modern state gradually came to rest on formal equality, however incomplete (Marshall 1950; Tilly 1992).

Colonial slavery reversed the sequence. The American plantation economy was fully integrated into commercial capitalism while simultaneously institutionalizing inherited status. Law did not erase hierarchy; it codified it. Racial classification became a legal technology determining property rights, mobility, punishment, and political standing (Du Bois 1935; Patterson 1982; Reiter 2026).

The result is not simply a harsher version of the same process. It is a different configuration of modernity. Market participation did not presuppose citizenship. Productivity did not presuppose equality. Economic growth depended upon the reliable subordination of a defined population (Beckert 2014).

Here the theoretical significance of Gorender's concept becomes clear. By defining colonial slavery as a coherent mode of production, he identifies a structural connection between economic organization and social hierarchy. The plantation required institutions capable of managing permanent inequality—systems of supervision, coercion, and legal classification (Gorender [1978] 2016). These institutions were not auxiliary supports to the economy; they were conditions of production.

Abolition altered the legal form but not the institutional inheritance. Mechanisms for managing unfree labor did not disappear; they adapted. Surveillance, punishment, and restricted access to rights continued under new legal frameworks (Du Bois 1935; Blackmon 2008).

At this point, the relevance of contemporary institutional theory becomes evident. Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson distinguish between inclusive and extractive institutions. Inclusive institutions distribute political power broadly and secure participation and property rights. Extractive institutions concentrate power and organize economic activity to benefit a limited elite (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012).

Plantation societies exemplify extractive institutions. The state developed not to mediate between citizens but to control a laboring population excluded from citizenship. Law functioned as a mechanism of labor discipline rather than a neutral guarantor of rights (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012; Patterson 1982).

The persistence of inequality in the Americas therefore requires a different explanation. It is not a residue that modernization has failed to erase. It is an outcome of modern institutions designed to endure. Economic development built upon these institutions inherits their logic (North 1990).

American modernity thus represents an alternative path into modern social organization. One trajectory links economic development to expanding citizenship because production depends on autonomous workers. The other links development to managed inequality because production originated in coerced labor. Both trajectories are modern. Only one is inclusionary.

The implication is theoretical. The association between capitalism and democracy cannot be treated as a universal law. Where capitalism developed through the commodification of labor-power, it generated pressures toward participation. Where it developed through the ownership of persons, it generated pressures toward administrative control (Gorender [1978] 2016; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012).

Modernity therefore contains at least two, but probably more and distinct institutional logics: one in which markets erode hierarchy, and another in which markets stabilize it. I shall hint at other possibilities in the conclusion and mention them as limitations of this article and possibilities for future research.

6. Plantation America and Divergent Institutional Trajectories

The preceding argument requires an important qualification. Colonial slavery did not shape all regions of the Americas equally. While plantation slavery became the dominant mode of production in large parts of the Caribbean, Brazil, the U.S. South, coastal Venezuela, Colombia, Central America, and sections of Atlantic Mexico and Peru, other regions followed different developmental trajectories. The argument advanced here therefore applies most directly not to the Americas as a whole but to what may be called Plantation America.

This distinction is important because it allows us to identify divergent paths of modernity within the Western Hemisphere itself. Gorender's theory is most applicable where plantation slavery constituted the dominant organizing principle of society. In such regions, economic accumulation, political authority, labor relations, and social hierarchies were structured around the extraction of labor from legally unfree populations. Elsewhere, different labor regimes generated different institutional outcomes (Beckford 1972; Patterson 1982), with far-reaching consequences of durable inequality to this day.

The comparative work of Engerman and Sokoloff (2002) and, more recently, Acemoglu and Robinson (2012), provides important empirical support for this distinction. Both identify colonial labor systems and initial distributions of wealth and power as decisive determinants of long-term institutional development. Regions characterized by plantation agriculture, large estates, and slave labor tended to develop highly unequal social structures. Political power remained concentrated, access to education was restricted, and institutions evolved to protect elite privilege. By contrast, regions dominated by smallholders, family farms, and free labor generally developed more inclusive institutions and broader political participation (Engerman and Sokoloff 2002; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012).

The contrast between the northern and southern regions of what became the United States illustrates the point. The industrializing Northeast followed a trajectory closer to the classical European narrative. Free labor, urbanization, manufacturing, and expanding labor markets generated forms of social mobility and political participation broadly compatible with the assumptions embedded in Hegelian and Marxian theories of labor. Workers remained exploited, but they possessed juridical ownership of labor-power and could therefore participate in labor markets, organize collectively, and gradually claim political rights.

The plantation South followed a different path. Cotton production became one of the most profitable economic activities in the nineteenth-century world economy. By 1860, cotton accounted for nearly sixty percent of all U.S. exports (Beckert 2014). Yet this extraordinary wealth did not generate broad-based industrialization, widespread education, or inclusive political institutions. Instead, wealth became concentrated in a narrow planter elite whose political influence depended upon maintaining systems of racial domination and labor control. Economic success reinforced rather than undermined hierarchy.

Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) describe such arrangements as extractive institutions. Plantation societies generated institutions designed not to maximize participation but to maximize extraction. Their purpose was to secure labor, protect concentrated property, and limit access to political power. These institutions often survived abolition because their beneficiaries retained sufficient power to preserve them. The result was path dependence: institutions originally created to govern enslaved populations continued to shape labor relations, political participation, and social inequality long after slavery formally ended.

Brazil offers perhaps the clearest example. Between the sixteenth century and abolition in 1888, plantation slavery constituted the dominant economic and social institution in much of the country. The concentration of landownership, the weakness of public education, the exclusion of formerly enslaved populations from property ownership, and the persistence of highly unequal political structures all reflected institutional arrangements originally developed under slavery (Faoro [1958] 2001; Fernandes 1965). Abolition ended legal slavery but did not fundamentally alter the institutional distribution of power.

The same pattern can be observed throughout Plantation America. Caribbean plantation colonies remained highly unequal after emancipation. In Colombia and Venezuela, plantation and hacienda systems contributed to durable forms of political exclusion. Throughout much of Latin America, coerced labor systems, including slavery, *encomienda*, and *mita*, created institutional environments characterized by concentrated wealth and restricted citizenship.

Recognizing these regional variations strengthens rather than weakens the article's central argument. The existence of alternative trajectories within the Americas demonstrates that modernity did not emerge from a single historical process. Instead, different labor regimes produced different institutional outcomes. Regions built upon free labor moved closer to the European pattern in which economic development gradually expanded citizenship and political participation. Regions built upon plantation slavery generated a different form of modernity, one characterized by commercial rationality, global market integration, and economic dynamism, but also by persistent inequality, racial hierarchy, and extractive institutions.

The concept of Plantation America therefore provides a more precise formulation of the article's central claim. The argument is not that all American societies diverged equally from Europe. Rather, those societies whose development was fundamentally structured by plantation slavery followed a distinct institutional path. Their modernity emerged not from the emancipation of labor but from its systematic subordination. In these societies, the institutions of slavery did not simply precede modernity; they became constitutive of it.

7. Institutions, Persistence, and the Afterlife of Slavery

If colonial slavery created a distinct institutional order, the decisive question is not why inequality existed in the past, but why it persists after abolition. Slavery as a legal labor relation ended in the nineteenth century across the Americas, yet extreme inequality, restricted mobility, coercive policing, and racially stratified labor systems remained remarkably stable. The phenomenon requires a theory of institutional continuity rather than a purely economic explanation (Du Bois 1935; Patterson 1982).

Gorender's analysis points directly in this direction. The plantation was not only an economic unit but an administrative system. Production required surveillance, classification, enforcement, and punishment. Labor discipline depended on legal rules defining persons as property and regulating movement. Economic organization therefore shaped the structure of authority itself (Gorender [1978] 2016).

Once constructed, such institutions do not disappear when the original labor system collapses. They reorganize. Abolition removed ownership of persons but did not eliminate the perceived need, from the perspective of dominant groups, to secure a dependable labor supply. New mechanisms emerged: vagrancy laws, contract enforcement regimes, debt peonage, sharecropping, and convict leasing (Du Bois 1935; Blackmon 2008; Faoro [1958] 2001; Fernandes 1965). The objective remained constant—labor control without political equality.

This continuity becomes intelligible through the concept of extractive institutions. Extractive systems distribute political power narrowly and structure economic life to preserve that distribution (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012). Because elites benefit from these arrangements, they possess incentives to preserve them even after the original justification disappears. Legal reforms alter surface features while preserving underlying functions (North 1990).

Plantation societies created precisely such a structure. Property relations concentrated land ownership, political systems restricted participation, and law enforcement emphasized supervision over rights protection. The institutions originally justified by slavery became general mechanisms for managing inequality (Gorender [1978] 2016; Du Bois 1935).

Industrialization and urbanization therefore did not eliminate coercive practices. They relocated them. Systems originally developed to supervise plantations appeared in factories, urban labor markets, and penal systems (Blackmon 2008; Muhammad 2010).

The modern state in these societies consequently assumed a dual character. Formally, it adopted constitutions, elections, and legal equality. Practically, it maintained administrative practices oriented toward regulating marginalized populations. The persistence of mass incarceration, militarized policing, and precarious labor is therefore not an anomaly within democratic capitalism but reflects the institutional trajectory along which that variety of capitalism developed (Muhammad 2010; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012).

The critical implication is that inequality in the Americas is structural rather than merely distributive. It is embedded in the organization of authority. Where the historical formation of the state was tied to controlling labor rather than incorporating citizens, political inclusion remains conditional (Tilly 1992). The more foundational enslavement was to a country's social and economic system, the more slavery became the dominant mode of modernity. As slavery was indeed dominant in vast parts of the modern Americas, a distinctive "American modernity" emerged here, constituted by slavery.

This perspective also clarifies why economic growth repeatedly fails to resolve social disparities. Growth increases aggregate wealth but does not alter the institutional mechanisms through which opportunity is allocated. If access to property, education, mobility, and legal protection is mediated by structures descended from a system of domination, market expansion alone cannot produce equality (North 1990).

Gorender's theory thus shifts the analysis of contemporary inequality away from culture, attitudes, or policy mistakes. The issue is historical design. Societies formed through coerced labor developed political and legal systems adapted to hierarchy. These systems proved durable because they were functional: they stabilized economic relations and protected concentrated wealth (Gorender [1978] 2016).

The broader consequence concerns modern social theory itself. If capitalism can develop within extractive institutional frameworks, then the presumed linkage between market development and democratic deepening becomes contingent rather than necessary (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012). The afterlife of slavery therefore lies not primarily in memory but in organization as the past survives as institutional practice.

Contemporary Relevance: Inequality as Institutional Inheritance

The theoretical stakes of Gorender's argument emerge most clearly in the present. Contemporary societies across the Americas display a persistent pattern of high levels of economic inequality, segmented labor markets, concentrated land ownership, and disproportionate exposure of marginalized populations to policing and punishment. These phenomena are often explained as policy failures, educational deficits, or incomplete modernization. Such explanations assume that the normative baseline of modernity is inclusion and that inequality represents a deviation from it (World Bank 2018).

Gorender's framework suggests the opposite. He argues that the institutional architecture that structured colonial slavery did not vanish; it reorganized the social distribution of power (Gorender [1978] 2016). The plantation required a system capable of supervising labor, restricting mobility, and enforcing obedience. After abolition, those mechanisms lost their explicit legal justification but retained their administrative function. The coercive capacities of the state, once directed toward enslaved populations, became generalized instruments for regulating precarious labor and marginalized groups (Du Bois 1935; Muhammad 2010). This continuity becomes visible in three domains.

First, in labor organization: Post-emancipation labor regimes frequently reproduced dependence through contractual rather than proprietary forms. Sharecropping, peonage, and informal employment preserved nominal autonomy while maintaining economic vulnerability (Du Bois 1935; Blackmon 2008). Workers formally entered markets but lacked bargaining power and mobility. Labor markets therefore existed without labor equality (Patterson 1982).

Second, in property distribution: Plantation systems concentrated land ownership, and abolition rarely redistributed land. Freed populations entered legal freedom without economic independence. Because access to property determines access to credit, education, and political influence, initial inequalities reproduced themselves across generations (Engerman and Sokoloff 2002). Industrial and urban growth layered new sectors onto an unchanged ownership structure.

Third, in coercive authority: Administrative practices developed to enforce plantation discipline shaped policing institutions. Surveillance, patrols, and punitive enforcement became normal functions of governance. Populations historically excluded from citizenship continued to encounter the state primarily through control rather than representation (Muhammad 2010).

Institutional theory helps explain persistence. Inclusive institutions rely on broad participation and predictable rights while extractive institutions secure economic production through concentrated power (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012). Where economic organization historically depended on coerced labor, elites developed political structures designed to preserve that arrangement. Because these structures maintained economic stability, they were retained after slavery's formal abolition (North 1990). The result is a characteristic paradox of American societies: constitutional democracy coexists with entrenched inequality. Elections occur regularly, legal equality is proclaimed, and economic growth proceeds, yet social mobility remains constrained and wealth concentrates (Engerman and Sokoloff 2002; Acharya et al. 2018; Rothstein 2017; Wilkerson 2020). The legacy of slavery is not merely economic. It produced a durable social order: concentrated landholding, racialized citizenship, weak redistribution, coercive policing, violent labor discipline, and political cultures organized around status defense, as represented in Tables 1–3. The contemporary inequality, homicide, racial polarization, and anti-redistributive politics showcased in Tables 1–3 are therefore not accidental residues but institutional afterlives of plantation and slave societies. The following tables illustrate this reality.

Table 1. Historical legacies of slavery and contemporary inequality in the Americas.

Region/Country	Historical System	Contemporary Indicators
Brazil	Plantation slavery; imported approximately 4.9 million enslaved Africans (1550–1888)	Gini coefficient approximately 0.52 (2023); homicide rate approximately 19 per 100,000 (2023); high racial wealth and income disparities
Colombia	Plantation slavery, mining economy, and large landed estates	Gini coefficient approximately 0.54 (2023); homicide rate approximately 25 per 100,000; persistent regional inequality
Jamaica and Caribbean plantation economies	Sugar plantation slavery	Homicide rate among highest globally (approximately 53 per 100,000 in Jamaica); high wealth concentration
U.S. South	Slave plantation economy	Persistent racial wealth gap; elevated poverty and incarceration rates; homicide rates higher than U.S. Northeast and Midwest
United States (overall)	Mixed economy with slave and free labor regions	Gini coefficient approximately 0.41; wealth of median White household roughly six times that of median Black household
Canada	Settler-colonial economy with limited plantation slavery	Lower inequality (Gini approximately 0.31); lower homicide rates; comparatively higher social mobility
Western Europe (England, Netherlands, Germany, Scandinavia)	Commercial and industrial capitalism; limited reliance on plantation slavery domestically	Lower homicide rates (generally below 2 per 100,000); lower income inequality; stronger welfare institutions

Caption: This table compares regions shaped by plantation slavery with settler societies and mixed economies. It illustrates the persistence of inequality, violence, and social fragmentation in areas where slave labor was historically central to economic production.

Sources:¹ World Bank, Gini Index database; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Global Study on Homicide (2023); OECD, Income Distribution Database; Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, Continuous PNAD surveys; U.S. Census Bureau; Federal Reserve System; Statistics Canada.

Table 2. Contemporary legacies of slave and plantation economies: inequality, violence, and social fragmentation in comparative perspective.

Country/Region	Historical Labor Regime	Gini Index	Top 10% Income Share (%)	Homicides per 100,000	Notes
Brazil	Plantation slavery, mining slavery	51.7	39.3	19.0	Largest slave society in the Americas
Colombia	Plantation/mining slavery	54.4	39.0+	25.4	Among world's most unequal countries
Jamaica	Sugar plantation slavery	~45	--	53.3	Extremely high violence
United States	Mixed settler/slave economy	41.8	30.5	5.7	Strong regional slave legacy in South
Canada	Settler economy	31.7	24.8	2.0	Lower inequality and violence
Uruguay	Settler-smallholder economy	40.0	27.7	10.7	Most egalitarian in South America
Germany	Non-slave domestic economy	31.7	23.8	0.8	Low violence, moderate inequality
France	Non-slave domestic economy	31.5	24.5	1.1	Low violence
Spain	Non-slave domestic economy	31.5	24.3	0.7	Low violence

Caption: Comparison of contemporary socioeconomic outcomes in societies historically characterized by plantation slavery and coerced labor versus settler societies and European countries where slavery was not the dominant mode of production. Data are

drawn from official international datasets and represent the most recent year available (2023–2025).

Sources: World Bank Poverty and Inequality Platform (Gini; top-income shares); UNODC Intentional Homicide Statistics; World Development Indicators. (World Bank Open Data).

Table 3. Long-term institutional legacies of slavery: land, education, and wealth.

Region	Historical Slave Share (1860 or Nearest Census)	Current Poverty	Current Incarceration	Current Political Polarization
U.S. Deep South	Very high	Higher	Higher	Higher
U.S. Northeast	Very low	Lower	Lower	Lower

Caption: This table summarizes the long-term institutional legacies of slavery within the United States by comparing the historically slave-dependent Deep South with the largely free-labor Northeast. It illustrates the association between the geographic concentration of slavery prior to emancipation and contemporary patterns of poverty, incarceration, and political polarization. The comparison highlights how historical differences in labor systems and social institutions continue to shape regional socioeconomic and political outcomes more than 150 years after the abolition of slavery.

Sources:² United States Census Bureau, *Eighth Census of the United States* (1860); Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, National Historical Geographic Information System (NHGIS); U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS), latest available estimates; United States Census Bureau; Bureau of Justice Statistics; Prison Policy Initiative, state incarceration datasets compiled from official correctional statistics; Pew Research Center, political polarization surveys; American National Election Studies; Congressional Research Service, regional voting and partisan alignment data.

These outcomes do not contradict modernity. Instead, they express the specific type of modernity produced by colonial slavery. Hierarchy persists not because modernization failed but because modernization occurred within inherited institutions (Gorender [1978] 2016; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012).

The persistence of hierarchy therefore does not require a cultural explanation; it follows institutional logic. Systems created to administer unfree labor adapted to regulate economic vulnerability rather than ownership of persons. Precarity replaced bondage, but the governing mechanisms remained recognizable (Patterson 1982).

The contemporary relevance of Gorender’s work lies precisely here. By identifying colonial slavery as a coherent mode of production, he shows that inequality is embedded in the organizational foundations of society rather than in temporary deviations from them (Gorender [1978] 2016). Reform measures addressing distribution without addressing institutional structure inevitably face limits. Policies can mitigate disparities but struggle to transform patterns produced by deeply rooted arrangements of power (North 1990).

The implication for democratic theory is sobering. The expansion of rights does not automatically dismantle extractive institutions. Formal inclusion can coexist with administrative exclusion (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012). Modernity in the Americas, then, is not unfinished; it is internally consistent. Its economic dynamism and its social stratification emerge from the same historical origin.

8. Conclusions

Gorender’s reinterpretation of colonial slavery forces a reassessment of one of the central assumptions of modern social thought: that labor contains within it the promise of freedom. The Hegelian bondsman and the Marxian proletarian achieve emancipation because their labor confronts them as their own activity, even when appropriated by others

(Hegel [1807] 1977; Marx [1844] 1992). Colonial slavery eliminates that condition. The laborer's activity is never recognized as his own. Externalized labor produces wealth but not recognition; accumulation but not autonomy.

From this follows a second consequence. Plantation economies did not merely precede industrial capitalism in the Americas; they shaped the form it would take. By preventing labor markets, suppressing domestic demand, and institutionalizing hierarchy, they redirected development (Gorender [1978] 2016; Beckert 2014). Economic modernization emerged within structures designed for domination. American modernity therefore differed from European modernity at its origin: one arose from the emancipation of labor, the other from its systematic coercion.

Institutional theory provides the mechanism of persistence. The political and legal systems created to sustain slavery continued to organize social life after abolition (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012; Du Bois 1935). Inequality endured not because modernization failed but because modernization operated within inherited institutions. The legacy of slavery survives not primarily in attitudes or memory but in administrative practice.

If this interpretation is accepted, a broader comparative question follows, which I shall only mention here as limitations of this article and possible directions of future work.

Approximately twelve million Africans were transported to the Americas through the Atlantic slave trade, yet roughly eighteen million were enslaved through trans-Saharan and Indian Ocean slave systems (Gordon 1998). If Atlantic colonial slavery produced a distinctive modernity in which exclusion and hierarchy became foundational, what institutional trajectories emerged in societies shaped by long-term enslavement elsewhere? The answer bears directly on the relationship between slavery and modernity. It will determine whether the connection identified here is regionally limited to the Americas or of a more global character.

Furthermore, in parts of colonial America, indigenous people were subject to systems of forced labor akin to enslavement, known as *mita*, which dominated the economies and social arrangements of Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, and parts of Chile and Argentina for even longer than enslavement because *mita* was first implemented by Inca rulers and later adopted by Spanish colonizers, roughly from 1400 to 1800. *Mita* consisted of forced labor in mines and created specific social systems of dependence based on temporal labor coercion. It, too, relied on labor relations and contracts that are foundationally different from modern European labor relations and contracts, thus potentially also forging *sui generis* divergent modernities.

Finally, the centrality of Spanish systems of land possession through genocide and expulsion, known as *encomiendas*, should equally be considered as a specific mode of spatial occupation and, as such, divergent from dominant European models of feudal land occupation and control. *Encomienda*, similar to *mita* and enslavement, became legally anchored into those societies where such arrangements dominated and they, too, potentially triggered divergent and properly Hispanic social formations and modernities.

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Notes

- ¹ Historical descriptions derive from the scholarly literature on slavery and colonial institutions, including Acemoglu et al. (2001), Acemoglu and Robinson (2012); and Engerman and Sokoloff (2002).
- ² Historical slave-population data from the 1860 U.S. Census. Contemporary poverty statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau. Incarceration rates from the Bureau of Justice Statistics. Measures of political polarization are synthesized from Pew Research Center surveys, ANES data, and Acharya et al. (2018). The categories “higher” and “lower” indicate relative differences between the Deep South and the Northeast rather than exact numerical values.

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