

## EMANCIPATION FROM CAPITAL

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**ABSTRACT:** *The paper asserts that capital is the dominant form of power and domination in the world today and argues that therefore emancipation must entail liberation from the power of capital. Drawing from the pioneer work of Max Weber, who distinguished the 'spirit' or ethos of capitalism from capitalism's institutions, the paper further argues that emancipation from capital must entail liberation not only from institutionalized forms of capital, for example, institutions of private property, but also from what the paper terms 'the capital form,' namely, the worldview that sees and values everything, including persons, in terms of capital, for instance, the tendency to view persons as 'human resources.' The paper alludes to some of the seductions of capital, whereby efforts at emancipation from capital have been derailed, and concludes by suggesting that the history of Africana people, who have long fought for emancipation from capital, provides much inspiration and insight into what emancipation from capital entails. The paper notes two examples in particular: Haiti's ongoing struggle for national emancipation and Frederick Douglass's personal struggle for emancipation.*

I open with a chant from the Haitian Revolution that is still repeated today. It is in the traditional African, call-response form.

The white colonists will persecute us!  
**Not** a problem!  
The white colonists will torture us!  
**Not** a problem!  
The white colonists will always have slaves?  
**Not** possible!  
The white colonists will kill us?  
**Not** a problem!  
We prefer death to slavery.<sup>1</sup>

I take as evident that capital is the dominant form of domination in the world today, and based upon that premise I will argue here, first, that emancipation from capital must include emancipation not just from the institutional structures of capitalism but also from the capital form, or 'spirit' of capitalism (in the sense of Max Weber), that is, from the epistemological and ethical system created by the regime of capital, and, second,

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Bertrand Aristide. *Haiti-Haitii? Philosophical Reflections for Mental Decolonization*, trans. Mildred Aristide (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2011), p. 22.

that Africana history offers extraordinarily rich resources for such emancipation and for teaching us what it entails.

### I. Five Meanings of 'Capitalism'

(1) 'Capitalism' most properly pertains to economic systems rooted in the private ownership of the means of production, as opposed to those systems wherein capital is collectively or socially owned—socialism proper. However, it is often conflated with (2) free markets, that is, economic systems that answer the fundamental questions of economy—What will be produced? How much of each good will be produced? By what means will production take place? And, who will receive what is produced?—by reference to markets governed by the principles of supply and demand. Free market economies thus stand in contrast to command or planned economies, wherein such questions are answered through some central authority, whether it be democratic or autocratic.

Capitalism and free markets do not necessarily go together. For example, Nazi Germany left capital in the hands of private owners, such as Oskar Shindler, but dictated to them what and how much they would produce. Hence, it was more properly a system of national capitalism, rather than 'national socialism.' And prior to the breakup of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia operated a system of market socialism, wherein capital was owned collectively by the state, but production and distribution was left to the forces of the market. Thus there is no necessary connection between capitalism and free markets.

The conflation of 'capitalism' with 'free markets,' however, allows defenders of the former to claim for that system the virtues of the latter, such as its supposed elimination of chattel slavery. Ludwig von Mises offers a primary example of such conflation:

The abolition of slavery and serfdom is to be attributed neither to the teachings of theologians and moralists nor to weakness or generosity on the part of the masters. ... Servile labor disappeared because it could not stand the competition of free labor; its unpredictability sealed its doom in the market economy. ....

Now, at no time and at no place was it possible for enterprises employing servile labor to compete on the market with enterprises employing free labor....

.... In the production of articles of superior quality an enterprise employing the apparently cheap labor of unfree workers can never stand the competition of enterprises employing free labor. It is this fact that has made all systems of compulsory labor disappear.<sup>2</sup>

Mises offers no empirical evidence for his claim: it is but ideological assertion. Moreover, he here implicitly suggests that the worst thing that free market advocates can say about chattel slavery is that it is 'inefficient' and thereby reveals the ethical poverty of free market ideology. More to our point here, however, while Mises in this passage explicitly credits 'free markets' with ending slavery, he uses this point as part of a general defense of 'capitalism.'

'Free market' ideology offers its own utopian vision of emancipation: a world liberated from feudal oppression, wherein one is free to pursue the good life as one determines for oneself. Indeed, Adam Smith famously described the conditions of 'perfect liberty' whereby the forces of competition bring about the most equitable, just, and happy of all possible worlds, better than any philosopher king could ever achieve. It is ironic, though, that such a system would be called 'capitalism,' because, as Smith already recognized, capitalists are the people who least want such a system: within ideally free markets capitalists are relatively impotent and hence unable to achieve the 'extraordinary profits' that they desire. As Mises describes,

The direction of all economic affairs is in the market society a task of entrepreneurs. Theirs is the control of production. They are at the helm and steer the ship. A superficial observer would believe that they are supreme. But they are not. They are bound to obey unconditionally the captain's orders. The captain is the consumer. Neither the entrepreneurs nor the farmers nor the capitalists determine what has to be produced. The consumers do that. If a business man does not strictly obey the orders of the public as they are conveyed to him by the

structure of market prices, he suffers losses, he goes bankrupt, and is thus removed from his eminent position at the helm. Other men who did better in satisfying the demands of the consumer replace him.<sup>3</sup>

Free markets are thus more properly a system of 'consumerism,' as Smith suggests:

Consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production; and the interest of the producer ought to be attended to, only so far as may be necessary for promoting that of the consumer. **The maxim is so perfectly self-evident, that it would be absurd to attempt to prove it.**<sup>4</sup>

John Maynard Keynes concurs: "All production is for the purpose of ultimately satisfying a consumer."<sup>5</sup> Free markets promise consumers emancipation to satisfy their desires, and thus the ideology in support of them is to be condemned at least for its impoverished notion of 'freedom.' I think here of Chase Bank's 'Freedom (Master) Card,' which, so its advertisement claims, "gives you the freedom to say, 'yes,' to your every desire."

There are merits in several other definitions of 'capitalism,' which are useful for our analysis here. For instance, (3) the first definition of 'capitalism' that the *Oxford English Dictionary* offers is, "a system which favors the existence of capitalists,"<sup>6</sup> something which, as we saw, free markets clearly do not do. 'Capitalism' might be defined, too, (4) as an economic system wherein capital hires labor, as opposed to those systems, such as worker cooperatives, wherein labor owns capital, and (5) Robert Heilbroner defines it as "the regime of capital,"<sup>7</sup> that is, a social system ruled by the power of capital.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 269-70.

<sup>4</sup> Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), ed. Edwin Cannan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), II, 179. Emphasis added.

<sup>5</sup> John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money* (1936), vol. 7 of *Collected Writings* (Cambridge: Macmillan, 1973), p. 46.

<sup>6</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> Robert Heilbroner, *Behind the Veil of Economics: Essays in the Worldly Philosophy* (New York, W. W. Norton, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2007), p. 630-31.

## II. Emancipation from the Regime of Capital

Decades prior to Marx, Jacksonian democrats, such as Orestes Brownson, distinguished chattel from wage slavery. Brownson wrote, in his support of the Chartist movement in England:

we say frankly that, if there must always be a laboring population distinct from proprietors and employers, we regard the slave system as decidedly preferable to the system of wages. ... Wages is a cunning device of the devil for the benefit of tender consciences who would retain all the advantages of the slave system without the expense, trouble, and odium of being slaveholders.<sup>8</sup>

The slave-owner at least has it in his own self-interest to protect his investment and to provide the slave with minimum sustenance, but those who rent labor, through wages, do not necessarily care whether their laborers live or die as long as there are others to replace them. Following the collapse of Reconstruction, in 1877, Frederick Douglass concurred with Brownson's judgment: "the Negro," he claimed,

is worse off, in many respects, than when he was a slave .... He is the victim of a cunningly devised swindle, one which paralyzes his energies, suppresses his ambition, and blasts all his hopes; and though he is nominally free he is actually a slave. I here and now denounce this so-called emancipation as a stupendous fraud--a fraud upon him, a fraud upon the world. ... With slavery [the old slaveholders] had some care and responsibility for the physical well-being of their slaves. Now they have as firm a grip on the freedman's labor as when he was a slave and without any burden of caring for his children or himself.<sup>9</sup>

Such are the oppressive conditions under capitalism, as a system wherein capital hires labor.

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<sup>8</sup> Orestes Augustus Brownson, "The Laboring Classes," review of Thomas Carlyle's *Chartism*, *Boston Quarterly Review* (1841, in (abridged) *Social Theories of Jacksonian Democracy: Representative Writings of the Period 1825-1850*, ed. Joseph L. Blau (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1954), pp. 307, 309.

<sup>9</sup> Frederick Douglass, "I Denounce the So-Called Emancipation as a Stupendous Fraud" (1888), in *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Philip S. Foner (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), pp. 715, 717.

By contrast, the Mondragon cooperatives, in the Basque region of Spain, constitute a system of emancipation from capital through their subordination of capital to labor:<sup>10</sup> only workers can own capital. Capital and profit stemming from it are thus treated as means for improving material living conditions, rather than as ends in themselves. The cooperatives measure their performance not by their profitability but by the quantity and quality of employment that they generate and maintain. As George Cheney describes, "Seeing themselves as neither in the service of capital nor alienated from it, the coops aimed to subordinate the maintenance of capital to the interests of labor and human values."<sup>11</sup> Labor democratically controls capital and is treated thereby as a fixed rather than a variable cost of production. In times of economic difficulty, such as the present, labor is the absolutely last expense to be cut, and even then workers will be transferred to another cooperative or sent to the technical school or university for retraining rather than laid off altogether. In conventional capitalist firms, by contrast, labor is viewed as a cost to be minimized and commonly the first expense to be cut, and workers are seen as expendable means rather than ends in themselves.

Although Mondragon derived this principle of the subordination of capital to labor from Catholic social teaching, the architect of Mondragon, Father Jose Arizmendiarieta, a parish priest, considered it a matter of social justice: "Cooperation is an authentic integration of the person in the economic and social process, and it is central to a new social order; employees working cooperatively ought to unite around this ultimate objective, along with all who hunger and thirst for justice in this world of work."<sup>12</sup> Mondragon measures

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<sup>10</sup> George Cheney, *Values at Work: Employee Participation Meets Market Pressure*, updated ed. (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 1999), and Kenneth W. Stickers, "Dewey, Economic Democracy, and the Mondragon Cooperatives," *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* 3.2 (2011): 186-99.

<sup>11</sup> Cheney, pp. 38-39.

<sup>12</sup> As quoted and translated by Cheney, p. 39.

economic growth not by the sheer quantity of goods produced and consumed but on the basis of the cooperatives' ability to provide stable employment in accord with human dignity. Profit is treated not as the purpose of business but as a means to create the conditions for dignified human living. As Cheney describes, "the growth of the cooperatives ... has meant far more than 'adding more of the same' to existing structures" but has included the personal growth of its members as well as the strengthening of relationships among themselves, with the community, and even with the world and the capacity of the enterprise to adapt to a changing, global economic environment.<sup>13</sup>

John Stuart Mill had argued already, in his *Principles of Political Economy* (1848), that cooperatives, owned primarily but not solely by the workers themselves, would be the next phase in the natural evolution of capitalism. Such cooperatives would outperform traditional capitalist firms, Mill claimed, because they would be more efficient. As owners of their own businesses, workers work harder; they manage themselves, thereby saving the huge expense of having to employ supervisors; they strive for increased efficiencies and vigilantly work to eliminate waste because they themselves benefit. Furthermore, not being pressured to return maximum profits to investors immediately, such cooperatives could retain larger portions of profits as reserves and for reinvestment.<sup>14</sup>

As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>15</sup> Mondragon cooperatives exemplify central features of what John Dewey described when he spoke of democracy as "a way of life": they have attained a level of economic democracy in the lives of ordinary workers unmatched in world history. Mondragon's democracy is not merely a formal, political one, wherein people go to the polls every few

years to cast ballots and which can be manipulated too easily by powerful moneyed, anti-democratic interests. Rather, it is a democracy that workers practice everyday at their places of work.

Recently there have been concerns about Mondragon's failure to extend its democratic principles and structures to its international subsidiaries. For example, I have visited two of Mondragon's automotive parts plants in Mexico and talked with their workers. The workers complained that working conditions in these plants are at least as oppressive as those in plants owned by major automobile manufacturers, such as General Motors, and that there is no democracy for workers in them. I confronted economists in Mondragon with such complaints, and they admitted that Mondragon's application of its democratic principles outside of Spain is "uneven." They also indicated that they were concerned by such reports, but it was not clear that remedying these conditions was a high priority for the cooperatives that owned the plants in question.

Indeed, the history of cooperatives reveals the seductive power of capital: even within structures designed to prevent exploitative uses of capital, profit from capital lures worker owners to abandon their own ethical and democratic principles and to seek personal gain at the expense of others. At the first successful industrial, worker-owned cooperative at New Lenark, England, which utopian socialist Robert Owen began in 1799, worker-owners, hungry for additional profits, opened the cooperative to external investors, who quickly took over the enterprise and converted it into a traditional capitalist firm, which continued to operate until 1968. The attraction to external investment has been a constant threat to worker cooperatives throughout their history.<sup>16</sup> In a similar vein, we see in the history of socialist economies, such as the Soviet Union, which

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<sup>13</sup> Cheney, p. 74.

<sup>14</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy, with Some of Their Applications to Social Philosophy* (1848), ed. Donald Winch (Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1970), pp. 118-42.

<sup>15</sup> Stickers, op. cit.

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<sup>16</sup> John Pencavel, "Worker Cooperatives and Democratic Governance," Discussion Paper No. 6932 (Bonn, Germany: Forschungsinstitut zur Zukunft der Arbeit, October 2010), pp. 27-28. <http://ftp.iza.org/dp6932.pdf>

ironically claim to be anti-capitalist, the strong propensity to reduce human beings to capital, not for profit but for ideological purposes. All these instances illustrate the seductive power of capital—the temptation to use it as a coercive means for dominating others in order to achieve one’s own ends. Thus, the capital form, as Weber showed in his own way, transcends the institutions of capitalism.

### III. Slavery, Capitalism, and the Capital Form.

What I intend here by the ‘capital form’ bears strong resemblance to what Weber described as ‘the spirit of capitalism.’ Central to Weber’s famous analysis of that ‘spirit’ is his clear separation of ‘capitalism’ as an economic system and institutions such as private property and unfettered global markets, from ‘capitalism’ as an ‘ethos,’ or system of values. Similarly, the ‘capital form’ is a worldview that sees everything—living and non-living—as means for profit-making, that is, as capital. Such a worldview, however, does not stop with the non-human world, and the capital form and the spirit of capitalism come to see human beings, too, as means to profit making, as capital. Weber summarizes the spirit of capitalism in the words of Kürnberger: “They make tallow out of cattle and money out of men.”<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, the pervasiveness of the capital form is evident in the common use of such terms as ‘human capital’ and ‘human resources.’ Life no longer appears as containing its own inherent value: henceforth life must be ‘earned’—justify itself as capital.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, people are not just treated as capital and used up in the earning of profit, but they also internalize the capital form and hence come to see and value themselves as capital: “Your future depends on how you market yourself,” proclaimed a flier on my university’s bulletin board. One is commanded by the ‘free’ labor market to present—

package, brand, and sell—oneself as human capital in order to ‘earn a living.’

Contra Mises, the slave trade made the world safe for the regime of capital in at least a two-fold way. First, it created much of the surplus value upon which capitalism was built. Reformed Marxists, such as two Trinidadian economists, Eric Williams,<sup>19</sup> who was also the first Prime Minister of independent Trinidad and Tobago, and Oliver Cox,<sup>20</sup> one of the developers of world-systems theory, emphasize material continuities between the two systems: contrary to the claims of orthodox Marxists, that surplus value came entirely from capitalist modes of production, the Atlantic slave trade, they argue, provided much of the capital formation that was necessary for the rise of Western capitalism. On this matter Cox takes direct issue not only with orthodox Marxists but even with Marx:

The pivotal problem faced by ... Marxian economists was that of breaking through the labor-capital-commodity-surplus-value frame of reference which seemed to become more and more limiting and unrealistic. It became apparent that the accumulated capital in leading capitalist nations was not all the product of its own factories. Some of it came from “outside.”<sup>21</sup>

That is, significant portions of the surplus value out of which capitalism arose came from slavery.

Second, the slave-trade was the logical extension of the capital form to humanity: it is the reduction of human persons to capital in its crudest form. The slave ship served as a factory for the manufacture of human capital. As historian Marcus Rediker writes, “the slave ship worked as a machine to produce the commodity ‘slave’ for a global labor market. A violence of enslavement and a violence of abstraction developed together and reinforced each other.” The slave ship embodied

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<sup>17</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1959): p. 51.

<sup>18</sup> Max Scheler, *Ressentiment*, trans. William Holdheim, ed. Lewis Coser (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1961), p. 160.

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<sup>19</sup> Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944).

<sup>20</sup> Oliver Cromwell Cox, *Capitalism as a System* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 216.

the brutal logic and cold, rational mentality of the merchant's business--the process by which human beings were reduced to property [capital], by which labor was made into a thing, a commodity shorn of all ethical considerations. In a troubled era of transition from a moral to a political conception of economy, the [slave ship] represented a nightmarish outcome of the process. Here was the new, modern economic system in all its horrifying nakedness, capitalism without a loincloth.<sup>22</sup>

The slave ship manufactured the human capital that the theories, institutions, and proponents of capitalism would take for granted and Marx would criticize: human life reduced to the logic of the balance sheet.

#### IV. Africana History as Resource for Emancipation from Capital

Because the power of capital to oppress comes from its capacity to threaten life, to withhold the means of living, resistance to and thus emancipation from that power and the capital form requires some intuition of, some feeling for those values that transcend those of capital—those values beyond all price—but also that transcend life itself.

Africana history is replete with inspiring examples of enslaved people successfully resisting not just their physical enslavement but also the capital form that reduces them to human capital and throwing off their physical shackles precisely because of their powerful sense of values transcending human life, enabling and empowering them to refuse to be reduced to mere human capital. On this matter I agree with Angela Davis's suggestion, in her pioneer essay making the case that Frederick Douglass warrants inclusion in the literature of philosophy, that those who have been historically denied human freedom are generally better able to articulate the nature and conditions of human freedom, of emancipation, than those who take their freedom for granted and who might even have it in their interests to deny freedom to others. "Are human beings free or are they not?" Davis asks.

<sup>22</sup> Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Viking, 2007), pp. 338-39.

Ought they be free or ought they not be free? The history of Afro-American literature furnishes an illuminating account of the nature of human freedom, its extent and limits. Moreover, we should discover in Black literature an important perspective that is missing in so many of the discussions on the theme of freedom in the history of bourgeois philosophy. Afro-American literature incorporates the consciousness of a people who have continually been denied entrance into the real world of freedom, a people whose struggles and aspiration have exposed the inadequacies not only of the practice of freedom, but also of its very theoretical roots.<sup>23</sup>

Those who have suffered as a result of being systematically "denied entrance into the real world of freedom" have a special interest in articulating with maximal clarity those universal qualities and conditions upon which claims to rights and freedoms are made. By contrast, those who take such rights and freedoms for granted are not so motivated but are more likely to avoid such clarity so as to conceal and protect their privileged status.

In the light of Davis's comments Kanye West's recent "Made in America" tour with Jay Z is disheartening and betrays the tradition of which Davis speaks. Their song with the tour's title invokes the names of Martin, Coretta, and Malcolm as prelude to descriptions of how they made it in America,<sup>24</sup> and throughout the tour West claimed that his only responsibility to the Black community was to make as much money as possible so that it would trickle down to the Black community, and he advised young African Americans to "brand, market, and franchise" themselves like he and Jay Z have done—that is, to conform themselves perfectly to the capital form—and, without any apparent irony in their use of 'brand' and 'market,' essentially do to themselves what slaveholders had done to African peoples in the past,

<sup>23</sup> Angela Davis, "Unfinished Lecture on Liberation—2," in *Philosophy Born of Struggle: Anthology of Afro-American Philosophy from 1917*, ed. Leonard Harris (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 1983), p. 90.

<sup>24</sup> Shawn Carter ('Jay Z') and Kanye West, "Made in America" Lyrics, Genius, <http://genius.com/Kanye-west-made-in-america-lyrics> (accessed 25 July 2015)

that is, reduce them to capital. His connection of Black history with the self-capitalizing of Black bodies is disturbing because it suggests that Martin, Malcolm, and other great Black leaders died so that Black people like him could submit obediently to the regime of capital and the capital form, branding and marketing their own black bodies.

W. E. Du Bois offers a different view, with which those whom West invokes would agree: in our haste to gain access to the means of making a living, let us not forget the things of beauty that remind us of those values for which it is worth living. With his typical eloquence, Du

Bois challenges an African American audience in 1926 Chicago:

If you tonight suddenly should become full-fledged Americans; if your color faded, or the color line here in Chicago was miraculously forgotten; suppose, too, you became at the same time rich and powerful;—what is it that you would want? What would you immediately seek? Would you buy the most powerful of motor cars and outrace Cook County? Would you buy the most elaborate estate on the North Shore? .... Would you wear the most striking clothes, give the richest dinners and buy the longest press notices?

Or, expressed in the present-day context: would you act like West and Jay Z? Du Bois continues his challenge:

Even as you visualize such ideals you know in your hearts that these are not the things you really want. You realize this sooner than the average white American because, pushed aside as we have been in America, there has come to us not only a certain distaste for the tawdry and flamboyant but a vision of what the world could be if it were really a beautiful world; if we had the true spirit; if we had the Seeing Eye, the Cunning Hand, the Feeling Heart; if we had, to be sure, not perfect happiness, but plenty of good hard work, the inevitable suffering, that always comes with life; sacrifice and waiting, all that—but, nevertheless, lived in a world where men know, where men create, where they realize themselves and where they enjoy life. It is that sort of a world we want to create for ourselves and for all America.

‘Emancipation’ in the deep sense requires remembrance of those things of beauty that remind us of what the

world could be and for which we all must struggle. Du Bois offers four examples:

The Cathedral of Cologne, a forest in stone, set in light and changing shadow, echoing with sunlight and solemn song; a village of the Veys in West Africa, a little thing of mauve and purple, quiet, lying content and shining in the sun; a black and velvet room where on a throne rest, in old and yellowing marble, the broken curves of the Venus of Milo; a single phrase of music in the Southern South—utter melody, haunting and appealing, suddenly arising out of night and eternity, beneath the moon.

Such is Beauty. Its variety is infinite, its possibility is endless. In normal life all may have it and have it yet again. The world is full of it; and yet today the mass of human beings are choked away from it, and their lives distorted and made ugly. This is not only wrong, it is silly. Who shall right this well-nigh universal failing? Who shall let this world be beautiful? Who shall restore to men the glory of sunsets and the peace of quiet sleep?

Du Bois believed that Black folk, as a result of their history of oppression and suffering, had a special ability and mission to restore beauty to the world.<sup>25</sup>

Interestingly, Kanye West, too, like Du Bois, decries the loss of beauty in the modern world and calls for its restoration, but it is mainly the beauty of expensive automobiles, estates, and clothing,<sup>26</sup> which Du Bois described as superficial.

Like Du Bois and Davis I read Africana history quite differently than does Kanye West, and I offer two examples from that history that suggest an opposite message and inspire and instruct us regarding emancipation from capital, both capital as a material force of oppression and the capital form. The first is grand and monumental: it is the story of the Haitian

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<sup>25</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, “Criteria of Negro Art” (1926), in *The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 325–26.

<sup>26</sup> Tim Nudd, “Kanye West Charms Cannes with His Moral Take on Brands and Culture; Plus, What He Thinks about Apple’s Deal with Beats,” *Adweek* (17 June 2014): <http://www.adweek.com/news/advertising-branding/kanye-west-charms-cannes-his-moral-take-brands-and-culture-158376>

Revolution. The second is so subtle and quiet that it could go easily unnoticed, but it is no less powerful and profound: it is from the life of Frederick Douglass

In 1779, decades prior to Haiti's own revolution, 800 mulatto and free black Haitians, many having been trained in the French army, answered Count D'Estaing's call for volunteers to join French forces already fighting with the American revolutionaries. The Haitians believed that American independence would contribute to the liberatory efforts of all oppressed people, including their own in Haiti, and naively imagined that their efforts and sacrifices would be remembered and repaid when their own revolution came. The Haitian Fontages Legion, under the command of Viscount de Fontages, partook in the Battle of Savanna and in an ill-advised and ill-conceived assault on the British fortification there, in conjunction with American and French troops and fleets, as well as Polish troops under the command of Count Pulaski, who suffered multiple, severe injuries. The assault failed miserably, and the British counterattacked, threatening to annihilate the combined armies. The free Haitians rose to the occasion, though, and met the attacking British troops head-on, fiercely, brilliantly, and at great loss, allowing the remainder of the southern revolutionary forces to retreat safely: by all accounts the Legion acted with extraordinary valor and skill. According to the official report, prepared in Paris, "This legion saved the army at Savannah by bravely covering its retreat,"<sup>27</sup> and it likely saved the revolution altogether. The heroics of the Legion, along with the eventual success of the American Revolution, greatly inspired other American liberators, such as Simon Bolivar, and prompted Haitians to begin planning their own emancipation. Indeed, those who fought at Savannah became some of the most important leaders of the Haitian Revolution—mulattos Commandant Villarte and André Rigaud, its leading mulatto general,

<sup>27</sup> As quoted in T. G. Steward, "How the Black St. Domingo Legion Saved the Patriot Army in the Siege of Savannah, 1779" (Washington, D.C.: American Negro Academy, 1899), p. 12.

and black freedmen M. Lambert and Henri Christophe, independent Haiti's second leader and first elected President of the Northern Republic of Haiti.

The Haitian fighters imagined that the liberal principles that inspired the French Revolution would lead France to renounce its colonialist practices and abolish slavery. Much like southern slaveholders who fought in the American Revolution, Haitian planters appealed to such principles in arguing for Haiti's independence but then pledged themselves (in their own words), "To die rather than share equal political rights with a bastard race."<sup>28</sup> In 1794, after much hesitation and under intense pressure from the Haitian revolutionaries, France did abolish slavery, and two years later former slave and leader of the slave uprising, Toussaint L'Ouverture, effectively ruled Haiti. Napoleon, however, was determined to restore the profitable slave system to Haiti, and he was incensed by the very thought of defeat by a band of mulattos and black slaves, sending his very best troops and the largest expedition that had ever sailed from France, under the command of his brother-in-law, General Charles Leclerc, to crush the revolt. "All the niggers, when they see an army, will lay down their arms," Leclerc confidently boasted. "They will be only too happy that we pardon them."<sup>29</sup> L'Ouverture countered, writing to General Dessalines, Commander of the western revolutionary army, who would later become the first leader of free Haiti:

we have no other resource than destruction and flames. Bear in mind that the soil bathed with our sweat [and blood] must not furnish our enemies with the smallest aliment. Tear up the roads with shot; throw corpses and horses into all the fountains [and wells; i.e., poison the water]; burn and annihilate everything, in order

<sup>28</sup> As quoted by Theodore J. Holly, "A Vindication of the Capacity of the Negro for Self-Government and Civilized Progress" (1857), in *Pamphlets of Protest: An Anthology of Early African American Protest Literature, 1790-1860*, ed. Richard Newman, Patrick Rael, and Phillip Lapsansky (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 265.

<sup>29</sup> As quoted by C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p. 274.



that those who have come to reduce us to slavery may have before their eyes the image of that hell which they so deserve.<sup>30</sup>

While it is common for liberation movements to cultivate utopian visions of emancipation, here Toussaint creates an image of what those resisting emancipation might expect. So the Haitians burned their cities, their fields, and their forests and poisoned their own water sources: not a grain of wheat, not a piece of wood or a single nail, not a drop of water was to be left for the French to use in their efforts to enslave and oppress. In my judgment, the Haitian Revolution was the most noble of all revolutions ever fought, the only successful revolution in human history by a slave population: never, to my knowledge, did a people pay so high a price for their liberty, and by comparison the American and French Revolutions were cake walks.

The Haitians imagined, too, wrongly again, that the United States would surely come to their aid and repay its debt. Not only did the United States fail to lift a finger to assist the Haitians in their own revolution and to repay its enormous debt, but it, with the author of its own Declaration of Independence as its President, placed an embargo upon and did all that it could to undermine the new republic, for fear that its success would inspire slave rebellions at home, which it indeed did, including a major one in Jefferson's own Virginia—Denmark Vessey's rebellion of 1822. Moreover and ever since, the United States, along with other Western colonial powers, has punished Haiti for its independent spirit and refusal to cooperate with global corporate interests, colonialism's newer form. Repeatedly the United States has militarily intervened in and occupied Haiti, even overthrowing duly elected democratic leaders, as recently as 2004.<sup>31</sup>

Haiti is the only Western country bearing an African

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<sup>30</sup> Toussaint L'Ouverture, Letter to Dessalines (1802), in *The Haitian Revolution*, ed. Nick Nesbitt (London: Verso, 2008), p. 76.

<sup>31</sup> Randall Robinson, *An Unbroken Agony: Haiti, from Revolution to the Kidnapping of a President* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2007).

name, and its spirit of emancipation is contained in that name, which means, do not obey: resist.<sup>32</sup> That this spirit of emancipation is animated by values transcending those of capital and even of life itself, is indicated by its extraordinary sacrifices in its resistance to the forces of capitalism but also to the capital form and also by the chant with which I opened and which is invoked still today:

The white colonists will persecute us!  
**Not** a problem!  
The white colonists will torture us!  
**Not** a problem!  
The white colonists will always have slaves?  
**Not** possible!  
The white colonists will kill us?  
**Not** a problem!  
We prefer death to slavery.<sup>33</sup>

The memories of those beautiful days—November 18, 1803, when the Haitian revolutionaries, led by General Jean-Jacques Dessalines, defeated Napoleon's army at the Battle of Vertières, and January 1, 1804, when Dessalines declared Haiti an independent nation—those memories, immortalized in paintings by such artists as Auguste Raffet, Ulrick Jean-Pierre, Jacob Lawrence, and many others, and despite Dessalines's often brutal rule, which restored slave-like conditions for many, have done much to sustain Haiti through its troubled history and suffering.<sup>34</sup> They remind the Haitian people—and all of us—of those values, above all price, that transcend the capital form and even life itself.

Frederick Douglass, like Du Bois, speaks to the importance of memories of things beautiful. For example, even in his lowest moment and contemplating suicide, "broken in body, soul, and spirit,"<sup>35</sup> he finds himself comforted by the beauty of the sailboats on the Chesapeake Bay: "Those beautiful vessels, robed in

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<sup>32</sup> Aristide, pp. 20-23.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>34</sup> Aristide's book illustrates this point well.

<sup>35</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), in *Slave Narratives*, ed. William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (N.c.: Library of America, 2001), p. 324.

purest white, so delightful to the eye of freemen.”<sup>36</sup> The free movement of the ships reminds Douglass of the possibilities for his own emancipation, reminds him of what the world could be, and thereby gives him courage to continue bearing his burden and to hope for the future: “There is a better day coming,” he affirms.<sup>37</sup>

Even more powerful, though, for Douglass, was his beautiful memories of his mother, who was separated from him “before I knew her as my mother”<sup>38</sup> but who “four or five times” walked 12 miles each way, in the dead of night, “after the performance of her day’s work [as] a field hand,”<sup>39</sup> and without the permission of her owner, to lie for a few moments with her son and to settle him to sleep. She died when Douglass was only about seven years old, but her memory secured his emancipation: that this beautiful woman would risk her life just to be with him for a few precious moments, presented irrefutable evidence against the lies of white supremacy, which claimed Douglass to be less than human, mere property, mere capital. One does not risk one’s life repeatedly for mere capital. So in her loving, courageous acts of sacrifice, Douglass’s mother revealed to him those values that transcend the capital form and even life itself and thereby had already set him free, emancipated him from capital.

Douglass's emancipation began already with his mother's love: that love in large measure set him free. His story teaches us that emancipation from capital begins, as it did for him, with those things of beauty, including gestures of kindness, friendship, and love, that remind us of our humanity and reaffirm those values within that humanity that transcend those of capital and even life itself.

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 325.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 326.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 281.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 282.