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The Vexed Story of Human Commodification Told by Benjamin Franklin and Venture Smith

DAVID WALDSTREICHER

In the pages of this journal and elsewhere two of our most accomplished historians, Joyce Appleby and Gordon S. Wood, have depicted qualms about capitalism in the early republic as figments of historians' fervid imaginations. They associate the rise of capitalism with democracy and freedom, not with its more disturbing and, arguably, ubiquitous results: human commodification. While Appleby especially takes pains to distinguish this early liberal capitalism from later industrial, rapacious varieties, the impression given is that ordinary people did not view the spread of market relations or the cash nexus as a problem. On the contrary, they embraced it as their salvation, an alternative to empire and aristocracy. Republicanism, with its anti-commercial upraising of political man, was for Wood at best a halfway house with diminishing significance in the nineteenth century. Economic and political factors combined to create a democratic society of relative equals whose very free and democratic spirit are sufficient to explain the entrepreneurial zeal with which people in the new nation took up all manner of causes from abolitionism to evangelical religion.¹

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1. Gordon S. Wood, "The Enemy Is Us: Democratic Capitalism in the Early Republic," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 16 (1996): 293–308; Joyce Appleby,

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Much, in their accounts, rests on the testimony of eyewitnesses who made good, such as Benjamin Franklin. Franklin serves in Wood's *Radicalism of the American Revolution* and his more recent work on Franklin as a kind of prophet who does not get to see the promised land. In Appleby's revolutionary generation, he is the father everyone can embrace, the author of the model memoir or how-to book for a do-it-yourself generation. In his defining statement about the new nation written for an international audience, "Information to those who would Remove to America" (1782, 1784), Franklin did indeed depict the quintessential American as a freeholder who works for himself, with his own hands. Wages paid to immigrants, some of whom first come over bound for a period of years to pay their passage, translated directly into their ownership of landed property: in Franklin's words, "Multitudes of poor people from England, Ireland, Scotland and Germany, have by this means in a few Years become wealthy Farmers." The "commodity" of "high birth" was worth next to nothing in the United States: what mattered about a man was "*What can he DO?*" It was the very opposite of an old world order based on the aristocratic extraction of all agricultural profit. For this reason, European nobles could not take their rank—their property in themselves—to a "worse market."²

"The Vexed Story of Capitalism Told by American Historians," *ibid.*, 21 (2001): 1–18; Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York, 1992); Appleby, "The Popular Sources of American Capitalism," *Studies in American Political Development*, 9 (1995): 437–57; Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans* (Cambridge, MA, 2000). Of course, much turns on how capitalism is defined; and while I do not have space to explain why I think that neither customary conflation of markets and capitalism or the narrow stress on wage labor as capitalism's essence are sufficient for U. S. history, I would point out that one increasingly promising definition—promising because it makes it possible to understand better the place of modern slavery in the history of capitalism, and to come to grips with contemporary "hypercapitalism"—stresses how capitalism tends to commodify everything, including human relations, for the purpose of building capital reserves, i.e., liquid profits. This tends to economic (and political) compulsions that force people into the marketplace on terms often not of their own choosing; it also tends toward geographic expansion in search of cheap labor and new markets. For useful recent accounts, compare Immanuel Wallerstein, *Historical Capitalism, with Capitalist Civilization* (1983; rev. ed., London, UK, 1995), esp. 13–16, 39; Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origins of Capitalism: A Longer View* (New York, 2002); Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2000); and Susan Strasser, ed., *Commodifying Everything: Relationships of the Market* (New York, 2003).

2. Benjamin Franklin, *Writings*, ed. J. A. Leo LeMay (New York, 1987), 976–77.

It is interesting that Franklin would place aristocratic titles inside of a world market. While some early modern regimes, including the British one, did informally sell off titles, the metaphor does not really work. And that was Franklin's point. Insofar as the corrupt system of rank did operate as a market, that market breaks down in North America. These observations of Franklin's introduced the larger argument, that those who came to America as commodities in a rather different labor market—that is, indentured servitude—ended up happily beyond it. The American system, in short, de-commodified people. Work, land, and demographics combine to turn aristocrats and redemptioners alike into free middling folk. Franklin's American story seems straightforward, its results humane, and, like Wood and Appleby's transition to capitalism, unvexed by contradiction or even by nostalgia for the past.

And yet even while he was still talking about the misconceptions of European aristocrats, there is more to the story as Franklin tells it. And that more is slavery—or at least the necessity of rhetorically (if not otherwise) doing away with it. It does not take much reading between the lines to see the presence of slavery, for Franklin himself brought it up twice. He artfully unvexed American freedom by associating its underside, African slavery, with the old world, which he had elsewhere blamed for bringing slaves to America.³ Europeans had read false reports that “the [American] Governments . . . not only pay the Expence of personal Transportation, but give Lands gratis to Strangers, with Negroes to work for them, Utensils of Husbandry, and Stocks of Cattle.” The real America was different: slaves did not solve the labor problem, the immigrants themselves did.

3. Richard B. Morris mentioned Franklin's evasion of plantation slavery in *Information*; Ormond Seavey is the only other scholar I know of to observe how “deliberately provincial,” and not antislavery, Franklin chose to be in this defining statement. Richard B. Morris, *The Forging of the Union, 1781–1789* (New York, 1987), 9; Seavey, “Benjamin Franklin and Imperialist and Provincial,” in Gianfranca Balestra and Luigi Sanpietro, eds., *Benjamin Franklin: An American Genius* (Rome, Italy, 1993), 30–31. A contemporary who knew Franklin's politics and writings very well responded at length on the occasion of Franklin's death and insisted that emigration to America actually produced not progress but instead, “white Negroes.” *Memoirs of the late Dr. Benjamin Franklin: With a Review of his Pamphlet, Entitled 'Information to those who would wish to remove to AMERICA'* (London, 1790), 68.

Two paragraphs later, the African presence recurs, but ventriloquized, in West Indian dialect, in a comment on the Americans' propensity to work. "[The Americans] are pleased with the Observation of a Negro, and frequently mention it," Franklin asserted,

that *Boccarorra* (meaning the Whiteman) make de Blackman workee, make de Horse workee, make de Ox workee, make ebery ting workee; only de Hog. He de Hog, no workee; he eat, he drink, he walk about, he go to sleep when he please, *he libb like a Gentleman*. According to these Opinions of the Americans, one of them would think himself more oblig'd to a Genealogist, who could prove for him that his Ancestors & Relations for ten Generations had been Ploughmen, Smiths, Carpenters, Turners, Weavers, Tanners, or even Shoemakers, & consequently that they were useful members of Society; than if he could only prove that they were Gentlemen, doing nothing of Value, but living idly on the Labour of others, mere *fruges consumere nati*, and otherwise *good for nothing*, till be their Death, their estates like the Carcase of the Negro's Gentleman-Hog, come to be *cut up*.

Franklin's ventriloquism here repays close attention. The slave trickster tale embedded in his essay depicts whites as exceptional slave drivers who become hog-like in the process.⁴ There is an unmistakable criticism of slavery here, voiced in an Afro-Caribbean accent readers would have recognized as such.

But who is being criticized? By implanting the black dialect story in a paragraph contrasting the hardy *North* American citizenry with a European aristocracy that derives land and wealth from birth, new world slavery is compared to old world tyranny and the American yeomanry emerges as the antithesis of both. Some white people may be gentlemen-hogs—maybe in the West Indies, as in Europe—but not in our America. The larger comparison of Europeans versus Americans distinguishes the

4. This anecdote actually derived from a tract celebrating the progress and profits of Barbados and the suppression of a slave revolt there. *Great Newes from Barbadoes, or a True and Faithful Account of the Grand Conspiracy of the Negroes Against the English and the Happy Discovery of the Same* (London, 1676); Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh, *The Many Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston, 2000), 125, 372n; Jack P. Greene, "Changing Identity in the British Caribbean: Barbados as a Case Study," in Nicholas Canny and Anthony Pagden, eds., *Colonial Identity in the Atlantic World* (Princeton, 1987), 229.

United States of America from the Americas, from the slave societies that the West Indian accent of the Negro tale-teller otherwise signals. Americans are whites, yet not true slave-drivers like Caribbean whites. The way they drive “de Blackman” reflects only their own greater national industry, not their historical and continuing debt to slavery. In other words, Franklin’s minstrelization did more than miss the point of the slave’s tale. It actually appropriated the stories being told by new world slaves and obscured their very different understanding of whose labor had made America (not to mention their rather different prediction of who, in the end, might justly find themselves under the knife and “cut up” into pieces). The slave himself goes from being a victim and, in the telling, moral victor to being, in essence, an alibi.

With the commodified aristocrat-hog, we come full circle. The disturbing fact of human commodification is simultaneously blamed on the European aristocracy and visited upon them. Mere projection becomes outright fantasy. We can also see how important it was to Franklin’s revolutionary ideology—or perhaps we should say, with Francis Jennings, wartime propaganda—to project the human commodification actually going on in the United States onto the old world.⁵ If the reputedly most antislavery of the founding fathers dodged or reframed the issue so artfully while representing America to the world, we surely have license to wonder whether the commodification of humans played a greater role in post-revolutionary culture, society, and politics than Wood or Appleby allow. Franklin’s text is artful; if you believe implicitly its vision of American freedom, as we are schooled to do, it is likely to be damned near inspiring—especially if you can ignore or enjoy the literary blackface that helps it work. We might wish it were factual, but we cannot call it unvexed.

Wood and Appleby have not easily incorporated the reality of slavery or the presence of African Americans into their synthetic frameworks. Wood considers the issue of slavery anachronistic and prefers to emphasize, as his mentor Bernard Bailyn did, the antislavery effects of revolutionary ideology. Appleby discerns the entrepreneurial ethos among free northern blacks and defines the intransigent South out of the northern liberal capitalist culture she describes in light of its success stories. Race,

5. Francis Jennings, *The Creation of America: Through Revolution to Empire* (New York, 2000), 9, 203–05.

for Appleby, functions as a tragic bar to market activity—to whites' recognition of the human potential in African Americans. The published memoirs of its victims before they themselves, like Frederick Douglass, became success stories did not make it into her database. But as Ann Fabian has argued, the emergence of plebian storytellers in the marketplace of print testified doubly to harsh economic necessities. These people, the less successful members of Appleby's first generation, took up the opportunity to commodify their own stories as a kind of last chance to salvage some measure of freedom in a market that otherwise systematically devalued them, often because of their sex or race.⁶

The first memoir by a former slave published in the post-revolutionary North also suggests a far more vexed relationship between the rise of capitalism and the commodification of human beings than exists in the dominant paradigm. Where Franklin invents a free market of free persons in which the imagined absence of blacks is offered as proof, Venture Smith shows how flexibly whites applied the supposedly neutral rules of the marketplace to keep blacks tethered to their status as commodities, even during and after their very gradual emancipation.⁷

The first third of Smith's *Narrative* covers his five years in his native country, the despoliation of his nation, the murder of his father, and his journey to the coast in an enslaving war "instigated by some white nation." The middle part describes his own middle passage on a Rhode Island vessel across the Atlantic, with a stop in Barbados. He avoided the West Indies death trap after being bought by a ship's mate named Robert Mumford "for four gallons of rum and a piece of calico." Mumford named him "VENTURE, on account of his having purchased me with his own private venture," and brought Smith to his family home on Fisher's Island, New York.⁸

6. Ann Fabian, *The Unvarnished Truth: Personal Narratives in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley, 2000).

7. Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780–1860* (Ithaca, 1998), 105.

8. *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa: But resident above sixty years in the United States of America. RELATED BY HIMSELF* (New London, CT, 1798), reprinted in Vincent Carretta, ed., *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the English-Speaking World of the Eighteenth Century* (Lexington, KY, 1996), 369–85. For an excellent discussion of the background, see Robert R. Desrochers Jr., "'Not Fade Away': The Narrative of Venture Smith, an African American in the Early Republic," *Journal of American*

The Mumfords were the epitome of the mixed economy of the eighteenth-century coastal North. They farmed; they fished; they carded wool for home use; they sailed the Atlantic; and they traded in slaves. Three generations shared in one household, and it was generational tensions among the Mumfords that Smith emphasized because of how they put the eight-year-old slave at personal risk. The eldest Mumford patriarch demanded that Venture hand over the key to his venturesome, seagoing son's trunk. Refusing, the young slave earned the "confidence" of his master, but soon had trouble with Robert Mumford's teenage son, who gave him contradictory orders whenever he had the chance. Smith makes it clear that the honorable slave could not expect good treatment in a land of ventures, where fathers had questionable power and sons had questionable prospects. His labor was a weapon—his own and others'—in the battles among men.⁹

In 1754, at the age of twenty-six, Smith decided to join the white indentured servant Joseph Heday and two fellow slaves in a fantastic plan to sail all the way to "the Mississippi." This rebellion came to little, though, because Heday betrayed the others, taking the valuable clothes they had run away with, which the master listed in great detail in a newspaper ad. During this episode Smith, although naïve about geography and perhaps still too willing to trust whites, showed for the first time an awareness of the economic system that would later make a significant difference in his life. He himself successfully "advertised" for the thief Heday's capture! When Heday was brought to them the other fugitives decided to turn themselves in and Heday as well.¹⁰

History, 84 (1997): 40–66. Desrochers's emphasis on Smith's African roots—more rhetorical than actual, as his essay deals with a range of contexts—apparently licenses Joseph J. Ellis to dismiss Smith, with Laurel Ulrich's Martha Ballard, as interesting common folk whose experience social historians have overemphasized at the expense of the statesmen "at the center of the national story." Joseph J. Ellis, *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* (New York, 2000), 12–13.

9. Smith, *Narrative*, 375–76; Desrochers, "'Not Fade Away,'" 58n.

10. Smith, *Narrative*, 375–77; *New York Gazette and Weekly Post-Boy*, Apr. 1, 1754. This ad is also reprinted in Graham Russell Hodges and Alan Edward Brown, *"Pretends to be Free": Runaway Slave Advertisements from Colonial and Revolutionary New York and New Jersey* (New York, 1994), 49–50. The existence of the ad and its closeness to what Smith says can be taken to document the whole. It adds to Desrochers's documentation of other accurate references to Africa the fact that Venture had been "mark'd in the Face, or scar'd with a Knife in his own Country."

In Smith's mind, the honesty, ingenuity, and hard work he displayed in this episode—characteristics that would make him legendary in his community in the years to come—should have been enough to guarantee his forgiveness. Instead, he found himself sold away from his wife and infant daughter within the year. Thus began a series of removals, abuses, and negotiations throughout coastal Long Island and Connecticut, in which Smith tried again and again to hang on to what cash he made “by cleaning gentlemen's shoes and drawing boots, by catching muskrats and minks, raising potatoes and carrots, &c. and by fishing in the night, and at odd spells.” He got his new master to buy his wife and daughter, only to get caught in violent disputes between his wife and mistress. By the time he was thirty-six, he “had already been sold three different times, made considerable money with seemingly nothing to derive from it, been cheated out of a large sum of money” by another master, who held it for him and then sold him away, “lost much by misfortunes,” but finally managed to buy, with an “enormous sum,” his own freedom.

Narrating his free years, Smith begins to sound like the “Franklin and a Washington in a state of nature, or rather in a state of slavery,” that the editor of his memoir discerned in the self-made African. He wears homespun and counts the cost of everything in a desperate and ultimately successful quest to buy his wife, his sons, his daughter, and some land with which to support them. His consciousness of the cash nexus is almost a parody of Franklin's playful awareness of the relationships between people and capital in *Poor Richard's Almanack*.¹¹ When his teenage son Solomon was enticed by an employer to go whaling and died of scurvy aboard ship, he recorded the loss as “equal to seventy-five pounds” he had paid for the boy. When he purchased his pregnant wife for forty pounds in 1772, he saved “having another child to buy.” There is something deeply disturbing about Smith's absorption of the cash nexus in his society, as disturbing, perhaps, as his self-liberation is inspiring.¹²

11. For more on this theme, see my *Runaway America: Benjamin Franklin, Slavery and the American Revolution* (New York, 2004), chap. 4; and “Capitalism, Slavery and Benjamin Franklin's American Revolution,” in Cathy D. Matson, ed., *The Early American Economy: New Directions* (University Park, PA, forthcoming).

12. William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760–1865* (Urbana, 1986), 51–53, 59–60; Philip Gould,

That, however, was not his main message. What Smith emphasized, again and again, was not his own worries about the bottom line, or even his adaptation of whites' pecuniary strategies, but how whites (and, sadly, a few blacks with no other resources at their disposal) took advantage of his marginal status to steal the fruits of his labor. To Venture Smith, the American North harbored nothing but confidence men—and race was not the exception but the name of the game. The problem was epitomized for him in a favor he agreed to do for a Native-American boatman who sailed the Long Island Sound, and Elisha Hart, a Saybrook shipmaster who owned a barrel of molasses on board. At the request of the boatman, with granddaughter in tow, Smith went to tell Hart of the boat's arrival after it docked. Meanwhile, at the wharf, the barrel fell overboard and sank. The Indian could not pay for it, and Hart took Smith to court, making him pay ten pounds damages. Afterwards, Hart "insultingly taunted me with my unmerited misfortune." Memories of Africa, in this context, gave Smith more than an identity. They gave him the means to criticize: "Such a proceeding as this, committed on a defenceless stranger, almost worn out in the hard service of the world, without any foundation in reason or justice, whatever it may be called in a christian land, would in my native country by branded as a crime equal to highway robbery. But Captain Hart was a *white gentleman*, and I a *poor African*, therefore it was *all right, and good enough for the black dog*."

In the end, Franklin and Smith had things other than their entrepreneurship in common, something very important about the problem of capitalism in the early republic. Both understood that human commodification was a live issue and a result of new world settlement. Both depicted alternatives to it: for Franklin, an idealized free America itself; for Smith, in the passage above, both Christian and African standards of ethical behavior. And both conveyed, albeit differently, that even for northerners slavery and race both created and put limits on the commodifying, inhumane tendencies of nascent capitalism.

What this suggests to me is that the proper attitude for the historian is not Wood and Appleby's optimism and near-celebration of capitalism qua liberal democracy but rather early national Americans' own ambiva-

"Free Carpenter, Venture Capitalist: Reading the Lives of the Early Black Atlantic," *American Literary History*, 12 (2000), 677.

lence about capitalism's effects. As Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Richard Bushman, Catherine Kelly, and others increasingly suggest, even small property holders (like Smith) displayed a striking ambivalence about the effects on their human relationships of a capitalistic orientation toward the world. As a result, they often engaged in innovative, entrepreneurial activities in order to preserve real (or imagined) realms apart from the market. Extended to the South, such a perspective supports accounts that reconcile the rapacious capitalism in slaveholder expansionism with the paternalistic ethos more established planters made central to their culture. Precisely because their most important property was people, planters had to invent traditions that emphasized their distance from the most dehumanizing of marketplaces.¹³

Moreover, far from seeing capitalism as the root cause of antislavery (as Thomas Haskell would have it), we must remember that world capitalism created modern slavery, even if its slaveholding outposts, when viewed in isolation, did not always look like what we tend to think of (in a set of teleologies that would put any Marxist to shame) as what true (*i.e.* industrial or consumer) capitalism looks like. Such an interpretation might place the abolitionists—who repeatedly emphasized how slavery was a highly developed *market* in persons, in which slaves functioned as a flexible form of capital as well as of labor—much closer to the center of early republic and antebellum political culture. Although the political party system was reconstructed during the Jacksonian era in part to marginalize them, abolitionists repeatedly called white Americans to account the contradictions in their self-conceptions. When William Lloyd Garrison described a citizen who could not eliminate slavery as branded chattel, and when Thoreau depicted a trip to town itself as a cattle drive, they continued the dialogue about republicanism, economic arrangements, and human commodification that Franklin himself engaged in as a way of justifying, and salvaging, the American Revolution. In this as in

13. Richard Bushman, "Markets and Composite Farms in Early America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 55 (1998): 351–74; Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth* (New York, 2001); Catherine E. Kelly, *In the New England Fashion: Reshaping Women's Lives in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca, 1999); James Oakes, *Slavery and Freedom: An Interpretation of the Old South* (New York, 1990); Jeffrey Robert Young, *Domesticating Slavery: The Master Class in Georgia and South Carolina, 1670–1837* (Chapel Hill, 1999).

other things they were less outside the consensus than they were inside the cultural logics of the time.¹⁴

And in the end, their fellow citizens failed to marginalize them as much as historians' syntheses have. Perhaps it is time for historians to take their cues from the abolitionists and the slaves, rather than from the Benjamin Franklins.

14. Thomas Haskell, "Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility," in Thomas Bender, ed., *The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism as a Problem in Historical Interpretation* (Berkeley, 1993), 107–60; Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill), 1944; Barbara L. Solow, "Capitalism and Slavery in the Exceedingly Long Run," in Solow and Stanley L. Engerman, eds., *British Capitalism and Caribbean Slavery: The Legacy of Eric Williams* (New York, 1987), 51–77; Solow, "Slavery and Colonization" and David Richardson, "Slavery, Trade, and Economic Growth in Eighteenth-Century New England," in Solow, ed., *Slavery and the Rise of the Atlantic System* (New York, 1991), 21–42, 237–64; Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern, 1492–1800* (New York, 1997); Joseph Inikori, *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England: A Study in International Trade and Economic Development* (Cambridge, UK, 2002); Seth Rockman, "The Unfree Origins of American Capitalism," in Matson, ed., *The Early American Economy*; Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA, 1999), 25–27, 230–31n20; Robert Fanuzzi, *Abolition's Public Sphere* (Minneapolis, 2003), 26; Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, ed. Owen Thomas (New York, 1966), 113; Paul Goodman, *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality* (Berkeley, 1998).