

## Editorial

The role of the slavery-based plantation economy in the development of capitalism has preoccupied many generations of scholars. This is related to a number of very important questions, the answers to which have a lasting impact on narratives about modernity and the ways it emerged in what is often called the early modern times. Was slavery-based production good for the initial accumulation of vast fortunes that became the precondition of modern capitalism, but ultimately incompatible with a capitalism based on the marketization of labour that is “freely” offered and demanded? Or did the history of slavery and other forms of forced and coerced labour, regardless of the moral scruples that became public for religious reasons (in England and the USA) or out of a predominantly secular-humanist motivation (in France), accompany capitalism until the social counterforces of decolonization were strong enough to shake off this form of particularly crass exploitation (even if not inconsiderable remnants persist to this day)?

This fundamental debate, which provides a subject for an entire direction within current historiography, namely the New History of Capitalism, is now profiting from the enormous expansion of its empirical basis through the global-historical interest of the last three decades. It makes a difference whether one looks at the problem from the perspective of the one or the other empire. This was already clear to contemporaries who, in the famous renunciation of the slave trade at the Congress of Vienna, left a loophole for the Spanish and Portuguese, who were allowed to continue taking slaves on board south of the equator and transporting them to their colonial empire in South and Central America (which was, however, soon to shrink considerably). Napoleon had indeed burned his particularly republican-minded troop contingents in a vain attempt to restore slavery on Saint Domingue, but immediately after returning from his first exile on Elba he decreed the abolition of slavery. In between lay the dramatic defeat of the French against the English navy at Trafalgar and the sale of Louisiana to the USA: in view of the impossibility of asserting naval supremacy against the British competitor, there followed a provisional rejection of the Atlantic as the relevant space of expansion and geopolitical projection which implied a return to a different type of capitalism, based not on the trade ports on the coast but on agriculture and manufactures in the hinterland of metropolitan France. That this meant neither a definitive rejection of colonial projects nor of exploita-

tion through forced labour by French elites was soon to become apparent in North Africa and later in Southeast Asia.

What was supposed to be exemplified here by the French case is made plausible by this thematic issue with many more examples: there is no one, universally valid answer to the question of the relationship between slavery and capitalism, but slavery and other forms of forced labour are part of the history of capitalism and cannot be excluded from its definition. What form this connection took, what consequences it had for the persistence of monocultures (and therefore impacting chances for diversified development afterwards and until today), and how it inscribed and continues to inscribe itself in the cultural patterns of societies that were based on slave labour to a huge extent varies and invites a history of capitalisms in the plural.

Matthias Middell / Katja Castryck-Naumann