

Orlando Patterson's analyses of slavery as an intervention into debates around the political economy of the "Third World" in the 1970s  
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In his review of Orlando Patterson's first book *The Sociology of Slavery*, Sidney Mintz asks why after more than a century of neglect the study of slavery in the "New World" was the subject of an explosion of scholarly interest in the mid-1960s. According to Mintz, 'two obvious reasons recommend themselves'. The first is the emergence of the civil rights movement in the United States; the second is the 'emergence of sovereign polities in Africa and in the Caribbean'.<sup>1</sup> Given the unquestioned importance we rightly accord to the history and theory of slavery within the contemporary academy today, it is easy to forget that the widespread study of slavery, particularly outside classics and the history of the American South, is a fairly recent phenomenon. It is also a phenomenon intrinsically linked to the immediate post-colonial period and the processes of both political and intellectual decolonization.

In this paper I will show that one of the most celebrated comparative studies of slavery, Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death*, emerged in the midst of a veritable explosion in the 1970s of neo-Marxist scholarly interest in pre-capitalist economic formations as a means of making sense conceptually of economic underdevelopment in the countries of the Global South. Alongside countless neo-Marxist studies on peasants, the articulations of modes of production and the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the analysis of slavery was considered essential to understanding the integration of "traditional" and non-industrialized economies into global capitalism. By resituating the concept of "social death" in the sets of contemporary debates related to the political economy of the "Third World", I will show that Patterson's original formulation of the concept was not primarily concerned with defining the distinctive form of subjectivity which emerges as a result of the institution of slavery or with defining a generic existential condition of extreme deprivation associated with slavery. Rather, I will suggest that Patterson initially elaborated the concept in order to challenge prevalent Marxist accounts of the political economic significance of slavery as an institution.

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<sup>1</sup> Sidney W. Mintz (1969) 'Slavery and the Slaves' in *Caribbean Studies*, Vol. 8, no. 4, pp 65-66

The paper is divided into three parts. I begin by situating Patterson's early thought within the rise of dependency theory in the wake of the collapse of the dominant post-war development models. I highlight in particular the proximity of Patterson's early studies of slavery to a distinctive Anglo-Caribbean variant of dependency theory which was specifically concerned with accounting for the role of the West Indian slave plantation in the persistent economic underdevelopment of Caribbean societies. I then go on to chart a genealogy of the concept of 'social death' in Patterson's work. I suggest that, while Patterson often claims that the origin of the concept is the classicist Moses Finley's studies of slavery in ancient Greece and Rome, it is really the elaboration of the concept by a school of French anthropologists of Africa centered around Claude Meillassoux that Patterson's notion of social death is most indebted to conceptually. I show how Patterson draws on the thought of the elaboration of the political economy of African slavery by the French Africanists to simultaneously displace American slavery from the centre of comparative accounts of slavery and challenge the dominant neo-Marxist accounts of the political economy of slavery. Finally, I briefly suggest why these political economic dimensions of Patterson's elaboration of social death have been obscured by his later thought and the reception of his ideas and why returning to the initial context of his ideas might be fruitful for contemporary social and political theory.

### **Dependency and theories of 'Plantation Society'**

In order to appreciate the importance of academic discourses of economic development and underdevelopment of the Third World to Patterson's thought in the 1970s it is necessary to sketch the context of the crisis of the dominant post-war economic development models at the end of the 1960s and the academic and policy responses this crisis provoked. It will also be necessary to show the specific academic response of Caribbean thinkers and the proximity of some of Patterson's early ideas about slavery with aspects of the former's thought.

At the end of the 1960s, the dominant models of economic development which had guided the policies of international development agencies and early post-colonial regimes were in the midst of a profound crisis. At the start of the 1960s the United Nations had championed the idea of a "development decade". They argued that if "developed" nations contributed 1% of their GNP towards foreign development aid and "developing" countries achieved 5% per annum growth rates and an increase from 26% to 28% of their share of global trade economic, development would hasten to levels achieved by European economies in the wake of the

Marshall Plan in the years following the Second World War. Levels sufficient, according to the UN, to achieve a fundamental change in the inequalities between the ‘North’ and ‘South’ in just a decade.

By the end of the 1960s, however, the promise of rapid economic growth in the developing countries of the world had failed to materialize. Emblematic of the pessimism that had struck mainstream development policy at the time was the report of the Pearson Commission. Formed by Robert McNamara, president of the World Bank, in August 1968 the commission was tasked with assessing the consequences of international development assistance over the past 20 years and to advise how best to rejuvenate government support for official aid in developed countries. The commission found that while many developing countries had experienced high levels of growth during the 1960s this did not contribute to an overall reduction in levels of poverty and that the period actually saw an increase in rural unemployment<sup>2</sup>.

The crises of the developmental agendas of the 1960s provoked a number of theoretical responses. The effects were most profoundly felt within developmental economics. The broad economic aggregates and econometric models produced by development economists and which had underpinned the development agendas of a number of countries in the Third World, most notably India, had resoundingly failed. The economic development policies of a number of Third World countries had been based on Keynesian macroeconomic theories like the Harrod-Domar model of economic which emphasized the capacity-increasing effects of investment for economic growth. The model suggested that in an open economy economic growth is a function of domestic savings – supplemented by foreign aid and foreign capital - available for investment and the incremental capital-output ratio<sup>3</sup>. The model assumed that the determinants of short-term economic activity and long-term growth were endogenous to the economy. This model led Caribbean nations to pursue economic policies that assumed monetary and fiscal policy could deal with the short-term management of the economy, while policies aimed at attracting foreign capital to supplement local savings and finance the level of investment would stimulate long-term growth. This led many Caribbean economies to adopt an ‘open door’ policy to foreign investors along the lines of Puerto Rico’s “Operation

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<sup>2</sup> Pearson, Lester B. (1969) *Partners in Development: Report of the Commission on International Development*. New York: Praeger Publishers

<sup>3</sup> Domar, Evsey (1957) ‘Expansion and Employment’ in *American Economic Review* vol. 37, pp. 34-55; Harrod, Roy

Bootstrap”, which attempted to attract transnational capital through tax holidays and cheap labour.

Another important theoretical framework underlying economic development policies in the 1950s and 1960s was St. Lucian economist Sir W. A. Lewis’ “dual economy” development model<sup>4</sup>. Lewis’ model had been underpinned by the idea that economies of developing nations tended to be characterized by a “dual sector” structure comprising a ‘capitalist sector’ and a ‘subsistence sector’ with little interaction between the two. Lewis’ model assumed that the marginal productivity of labour in peasant agriculture – the ‘subsistence sector’ – tended towards zero and that labour could thus be attracted to a growing “modern” sector without a corresponding decrease in agricultural outputs. By the late-1960s, this assumption was widely considered to have underestimated the degree of commercialization and accumulation which is possible in rural areas and on the basis of peasant agriculture<sup>5</sup>. Policymakers and researchers became increasingly concerned with correcting for the “urban bias” towards which development theory and policy had been prone.

Economic development models like the Harrod-Domar and Lewis models were viewed with increasing skepticism not only within more critical academic circles but also by policymakers and researchers within the UN, World Bank and WTO. One of the drivers of the theoretical revisionism was the newly established Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex established by the British Ministry of Overseas Development as a national institute in 1967. The institute and its research fellows had an important influence on the shift in the development policy prescriptions of the World Bank and International Labour Office in the 1970s. The first director of the institute, Sir Dudley Seers, had been an early critic of the use of national income accounting by policymakers to set and measure development targets. In a 1963 paper entitled ‘The limitations of the special case’, he argued economics as an academic discipline presupposed the advanced, industrial private enterprise economies of Western Europe and the United States<sup>6</sup>. In other words, economics, and development economics in particular, far from investigating the universal laws of economic activity, was a theory of a

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<sup>4</sup> W. A. Lewis (1955) *The Theory of Economic Growth*. London: Allen & Unwin

<sup>5</sup> For a summary of the criticisms that Lewis’ model attracted in the period see Witold Kula (1970) *Théorie économique du système féodal* Paris: De Gruyter Mouton, pp. 9-12 and Ernesto Laclau (1971) ‘Feudalism and Capitalism in Latin America’ in *New Left Review* 1/67 pp. 22-24

<sup>6</sup> Seers, Dudley (1963) ‘The limitations of the special case’ in *Bulletin of the Oxford University Institute of Economics and Statistics*

particular “special case” and therefore inapplicable to underdeveloped countries with very different social structures and institutions shaped, in part, by the structures of relations of inequality and subordination between rich and poor countries.

At the same time, across the Atlantic, the major assumptions that had underpinned sociological theories of development in the anglophone academy – modernization theory - were being turned on their head by “dependency theorists” in both in Latin and North America. For instance, the most prominent anglophone statement of dependency theory, Andre Gunder Frank’s *Development and Underdevelopment in Latin America*, opens with a step-by-step dismantling of the major tenets of American modernization theory<sup>7</sup>. The problem of development was not, according to Frank, the result of the persistence of ‘traditional’ or ‘backward’ social and economic structures within a given society attempting to ‘modernize’, but the outcome of a world historical process in which the economic development of some parts of the world were premised on a simultaneous process of underdevelopment of other parts of the world<sup>8</sup>. Frank suggested that those sectors of Third World economies that are most “underdeveloped” today are those which historically had been most integrated into global markets. Conversely, the development of certain parts of the Third World had been achieved during historical moments, like the World Wars, in which economies interaction with industrialized nations were at an all-time low.

The process of underdevelopment of the Third World was driven by capital seeking profits by accumulating capital where it can be done most cheaply and investing it where it can earn the highest return resulting in the removal of surplus from some parts of the world – the “periphery” - and its transfer to others – the “core”. This process results in persistent and structurally entrenched low productivity levels in peripheral economies through their subordination to the structure of capital accumulation at the core. This is expressed by the tendency of peripheral economies to export primary commodities and to import manufactured good, their agricultural sector being dominated by monocultures and their industrial sectors

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<sup>7</sup> See the first chapter of Frank’s (1969) *Latin America: Underdevelopment or Revolution?* New York: Monthly Review Press: 21-95. The article was originally published as an article in 1967 which was very influential in the climate of revisionism within development theory circles in the late 1960s. See ‘Sociology of Development or Underdevelopment of Sociology’ in *Catalyst*: 20-73.

<sup>8</sup> This “dualist” perspective underlay, according to Frank, all the major modernization theories of the period, from Bert F. Hoselitz’s Parsonian pattern variable approach and W. W. Rostow’s historical stages of development to Manning Nash’s diffusionist approach (See Frank (1967) *Latin America*, p. 62)

dependent upon foreign inputs. This state of affair in turn perpetuates a cycle of “dependency” in which higher levels of exploitation of the labour force at the periphery, and thus lower average wage levels, leads to low demand in domestic markets forcing peripheral economies to become “externally oriented” – that is, to produce for export. This is reinforced by income inequalities which produces a narrow import-oriented consumer demand and produces social classes within the periphery with interests in common with metropolitan capitalists. The so-called ‘modernizing elites’ central to modernization theorists’ models for economic development became, for dependency theorists, dangerous comprador classes who play a central role in both blocking development in peripheral economies and the formation of neo-colonial forms of exploitation.

In the early post-colonial period, these revisionist currents within development theory were drawn upon and expanded by thinkers in the Anglophone Caribbean. The sensitivity to the specificity of Third World economies vis-à-vis the economies of the industrialized West emphasized by the IDS and the anti-imperialist impulse of dependency theory appealed to Caribbean intellectuals concerned with extending political decolonization to the intellectual and economic spheres. While drawing on the international currents of thought mentioned above, this current of Caribbean thought, which - following one of its central expositors, Norman Girvan - I will refer to as “Caribbean dependency thought” (CDT), had its own specific characteristics<sup>9</sup>. The local, specifically Caribbean, nature of CDT stemmed from a shared interest among the thinkers associated with this tendency to make sense of the plantation as the central institution structuring the economies and societies of most Caribbean societies.

The West Indian Society for the Study of Social Issues was formed at the Mona Campus of the University College of the West Indies – now the University of the West Indies (UWI) – in 1960 and two years later it was reborn as the New World Group. During the 1960s the Group would be at the center of a pan-Caribbean intellectual movement which would pioneer a distinctive version of dependency theory tailored to the specificity of the societies and economies of the Caribbean<sup>10</sup>. The CDT championed by the New World Group rejected the thesis shared by a

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<sup>9</sup> Norman Girvan (2006) ‘Caribbean Dependency Thought Revisited’ in *Canadian Journal of Development Studies* Volume 27, Issue 3: 328-352

<sup>10</sup> My discussion of CDT and the New World Group will summary in nature, for a more detailed historical and theoretical treatment see Adom Getachew’s remarkable (2020) ‘The Plantation’s Colonial Modernity in Comparative Perspective’ in (eds. Leigh K. Jenco, Murad Idris, Megan C. Thomas, Megan Christine Thomas) *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Political Theory* New York: Oxford University Press: 41-61. See also Norman

number of macroeconomic models that the determinants of economic development were endogenous to the national economy in question. It argued instead that the major determinant of economic activity for Third World economies, like those in the Caribbean, was the level of exports, which was not primarily determined by local economic factors but rather by foreign markets and, more often than not, foreign owned corporations who controlled the production of these exports. From this point of departure thinkers associated to the New World Group sought to analyze the asymmetrical relations not only between Caribbean economies and the “core” economies of the industrialized West, but also between different sectors of Caribbean economies themselves since the era of slavery.

While the New World Group drew on the Latin American structuralist tradition – initiated by the pioneering development economist Raul Prébisch – and its inheritors, they adopted a distinctive historical approach to make sense of the institution, in their eyes, central to the shaping of contemporary Caribbean economies and societies – the plantation<sup>11</sup>. Various theorists associated with the World Group would in the late-1960s set out to determine the relationship between the nature of the economy established during the era of slavery in the Caribbean and the kinds of institutions produced during this era – the joint stock companies set up under mercantilism and the slave plantations they created – and the dependence and underdevelopment of Caribbean economies as well as the dominance of multinational corporations over economic activity.

Lloyd Best and Kari Polanyi Levitt proposed a tripartite model for understanding the historical trajectory of the typical Caribbean economy<sup>12</sup>. According to Best and Levitt, Caribbean

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Girvan (2006) ‘Caribbean Dependency Thought Revisited’; Susan Craig (1982) ‘Sociological Theorizing in the English Speaking Caribbean’ in (ed. Susan Craig) *Contemporary Caribbean: A Sociological Reader, Volume Two* Maracas, Trinidad and Tabago: The College Press: 143-181; Magnus Blomström and Björn Hettne (1984) *Development Theory in Transition. The Dependency Debate and Beyond: Third World Responses* London: Zed Book: 98-118

<sup>11</sup> Influential works of the structuralist tradition for the New World Group included Raul Prébisch (1950) *The Economic Development of Latin America and its Principal Problems*, New York: United Nations Department of Social and Economic Affairs; Celso Furtado (1963) *The Economic Growth of Brazil*, Berkeley: University of California Press; Osvaldo Sunkel (1973) ‘Transnational Capitalism and National Disintegration in Latin America,’ *Journal of Development Studies* 6:1. As well as the work of the principal exponent of Latin American structuralism in the anglophone world, Dudley Seers. Of particular importance were Seers’ (1963) ‘The limitation of the special case’ and (1964) ‘The Mechanism of the Open Petroleum Economy,’ *Social and Economic Studies*, 13:2: 233-242

<sup>12</sup> See Lloyd Best ‘A Model for the Pure Plantation Economy’ (1968) in *Social and Economic Studies* 17:3, 283-326; Lloyd Best and Kari Polanyi Levitt (1975) *Pure Plantation Economy*. Mona, Jamaica: Institute of International Relations. University of the West Indies; Kari Polanyi Levitt and Lloyd Best (1975) ‘Character of

societies have passed through three successive stages. Firstly the “Pure Plantation Economy” during the era of mercantilism and slave production, followed by the “Plantation Economy Modified” immediately after emancipation and, finally, the “Plantation Economy Further Modified” representing the contemporary conjuncture. Best and Levitt were concerned to show how the structural legacy of the first stage – the “Pure Plantation Economy” – deprived the economies of Caribbean societies with an internal dynamic that would foster economic development<sup>13</sup>. The core idea was that the centrality of the plantation in the formation of capitalist economies in the Caribbean has resulted in the failure of substantial inter-sector relationships to form in these economies. In other words, economic expansion in one sector of the economy – specifically, the sector of the economy based on plantation production – does not induce substantial expansions in other sectors of the economy.

The growth of sectors of the economy outside that dominated by plantation production is hindered during the ‘Plantation Economy Modified’ stage, among other reasons, because of culturally entrenched demand for imports, the concentration of skills and technology in the plantation sector, the tendency of the plantation sector to increase productivity of the same product line during economic upswings and to consume capital in period of economic downturn and state support for plantation production activity.<sup>14</sup> Subsequently, during the “Plantation Economy Further Modified” stage, the core industries of the economy are owned by multinational corporations which control the levels of investment, technological advancement, supply of inputs and processing and disposal of outputs. In this phase too the concentration of resources and investment in sectors originally associated with plantation economy prevents the emergence of local entrepreneurship, the growth of domestic savings and investment and the absence of inter-sector relationships which can become the motor for internally driven growth<sup>15</sup>.

Best and Levitt’s characterization of the legacy of the plantation as a source of the distinctive underdevelopment of Caribbean economies was a transparent challenge to Arthur Lewis’ “dual

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Caribbean Economy” in (ed. G.L. Beckford) *Caribbean Economy: Dependence and Backwardness*, Mona, Jamaica: Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of the West Indies: 34-60

<sup>13</sup> Levitt and Best (1975) “Character of the Caribbean Economy”, p. 37

<sup>14</sup> Lloyd Best and Kari Levitt (2009) ‘Outline of a General Theory of Caribbean Economy’ in *Essays on the Theory of Plantation Economy*. University of the West Indies Press, p. 23-24; Girvan ‘Caribbean Dependency Theory Revisited’ p. 335

<sup>15</sup> Best and Levitt (2009) ‘Outline of a General Theory of Caribbean Economy’, pp. 27-30; Girvan ‘Caribbean Dependency Theory Revisited’ p. 355

sector” model of Third World development. On Best and Levitt’s account, the “modern” sector of the economy dominated by plantation production is the source of underdevelopment rather than the bedrock of the nascent national economy and thus the key to economic growth as Lewis had argued. The “traditional” or “backward” sectors were viewed by Lewis as the obstacle to the take-off of national industry because of their tendency to be characterized by ‘low-level equilibrium traps’ – a situation in which return on investment is so low that farmers cannot be induced to adopt new inputs and new techniques. According to Best and Levitt, the “backward” sectors of the economy were not an untouched hinterland awaiting integration into the modern sectors of the economy; rather, the “backwardness” in some sectors of the economy is produced by structural rigidities in resource allocation produced by the plantation system which inhibits economic diversification and transformation over time. Far from Caribbean economies being two distinct sectors which are largely independent of one another, the plantation is a “total institution” within Caribbean societies and any “backwardness” in particular sectors of the economy is a result of the imperatives of plantation production dominating the structuring of economic and social life.<sup>16</sup>

Another thinker associated with the New World Group, George Beckford, further elaborated on the role the ‘pure plantation economy’ plays in underdeveloping Caribbean economies in his 1972 book *Persistent Poverty*. Beckford’s point of departure was the idea that the plantation was a ‘modernizing institution’<sup>17</sup>. Unlike the feudal manor to which it was frequently compared, the plantation was highly capitalized, it had a corporate structure and it was one of the first industrial organizations.<sup>18</sup> Proof of the plantation’s unqualified modernity was the fact that, according to Beckford, it was the first institution with a modern workforce, that is, the relations of productions we today associate with the factory and the bureaucratic control of labour, had their origins in the plantation.<sup>19</sup>

Like Best and Levitt, Beckford expressly critiques Lewis’ dual sector model by suggesting that historically the peasant sector – the “backward” sector in Lewis’ model – has been the driver of economic development and the plantation sector – Lewis’ “modern” sector – has historically acted as an obstacle to the development of the peasant sector thus acting as a force for

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<sup>16</sup> Best (1968) ‘A Model for the Pure Plantation Economy’, p. 288

<sup>17</sup> George Beckford (1972) *Persistent Poverty: Underdevelopment in Plantation Economies of the Third World*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. xxv

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, pp. 32-33

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p 32, 40

underdevelopment. Beckford's analysis aimed to show how the competition for resources between the plantations and the peasant sector begins with the initial emergence of plantation production in the societies in question.

Typically, Beckford argues, plantations are first established in societies characterized by open access to resources with few social structures restricting access to, and use of, resources and in which not all the land is in permanent settlement<sup>20</sup>. The "open resource" situation in which the plantation first establishes itself poses a problem of how to secure the large labour force necessary for plantation production where the majority of the population secures its independent existence through unrestricted access to land. This situation induces the plantation sector to extend its rights over fertile and well-placed land, large portions of which can be held in reserve, and secure a "closed resource" situation in which the peasantry is forced onto geographically marginal land and compelled to seek casual wage labour on plantations or to sell their crops to plantations for processing and transportation.

Like Best and Levitt, Beckford argues that the growth of the modern plantation enterprise has a limited knock-on effect on other sectors of the economy. Investments into the plantation sector are substantial but narrowly circumscribed to the very specific capital-intensive requirements of the plantation enterprise. The actual production of crops by the plantations themselves may in fact be a very small part of the overall economic activities of plantation enterprises, with plantations vertically integrated into an international company where resource extraction takes place at the Caribbean "periphery" but final processing in the metropolitan or "core" countries<sup>21</sup>.

Both Beckford and Best and Levitt's accounts of the centrality of the plantation to the economic trajectory of Caribbean societies sought, in effect, to turn Lewis' "dual sector" model of economic development on its head. Beckford, in particular, turned the tools of neo-classical economics against the dominant development models of the two preceding decades. Through calculations of the efficiency of resource allocation by marginal productivities and factor and product market considerations he sought to challenge the notion that the plantation was the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 34

<sup>21</sup> See Beckford's case study of the Tate & Lyle company for a detailed account of how the particular structure of the typical plantation enterprise and the underdevelopment effects it induces in Caribbean economies (1972) *Persistent Poverty*, pp. 130-140

exemplar of economic rationality and argue instead that the motor of agricultural development lay in the frustrated entrepreneurial energies of the peasant sector<sup>22</sup>.

Patterson, like Best, Levitt and Beckford also emphasizes the centrality of the slave plantation to the trajectory of Caribbean societies. But, whereas the latter sought to account for the centrality of the plantation in primarily economic terms, Patterson in *The Sociology of Slavery* argued for a more wide-ranging impact on Caribbean social formations as a whole,

Jamaica is best seen more as a collection of autonomous plantations, each a self-contained community with its internal mechanism of power, than as a total social system<sup>23</sup>.

From this characterization Patterson advances his well-known idea that slavery and colonization had produced a distinctively disintegrated and deracinated social order in Jamaica. Indeed, Patterson suggested that it was the closest any historical society had come to a Hobbesian state of nature. More than merely leaving behind a legacy of economic underdevelopment, slavery was figured by Patterson as a completely destructive process that left only social and cultural discontinuity in its wake. Moreover, more than merely the plantation being a distinctively modern institution, as Beckford suggested, the destruction of a collective past wrought by the institution of slavery – the ‘absence of ruins’ as the title of Patterson’s novels run – mean that, for Patterson, Caribbean societies as a whole are the most quintessentially modern societies on the planet.

The central theories of CDT emerged in the late-1960s in the midst of the mushrooming of Black Power and Ras Tafari movements and the repression of leftist activists and intellectuals – most notably the banning of Guyanese Marxist historian, Walter Rodney, from entering the country to take up his teaching position at UWI – by the government of Hugh Shearer in Jamaica. By 1972, CDT theories were propelled from radical academic and activist circles to the centre of Jamaican political life with the triumph of the People’s National Party under the charismatic populist leadership of Michael Manley.

The “open-door” economic policies pursued by the Jamaican government since the early 1960s, which sought to attract investors through offering tax holidays and access to cheap

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<sup>22</sup> See Beckford (1972) *Persistent Poverty*, p. 158

<sup>23</sup> Orlando Patterson (1967) *The Sociology of Slavery*. London: McGibbon and Kee

labour, were beginning to show their limitations with the collapse of the boom in the bauxite industry in the mid-1960s. By the end of the decade there was a sharp uptick in the rate of unemployment, from 13% to 24%, and a decline in the share of the poorest 40% of the population of personal earned income from 7.2% to 5.4%<sup>24</sup>. Riding the tide of popular discontent against widening social inequalities, particularly among the urban poor and rural peasantry, Manley's PNP swept to power in the 1972 elections on the campaign slogan 'Better Must Come'. While Manley was adamant not to define his regime in terms of any "-isms" during the election campaign of 1972, by 1974 he would declare that "The days of capitalism are over. Socialism is running the country now!" and in November 1974 the PNP published its 'Thirteen Principles' of 'Democratic Socialism'<sup>25</sup>.

This is not the place to assess the full gambit of policies pursued by the PNP under the banner of 'Democratic Socialism' – in effect, a rather haphazard and limited programme of nationalization of key industries and land reform while remaining committed to a "mixed economy" paired with a vocal non-aligned, anti-imperialist and Havana-friendly foreign policy. We should merely note that prominent CDT theorists like Norman Girvan were given prominent roles in Manley's government and that Orlando Patterson was appointed a special adviser for social policy and development in Manley's office in 1972. He held the position until the end of Manley's second term in 1980. Patterson was credited with introducing the 'basic needs' approach to economic development that was being championed by the ILO and the World Bank in the 1970s as a means of displacing economic growth from the centre of development agendas in favour of poverty reduction. This is just to emphasise that Patterson was thinking deeply about, and was in daily contact with, the cutting edge of Third World development theory and policy throughout the period in which he was simultaneously conducting the research that would culminate in *Slavery and Social Death*.

The concept of "social death", which Patterson famously described as the 'the permanent, violent domination of natively alienated and generally dishonored persons' in *Slavery and Social Death* may appear to be a simple extension of this catastrophic characterization of slavery in Jamaica he had advanced in his *Sociology of Slavery* to the history of slavery and slave societies

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<sup>24</sup> See Fitzroy Ambursley (1981) 'Jamaica: The Demise of Democratic Socialism' in *New Left Review*, 1/128, p. 79; Norman Girvan, Richard Bernal and Wesley Hughes (1980) 'The IMF and the Third World: The Case of Jamaica, 1974-80' in *Development Dialogue*, No. 2, p. 115

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in (1981) 'Better Never Come', NACLA Report on the Americas, 15:1, p. 25. The 'thirteen principles' were outlined in (1974) *Democratic Socialism: the Jamaican Model* Kingston: People's National Party

more generally with little relation to theories of economic underdevelopment being debated in the 1970s<sup>26</sup>. However, the concept has a more complicated genealogy and has a more direct bearing on such debates – evident in articles published by Patterson in the late-1970s – than the presentation of the concept in *Slavery and Social Death* suggests.

### **The African origins of the concept of social death**

In a retrospective interview with David Scott, Patterson explains that one of the central targets of the research which culminated in *Slavery and Social Death* has been the parochialism of American studies. He explains to Scott that he

wanted to point out the fact that not only was slavery *not* a peculiarly American institution, but seen within the context of broader slave studies, there were indeed *oddities* in American slavery that people had come to see as the norm, because American slavery had been so much more thoroughly studied than other areas of slave life in other countries.<sup>27</sup>

The breadth of historic and geographic comparison that Patterson undertakes is of course legendary, covering slavery in 66 societies and spanning the ancient, pre-modern and modern periods. However, Patterson finds his overall theoretical framework in a very specific literature that was beginning to emerge in the early 1970s, namely, a debate that was raging in African studies at the time around how best to characterize the nature of slavery among pre-capitalist West African societies. While Patterson often emphasizes the provenance of the concept in the work of Cambridge classicist Moses Finley's work on slavery in ancient Greece and Rome, it is really the work of a school French anthropologists of Africa centered around Claude Meillassoux that Patterson's notion of social death is most indebted to conceptually<sup>28</sup>.

Patterson's first invocation of the concept of 'social death' comes three years before the publication of *Slavery and Social Death*, in a 1979 article in the *New Left Review*, 'On Slavery and Slave Formations'. Patterson begins the article by arguing that an adequate sociological account of slavery and, more specifically, slave societies and slave formations must be approached at two distinct levels. Firstly, the "microsociological" which allows one to 'define the nature of the institution, to differentiate it from closely related forms of bondage such as

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<sup>26</sup> Orlando Patterson (1982) *Slavery and Social Death*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p. 13

<sup>27</sup> David Scott (2013) 'The Paradox of Freedom: An Interview with Orlando Patterson' in *small axe*, 40, p. 221

<sup>28</sup> For Patterson invocation of Finley see his (1982) *Slavery and Social Death*

serfdom and helotage, to specify its forms, to understand the way in which the elementary process is represented legally, culturally and ideologically, to explore the peculiar psychology of oppression and domination it entails and to clarify the circumstances under which the institution is individually terminated in the process of manumission.’<sup>29</sup> It is only once this microsociological level is defined that one can go on to define the “macrosociological” level, that is, ‘the relation of the institution to the wider social order.’<sup>30</sup>

While *Slavery and Social Death* is by and large a monumental “microsociological” study on the institution of slavery, in his article in the *New Left Review* Patterson also tentatively ventures to draw out some of the macrosociological implications of the former. At both levels of analysis, the concept of “social death” – particularly the way it is defined by the French Africanists – is deployed by Patterson in order to make very precise interventions in two distinct bodies of literature: contemporary developments in the historical and sociological studies of slavery and neo-Marxist and dependency theorists’ conceptualization of the relationship between capitalist and pre-capitalist modes of production.

After introducing the idea that the universal cultural mode of representing slavery is in terms of “social death” – usually the outcome of a commutation of a death sentence and the enslavement of the prisoner in question – Patterson reveals the origins of the concept. He quotes from Claude Meillassoux’s introduction to his collected volume on slavery in pre-colonial Africa where he defines African slavery, drawing on Michel Izard’s work published in the same volume, in terms of the slave or “captive” being ‘marked by an original, indelible defect which weighs endlessly upon his destiny. This is, in Izard’s words, a kind of “social death”. He can never be brought to life again as such since, in spite of some specious examples (themselves most instructive) of fictive rebirth, the slave will remain forever an “unborn” being.’<sup>31</sup>

In order to appreciate the significance of Patterson drawing on Meillassoux for his definition of “social death” we must briefly situate Meillassoux’s account of slavery in West Sudan within late-1970s debates around the conceptualization of slavery in African societies. The debate

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<sup>29</sup> Orlando Patterson (1979) ‘On Slavery and Slave Formations’ in *New Left Review*, 1/117, p. 32

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Claude Meillassoux quoted in Ibid, p. 40. The volume being referred to is Claude Meillassoux (ed.) (1975) *L’esclavage en Afrique précoloniale*. Paris: Francois Maspero

emerged in the wake of the appearance of two major collected volumes on slavery in sub-Saharan Africa – in France, *L'esclavage en Afrique précoloniale* edited by Meillassoux and, in the United States, *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives* edited by Igor Kopytoff and Suzanne Miers – which propelled the subject from one of the more neglected topics in African studies to one of the most fashionable in the 1970s. Both volumes showcased empirical studies spanning diverse geographical and historical contexts, but both also included lengthy synthetic introductions (80 pages in the case of the Kopytoff and Miers volume!) that attempted to capture the distinctiveness of slavery on the African continent in general vis-à-vis slavery in the Americas. Both Meillassoux and Kopytoff and Miers stressed the importance of understanding slavery in terms of the role it played in the societies in question rather than purely in terms of the relations between master and slave or the particular “status” of the slave – defining slavery, for instance, as a state of unfreedom or as property.

Kopytoff and Miers take a functionalist approach to suggest that what was distinctive about slavery on the African context is the role of enslavement in absorbing people into society, above all into kinship groups. Miers and Kopytoff explain that they ‘see the roots of these servile institutions in the need for wives and children, the wish to enlarge one’s kin group, and the desire to have clients, dependents servants and retainers.’<sup>32</sup> They argue that “African slavery” can generally be described as “An Institution of Marginality”. The idea is that slave-holding societies in African societies operate with a slave-to-kinship continuum in which the limbic state of the slave is slowly transformed through their insertion into a new set of kinship relations by the slave-holding society. Kopytoff and Miers are careful to dissociate themselves from an equation of slavery in Africa with slavery in the Americas, indeed, when they refer to “African ‘slavery’” they insist that the term “slavery” should be put in quotation marks. By making “absorptiveness” into a general characteristic of African slavery it could be contrasted with the stark patterns of economic exploitation and social separation that characterized slavery in the Americas.

In the eyes of some critics, this attempt to contrast a relatively benign form of slavery on the African continent with the brutality of American slavery placed Kopytoff and Miers’ volume – whether fairly or not – within a genre of North American academic studies of slavery in the

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<sup>32</sup> Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff (eds.) (1977) *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, p. 67

early to mid-1970s that sought to challenge more catastrophic accounts of slavery<sup>33</sup>. In 1974, for instance, the Nobel-prize winning economist Robert Fogel published a controversial two volume study co-written with Stanley Engerman which argued that the economic conditions in the Southern United States before 1860 – namely, the incentives offered to slaves to work, their living conditions and even the attitudes of slaves towards work and the family – were not so drastically different from conditions and attitudes of wage workers<sup>34</sup>. In the same period a number of studies emerged that attempted to problematize accounts of slavery as purely a destructive institution by showing how an independent culture developed among the enslaved – some notable examples include John W. Blassingame's *The Slave Community* and Kamau Brathwaite's *Folk Culture of Slaves in Jamaica*.<sup>35</sup>

Patterson was highly critical of both of these strands of the contemporary research on slavery and wanted to reassert the economic destructiveness and cultural discontinuity wrought by the institution in *Slavery and Social Death*.<sup>36</sup> However, what is clear from the New Left Review article is that Patterson draws on Meillassoux's insistence – contra Miers and Kopytoff – that the “social death” of the African slave rendered them absolutely unassimilable into a society's kinship structures, not merely because Meillassoux paints a bleaker picture of African slavery but also because of a number of the political economic arguments he advances on the basis of the concept.

Meillassoux approaches slavery in African societies according to a theme that cuts across his entire oeuvre, namely, that an adequate Marxist account of a particular social formation cannot focus purely on production but must also address the issue of social reproduction; how social groups and particular social classes are maintained from generation to generation.<sup>37</sup> Meillassoux argued that, generally, slave-holding elites in African societies were not powerful enough to allow their slaves to produce a new generation of slaves; they lacked the resources to contain potential conflicts that would emerge from a large slave population and to provide

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<sup>33</sup> See Frederick Cooper (1978) 'Review: Slavery in Africa by Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff' in *African Economic History*, no. 5, pp. 41-45; (1979) 'The Problem of Slavery in African Studies' in *Journal of African History*, 20, 1, pp. 103-105

<sup>34</sup> Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman (1974) *Time on the Cross*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company

<sup>35</sup> John W. Blassingame (1972) *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*. London: Oxford University Press. See also

<sup>36</sup> See David Scott (2013) 'The Paradox of Freedom' p. 221

<sup>37</sup> See Claude Meillassoux (1972) 'From reproduction to production: A Marxist approach to economic anthropology' in *Economy and Society*, Volume 1, Issue 1, pp. 93-105 for a general theoretical overview of the importance of a theory of social reproduction within Meillassoux's heterodox Marxist theoretical framework.

for this population's material needs. By importing or capturing new slaves, the category of slave could be reproduced without the risk of relying on biological reproduction. The "absorption" into kinship groups observed by Kopytoff and Miers was the process by which children of slaves entered different – non-slave – forms of dependent relationships precisely as a means of preventing the emergence of a large internal slave population. The "socially dead" character of the slave, the fact that they are denied progeny – in Patterson's terms that they are a "genealogical isolate", having been denied any relationship to their ancestors or descendants – thus plays a crucial role in the various means by which ruling classes maintained their hegemony and allocated resources in the societies in question.

What appeals to Patterson in Meillassoux's theory of African slavery was his attempt to approach the topic from a broadly Marxist perspective while simultaneously refusing two of the most common points of departure of Marxist accounts of slavery: either defining slavery as a form of property – that is, in terms of the legal-economic category of ownership of the slave by the master – or in relation to a distinctive 'slave mode of production'. Patterson quotes Meillassoux's claim that 'Slavery always appears in association with other relationships of production, so that it does not constitute the only or even the most dominant mode of production, and the ruling class cannot be defined strictly only in relationship to it [...] far from revealing the inability of dialectical materialism to analyze slavery scientifically' the argument leads one to 'reject any proto-Marxist shuffling of prefabricated Modes of Production summarily borrowed from this or that writing or remark from Marx or Engels.'<sup>38</sup>

Patterson draws on Meillassoux's insights to criticize the proliferation of Marxist studies on 'pre-capitalist modes of production' in the 1970s<sup>39</sup>. These studies sought to account for the distinctiveness of different social formations under capitalism on the basis of analyses of the specific ways in which capitalism took root in different societies at different historical moments. The idea was that capitalism emerged historically on the basis of different pre-capitalist modes of production in different societies. The nature of the pre-capitalist mode of production capitalism comes to displace is, according to these theories, important for understanding the kinds of economic and social structure that emerge out of the transition.

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<sup>38</sup> Meillassoux quoted in Patterson (1979) 'Slavery and Slave formations', p. 47

<sup>39</sup> He targets in particular Perry Anderson (1974) *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* London: NLB; R.A. Padgug (1976) 'Problems in the Theory of Slavery and Slave Society' in *Science and Society*, pp. 3-27; Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst (1975) *Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production*. London: Routledge

Where these studies err, according to Patterson, is in their claim that for societies in which slave labour is widely employed a distinctive ‘slave mode of production’ can be defined. According to Patterson, ‘A mode of production, if it is to mean anything, must refer to a specific productive process with specific relations of production [...] there is nothing in the nature of slavery that implies a given economic organization, therefore it is not enough to indicate the location of slaves in an economic sector to claim that a slave mode of production exists.’<sup>40</sup>

For Patterson, these contemporary Marxist approaches to pre-capitalist modes of production had failed to adequately account for the political economic significance of slavery because they were looking for it in all the wrong places. The significance of slavery should be sought not in the distinctive form of labour it embodies, nor in the distinctive form of exploitation that takes place in slave-holding societies, but rather in the role it plays in articulating or combining distinct modes of production. In the case of African slavery, the articulation of two pre-capitalist modes of production (the mode of production of the slaveholders and the mode of production of the societies from which slaves are captured) and in the case of New World Slavery the ‘quasi-capitalistic invasion of a pre-capitalist formation’.<sup>41</sup> The sheer variety of combinations between modes of production that is possible on the basis of slavery means that there can be no single model of a slave formation according to Patterson.<sup>42</sup>

Turning to New World Slavery on the basis of the concepts he derived from Meillassoux’s analysis of African slavery, Patterson concludes that ‘Capitalism, which is exclusively a product of the modern world, has had two major variants: the ‘free’ variant characterized by the sale of worker’s labour on the labour market; and the slave variant found in the Americas up to the closings decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.’<sup>43</sup> This argument is clearly in agreement with the influential dependency and world system theories of the period that rejected the idea that there remained pre- or non-capitalist social relations extrinsic to capitalism by positing a single capitalist ‘world system’. However, Patterson adds a twist to this familiar theory by arguing that Wallerstein’s world systems theory continues to implicitly treat slavery as a pre-capitalist mode of production or, at least, as a necessarily more backward zone of capitalism. The result, according to Patterson, is that Wallerstein’s whole analysis rests on the notion that ‘the

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<sup>40</sup> Patterson (1979) ‘Slavery and Slave Formations’, p. 48

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53

dynamic thrust in the emergence of capitalism moved only in the direction from core to periphery.’<sup>44</sup> In an argument reminiscent of Beckford’s discussed earlier, Patterson suggests that this underlying premise of the core/periphery model of world systems theory prevents it from recognizing that ‘at the microeconomic level the so-called periphery may well have been in advance of the core up to about the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.’<sup>45</sup> In other words, the kinds of production techniques and relations of production first developed in the West Indian plantation would become the model for the Western firm and not the other way round.

What is striking about the deployment of the concept of ‘social death’ in the NLR article is that it is first introduced as a way of decentering American slavery from comparative accounts of slavery by instead drawing on the debates within African studies around how to best characterize slavery on the continent as the basis for a general theory of slavery and its significance for political economy. The concept is then deployed in order to effect a second decentering, namely, the decentering of the capitalism of ‘core’ economies from accounts of the emergence of the capitalist world system and the relative development and underdevelopment of different capitalist societies. What is left for us to briefly interrogate is how this political economic dimension became less self-evident in Patterson’s subsequent works and especially in the reception of his thought.

### **What happened to the political economic dimensions of ‘social death’?**

The most obvious answer to this question is that the sheer comparative scope of *Slavery and Social Death* obscured the initial formulation of the concept in terms of the more confined comparison between New World Slavery and slavery on the African continent in which the political economic stakes were more obvious. By attempting to arrive at an adequate general theory to account for the experience of slavery across such a wide historical and geographical context, it is easier for the concept to be read, against Patterson’s express intentions, as a free-standing, transhistorical description of a particular subjective state.

However, I think a more important reason for the obscuring of the political economic dimensions of social death is the collapse of the social-democratic hegemony within academic

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p. 54

<sup>45</sup> Ibid

development studies in the 1980s, which had been an important terrain for shared theoretical elaboration for the broad intellectual left in the 1970s. The disappointment of Third World development agendas in the 1980s – Jamaica being a paradigm case – and the ascendancy of neoliberal development theory led to a relative decline in engagement by social theorists with critical studies of the political economy of underdevelopment and neo-imperialism. The theoretical centre of gravity had clearly shifted by the time Patterson published his next book *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture* in 1991. Here the target is the liberal triumphalism that accompanied the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War. Patterson’s argument that the sociohistorical roots of the ultimate Western ideal, freedom, was in the domination and degradation of slavery, cast a shadow on the ways in which his earlier thought has been received. On the basis of *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture* it is easy to read social death as the concept par excellence which pinpoints the brutality at the heart of “civilized” liberal society and the kinds of exclusion constitutive of a supposedly universal “civil society”.

Faced with the post-2008 conjuncture and the revival of interest in the critique of political economy among theorists of the left we may now return to Patterson’s work with different eyes. It is more at the level of the idiom of these texts than in the precise details – which are no doubt dated – that social theorists should take a particular interest. If anything, Patterson’s work on the 1960s and 1970s shows the theoretical productiveness that is possible on the basis of displacing the standard political economic comparative frameworks between core and periphery, global north and global south, in favour of comparisons across contexts in the global south. More important still, his work emphasizes the importance of paying as close attention to the south-to-north directionality of transformations in the world system as to the more widely studied reverse dynamic.