

The Janus Face of Fruits of Merchant Capital

Lawrence T. McDonnell

Volume 15, 1985

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt15re02>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

McDonnell, L. T. (1985). Review of [The Janus Face of Fruits of Merchant Capital]. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 15, 185–190.

The Janus Face of *Fruits of Merchant Capital*

Lawrence T. McDonnell

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press 1983).

IN 1965, EUGENE GENOVESE'S *Political Economy of Slavery* pioneered a resurgence of American Marxist scholarship. Other leftist academics had already begun the long trek back from the debacle of the 1950s, but it was Genovese especially who offered work too brilliant, too brash, too wide-ranging to be successfully ignored or denigrated. In subsequent works he has led the fields of southern and black history virtually by the nose for nearly two decades. Not that his arguments have commanded universal assent, by any means, or that they have settled controversies of long standing among scholars. On the contrary, Genovese has commanded universal attention because of controversies he has opened up, new questions he has asked, new methods and theories he has introduced, because his work has always been both learned and provocative. He has largely set the agenda for research in these fields, and has helped place Marxist historical methods at the centre of American scholarly debate.

Fruits of Merchant Capital, Genovese's first book-length study co-authored with Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, the formidable French and women's historian, seeks to continue this tradition of wit, brilliance, and outrage. Ranging across political economy, social history, and ideology in thirteen pungent essays, the Genoveses seek to illuminate the character and consequences of merchant capital's role in revolutionary France and the Old South. On balance, they conclude, merchant capital was Janus-faced, exerting contradictory influences in most cases, but usually yielding throttling conservatism. Merchant capital's fruits were many and varied — not least a bloody civil war — as the authors suggest in thoughtful and far-flung comparative comments linking European expansion with Asia, Africa, and the New World. This is a work of

L.T. McDonnell, "The Janus Face of *Fruits of Merchant Capital*," *Labour/Le Travail*, 15 (Spring 1985), 185-190.

the first order of scholarship, with a scope and theoretical compass American history has seldom, if ever, seen. Appropriately, it will begin debates and engender controversies, and will doubtless prove as resilient — for the most part — as their earlier work. The fruits of *Fruits*, however, vary from splendid to dubious. Ironically, the Genoveses' brilliant book, like merchant capital itself, proves ultimately Janus-faced, demonstrating on one page precisely the faults it rails against on another. While applauding one aspect, thankfully overwhelming, it is necessary to question and criticize the other.

Valuable insights and suggestions stud virtually every page of *Fruits of Merchant Capital*, but the core of its contribution lies in three major areas. First, the Genoveses provide a powerful critique of the new social history, based on their 1976 essay, "The Political Crisis of Social History." Revised and expanded here, this piece stands as one of the most important — and unheeded — theoretical works of Marxist scholarship in recent decades. The authors' considerable talents shine at their brightest in these pages: despite valuable contributions, they assert, the new "if already trying" school has pursued its "favorite victims" — blacks, women, workers — into "bedrooms, bathrooms and kitchens," away from the political arena which fundamentally shaped their lives. (x) Historians must turn back from aimless absorption with depoliticized culture, to the question which has dynamized the best social history at least since the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: "who rides whom and how." (212) This renewed political emphasis alone permits transcendence of social history, however new and improved, to the history of society Eric Hobsbawm has rightly called for. The Genoveses' long-awaited "Critique of Bourgeois Criticism" of *Time on the Cross* supplements these convincing charges with a brief but devastating analysis of liberal slavery scholarship. "The very idea of a 'slave culture' is

absurd," (171) they state flatly — an iconoclastic notion proponents of workers' culture, women's culture, gay culture, etc., would do well to ponder. Those, like Herbert Gutman, who champion the slave community's autonomy and self-determination inevitably ignore political relations, and deny the necessity of class conflict. Like Fogel and Engerman, whom they assail with such graceless indignation, these liberal critics ground their models of slave society in behaviourist psychology and neo-classical economics. The cost of such unreflective errors, *Fruits* shows, is ruinous: at best, a series of unconnected, pluralist structures emerges, demonstrating no inner dynamic except that with which their creators sidestep the most important historical questions. Here the Genoveses stand on strong ground indeed, and a backlash against such depoliticized liberal empiricism — often costumed in the most fashionable "radical" garb — is already emerging.

Fruits of Merchant Capital passes from this clear-eyed critique to its second major contribution, a brilliant analysis of the psychology of slavery. Genovese has offered important insights into this problem throughout his career, crowned by *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, yet the authors surpass their own achievement in this volume. Fox-Genovese's theoretical prowess, one suspects, makes the difference. The expanded version of her essay, "Poor Richard at Work in the Cotton Fields," here provides an essential point of departure for all future work on slave psychology. Placing Freudian object-relations theory in a context of Marxist social analysis, the authors convincingly argue that slavery's paternalist imperatives caused "tremendous ambivalence and a constant internal struggle, at a high level of tension, for spiritual survival." (122) Black achievement under capitalism was remarkable, they maintain, but the price was high. Careful readers will note here a tone less optimistic about the quality of slave endurance than presented in previous works. The psychology of slavery

remains underdeveloped — or mishandled, as a rebuttal of behaviourist and Sullivanian models shows — but the Genoveses take a significant theoretical step forward in this volume. Two forthcoming books, one linking psychoanalysis and historical materialism, the other criticizing writers on the psychology of colonialism, promise to continue this illuminating advance.

Fruits of Merchant Capital's chief contribution, however, focuses on the "problem of the transition to capitalism" in Marxist historiography. What role did merchant capital play in the emergence of bourgeois property and its conflict with previous property forms in the course of European expansion? This question has aroused vigorous debate since the publication of Maurice Dobb's pathbreaking *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* four decades ago, but heretofore has been neglected by scholars of the American past. With Dobb, Guy Bois, Robert Brenner, and Eric Hobsbawm, the Genoveses affirm that merchant capital helped dissolve feudal relations and organize capital accumulation. Usually, however, penetration of the economy "resulted in the reinforcement of feudal social relations and of obstacles to the emergence of bourgeois social relations, specifically, of free labor." (8) These ambiguities are central to the Genoveses' explanation of southern slave society as pre-capitalist, neither feudal nor capitalist, and of the coming of the Civil War. Plantation slavery in the New World began as a vital component of international capitalist development, they show, particularly in the outstanding essay, "The Slave Economies in Political Perspective." Specific conditions of plantation life, however, gave rise to reactionary ruling classes, stillborn culture, and new conservative ideological strains. By the middle of the nineteenth century, this retrograde elite found itself increasingly beset by internal contradictions and hemmed in by an aggressive, dynamic, and self-righteous bourgeoisie, striving to

complete its conquest of world power. Planters' only choice was to watch their world die by inches, or to risk all in one bold stroke. *Fruits'* formulation considerably strengthens and deepens theoretical understanding of the Genoveses' interpretation of southern society. Scholars will also find their remarks on merchant capital in French and Caribbean contexts enlightening, although they remain outside the scope of this review. *Fruits* attempts, moreover, to recast fundamentally the terms of debate over slavery, to widen greatly its scope, placing it within the framework of capitalist development, undermining the parochial myth of a separate and exceptional American past. Harold Woodman's splendid foreword to this volume ably outlines essential points of this complex debate. Whether the authors are preaching (however admirably) to the converted here, or whether issues they raise will focus and revitalize future research remains to be seen. At the least they have issued an admirable clarification call. Should *Fruits* succeed in making the Sweezy-Dobb debate a staple of conversation among historians of the South, they must next try their hand at loaves and fishes.

Fruits of Merchant Capital, however, is not without its problems. Perhaps unfairly, some will be disappointed that a large portion of this expansive work has previously appeared in essay form, or that review articles comprise more than half the text. The Genoveses use their two chapters on *Time on the Cross* as a springboard to important political and intellectual tasks, as noted above, but clearly, they intend more by them. The debates with Fogel and Engerman, now fully ten years old, are not yet over, they insist with curious urgency, and promise to break forth with renewed fury. Their concern seems misplaced: Fogel's forthcoming answer to his critics — *horribile dictu* — may indeed spark more exchanges, but Marxist interpretations of the slave South are already under siege from another quarter, which the Genoveses completely

ignore here. In this light, there is a tinge of anachronism to these two brilliant chapters.

This complaint, as noted, is perhaps unfair, and would have no grounds at all except for the stunning neo-revisionist assault which has pushed Marxists to the wall in recent years. Championed by J. Mills Thornton's redoubtable *Power and Politics in a Slave Society*, and buttressed by the work of Michael Holt, James Oakes, Marc Kruman, Harry Watson, Lacy Ford, and others, this school questions virtually every premise of the Genoveses' interpretation of planter society. In its most extreme form, this school threatens to read slavery out of southern history and to nullify the question of social class. The Marxist response to these historians has been, in a word, miserable. Here their challenge goes unnoticed. Here not one of these scholars is mentioned. The Genoveses neglect a fine opportunity and an important political task by their silence.

One could claim that *Fruits* does address the Thornton camp in backhanded fashion with the brief overview, "Yeoman Farmers in a Slaveholders' Democracy." If so, the results are not encouraging. Indeed, the Janus face of their own analysis shows itself starkly here. This essay seeks to understand the absence of class conflict between planters and non-slaveholders until the Confederacy's final hours. The Piedmont's yeomanry, the authors contend, avoided confrontation through geographical isolation and rejection of the market. Plantation belt non-slaveholders followed slaveholders' lead because of kinship ties and mutual interest. The Genoveses' assessment of Piedmont yeomanry, however, is chiefly based upon, and consonant with, Steven Hahn's acclaimed but errant *Roots of Southern Populism*. The neo-classicists' Robinson Crusoe materializes in northeastern Georgia in this recent work, waving the Stars and Bars gamely, and scrutinized by the best behaviourist technique. Though *Fruits*

rightly rails against political crises in historical analysis a scant 70 pages earlier, in "Yeoman Farmers" the Genoveses demonstrate disastrous theoretical amnesia, describing non-slaveholders' "choice" to shun commodity production in the antebellum era. Fox-Genoveses's judicious comment from *Past and Present*, "The Many Faces of Moral Economy" — significantly, not included in this book — speaks volumes against both Hahn and their own vision of upcountry yeomen. If these sturdy freeholders could enter and withdraw from market relations with the sort of freedom Hahn and the Genoveses suppose, if geographical isolation enabled them to hold an oppressive political power at arm's length, if no corrosive greed arose from within to lead backwoods communities to the shambles of primitive accumulation, then truly we ought to mourn the passing of this rural utopia. Reality, one suspects, was otherwise. The point is that "choices," for what they are worth, always exist in a framework of power, and that these determining political contours escape delineation here. In their treatment of plantation belt non-slaveholders, political crisis emerges again. How better to describe the political "choices" of a typical dirt farmer than by recourse to his "experience" with wealthy cousin Jeff, ginning and marketing his cotton, lending a spare slave when the crop was "in the grass," inviting the family to barbecue with a hearty handshake? How better — how worse! In these pages one finds precisely the sort of sentimental analysis for which the authors excoriate the new social history, and a reduction of class to class consciousness identical to the liberal empiricism of Gutman or E.P. Thompson. It is hard to know what the Genoveses mean by this theoretical shell game: Hahn, whom they praise, employs precisely the flawed understanding of class they scourge hapless Herbert Gutman for. Whatever happened to objective analysis of the social relations of production? If the Genoveses — or Hahn — had examined legislative petitions, church

and court records, the material life of the yeomanry, or manuscripts — yes, comrades, the yeomen left bundles of manuscripts — they would have come to very different conclusions. If we pause to consider, for example, how frequently slaveholders accused yeomen (frequently with good cause) of the theft and incendiarism that plagued plantations, things appear in a different light: a gin-house packed with cotton bales burning fiercely in the night is no beacon of class cohesion, as southern solons too often discovered. Readers will find this portion of *Fruits* long on theory, and dubious theory at that, and short on evidence. Ironically, it is the neo-revisionists who have championed a return to the archives, and who are now defeating Marxists at their own materialist game.

This problem impinges on the relation of political economy and ideology in *Fruits*. No good student of Gramsci has any business calling on those chimerical abstractions "majority rule" and "the people's will" (250) — shades of Aileen Kraditor — to cow those sensible of the role of political power. Yet "the most successful Marxist scholars," the Genoveses inform us with Olympian candour, have fled "stark materialist analysis" for greener — or, presumably, redder — pastures. At the risk of becoming an unsuccessful Marxist scholar, it seems necessary to call their bluff. As a young Turk named Genovese relentlessly argued in *In Red and Black*, it is one thing to reject economic determinism, or its dressed-up cousin, "stark" materialism, and quite another to let consciousness — perceptions, customs, ideology — dominate or override materialism. Too often theory is invoked as a device for avoiding engagement with the materialism of political economy. There is in this book a streak of liberal idealism both alarming and debilitating. So, for example, Fox-Genovese's "Legacy of Past Structure" claims "an abhorrence of revolutionary action" coupled with "pressing obligations and threat of business collapse" as a

"wonderful impetus" to the financial plunging which characterized Bordeaux-American trade between the American and French revolutions. (76) Though readers learn plenty about the subjective perceptions — abhorrences included — of Bordeaux merchants, there is nary a word on said "obligations" and "threats." So much for political economy! Or so little: though *Fruits* devotes 130 pages to the section titled "Ideology" (in fact, these concerns claim a hefty chunk of other sections too), only 44 pages suffice for "Political Economy," including the suspect "Legacy," after deduction for review essays. This is, assuredly, quantitative analysis at its worst, but there is an underlying truth: theory, and at crucial moments liberal theory, has alarmingly displaced materialist analysis and political economy in *Fruits of Merchant Capital*.

However attractive such developments must seem in certain quarters, they mark a striking departure from the usage of Dobb and Gramsci that Eugene Genovese pioneered in southern history. They leave the southern Marxists — alas, already few in number — ill-equipped to repel neo-revisionist assaults. What, then, is to be done? First we must turn back to the archives, working from concrete to abstract in the best materialist tradition, reversing the ideological predilections *Fruits*, in its worst moments, advocates. Second, we must address the brilliant scholars who have so forcefully challenged us, if we mean to keep Marxist problems at the centre of southern historical debate. Third, we must be alive to the pitfalls and political crises *Fruits* so well analyzes, and demonstrates. The left has a long march ahead, and it is time we got on with it.

There is today a thriving and frequently despicable cottage industry specializing in criticism of Eugene Genovese's work. It comes with the turf, one supposes, though such rationalizations are hard to square with the slanderous and malevolent quality of many of these attacks. Fittingly, Genovese, with

the prescient grace and determination known only to a good Gramscian, has treated these clowns with the silence they deserve. Yet *Fruits* is a work deserving sober and uncompromising comradely judgements — there is nothing more worthless than a Marxist without criticism — as well as hearty praise. The

Genoveses' greatest challenge, as it turns out, comes from their own work. This in itself testifies to their achievement. *Fruits of Merchant Capital* is a Janus-faced book, but thankfully, wonderfully progressive in its main contribution. The problems it considers, and the problems it gives rise to, deserve the closest attention.