

SYMPOSIUM: INTRODUCTION

The intertwined histories of capitalism and slavery in the Atlantic world—and the potentially revolutionary charge of anti-slavery—pose fundamental questions about the making of contemporary societies, the nature of capital, the exploitation of labour, the contingencies of race and the drivers of political change. In five books published over a span of thirty-six years, Robin Blackburn has produced a unique historical panorama of Atlantic slavery from its 15th-century origins (The Making of New World Slavery, 1997) to the uprisings of the 1790s, briefly supported by Jacobin France (The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1988), to the monstrous growth of the cotton plantation in the early 19th century, as counterpart to industrial manufacturing's take-off, and the simultaneous rise and ultimate victory of the abolition movement—covered in his most recent work, The Reckoning (2024). Blackburn's career-long interest in these themes was sparked by his participation in the early years of the revolutionary government in Cuba, where slavery was not abolished until 1880. His perspective has always been transnational and comparative, balancing economic, political and cultural-ideological factors in the explanations he advanced for the rise of slavery, in tandem with the advent of the modern age, and for the conditions that helped its opponents. In the symposium on The Reckoning that follows, three interlocutors engage with different aspects of his work. John Clegg, who has done pioneering archival research on the role of finance capital in 'modernizing' plantation slavery in the American South, teaches economic history at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. At the University of Galway, the comparative historian Enrico Dal Lago has studied the relations of unfree labour and nation-building, agrarian elites and emancipators, on both sides of the Atlantic, in The Age of Lincoln and Cavour (2015) and other works. Nancy Fraser, at the New School, has theorized capital's role in relation to the reproduction of class, race and gender. They explore questions of structure and agency in the overthrow of slavery; the shifting historiographical frameworks of the Atlantic World and what's been called the Second Slavery; the relationship of the factory to the plantation; the ideological contradictions of constitutional-democratic slaveholding; and the contrasting strategic goals of 'doubly free' and unfree labour. In his reply, Blackburn examines the successive contradictions of capital and rule that open up spaces for class struggle.