

Reconceptualising the factory as plant-ation: Black radicalism and the politics of history in a Detroit automobile plant¹

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In Paul Schrader's film *Blue Collar* (1978), there is a scene, a few minutes into the movie, in which Richard Pryor, interpreting an aggrieved Black worker in a Detroit automobile plant, stands up at a heated union meeting, complains about the lack of representation and shouts to the Local's President, "everybody knows what a plant is, a plant is just short for a plantation!". Fellow Black workers cheer, while the union leader looks irritated. The scene encapsulated a political moment that had come to an end by the time the movie was shot, but which had rocked Detroit's factories in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a time when insurgent Black workers linked Black nationalism tenets with revolutionary Marxism to protest against both factory management and the UAW (United Automobile Workers or, as the Black workers dubbed it, "U Ain't White" or "U Ain't Working"). The Richard Pryor line in *Blue Collar* echoed verbatim the Black Power vernacular used by the militants and the Black workers in the plants—since at least 1968, a rhetoric that characterised industrial labour as slave labour, the plant as plantation, floor supervisors as overseers, and strikers as "field negroes" or rebelling slaves. This is evidenced in the numerous publications of the radical groups forming the

¹ This research has benefitted from the contribution of the JFK Institute Library Grant and the Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Sam Fishman Award. The author would like to thank the, overall, eight reviewers who have provided constructive criticism to earlier drafts of this article as well as the members of the ELHN Working Group on "Free and Unfree Labour" for discussing it as a conference paper.

League of Revolutionary Black Workers (LRBW), and their propaganda film *Finally Got the News* (1970), interviews with activists and their memoirs, and media reports.

Indeed, such an analogy was a central feature of the rhetorical arsenal of Detroit's Black revolutionary nationalist groups, more so than, judging from the literature they produced, it can be traced in other similar groups agitating in that period, such as the Black Panthers or RAM (Revolutionary Action Movement) with whom the LBRW members crossed paths politically and personally, while keeping their differences at ideologically level.²

What prompted this reconceptualisation of the factory as a site of coercion? On what discourses were the Black revolutionary nationalists drawing on in establishing this analogy? And, finally, what were the political dividends of such rhetoric? In this article, I draw on these questions to analyse the rhetorical power of the plantation analogy in order to re-assess how Detroit's Black radicals' political use of history moulded, but eventually contributed to undermine, their political outlook, Marxist/Nationalist agenda, and appeal. In this article I start from the context that saw the emergence of the revolutionary Black autoworkers; then move onto analysing the meaning they attributed to "slavery" in their publications and against the backdrop of the historiography on slavery contemporary to the radicals; and finally, examine the long shadow that Malcolm X cast on the radicals' understanding of union politics in the plants. On the other hand,

² It is useful to contrast how these two groups blended Marxism, Black nationalism and Third World internationalism. Here the best starting point is Robin D. G. Kelley, "Black like Mao. Red China and Black Revolution", *Souls: a Journal of Black History, Politics and Culture*, Fall 1999, pp.6-41. See also, Bill V. Mullen, "Marx, Du Bois, and the Black Underclass: RAM's World Black Revolution", *Viewpoint Magazine*, February 1, 2018 <https://viewpointmag.com/2018/02/01/marx-du-bois-black-underclass-rams-world-black-revolution/> [accessed 18-8-2022]

this article is not a contribution to the academic debate on capitalism and slavery, or the Marxist literature on the modes of labour extraction through forms of domination, but a reflection on the political use of the rhetoric of slavery that the Black Radicals deployed during their organisational work.

In the late 1960s, a new Black Power vernacular was available to Black radicals in the car factories to critique racial and class relations. This critique drew, by analogy, on a subversive reading of race relations in the plantation as suggested by Black nationalists such as Malcolm X. As we will see, this drew also on an intra-racial critique of the plantation, and by extension, the plant, that presented moderate Blacks as unreliable “Uncle Toms” who courted the white power structure. The critique also intersected with a novel historiography that had brought to the fore the violence of the slave system, the salience of the plantation as a total institution, and the agency of slaves, drawing comparisons with the factory regime. Juxtaposing the factory and the plantation, or simply identifying the one with the other, provided, militants with a powerful “rhetoric of confrontation” to mobilise fellow workers in opposition to the established unionism of the UAW that bowed to the needs of the car manufacturers and undermined workers political agency.³

The context

There is now a rich historiography about the wave of protest at the intersection of labour militancy, revolutionary Marxism and Black nationalism that hit the factories in Detroit in

³ Robert Scott and Donald K. Smith. "The rhetoric of confrontation." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 55.1 (1969), pp. 1-8.

the period under consideration.⁴ A new generation of Black radicals started to organize on the fringes of the civil rights movement in 1963; it comprised students at Wayne State University and young auto workers such as General G. Baker, Luke Tripp, John Watson, Mike Hamlin, John Williams, Charles Simmons and Gwen Kemp. Some of them formed UHURU, a Black Power militant group that confronted the city's liberal institutions and criticized the mainstream civil rights movement. Having folded that initiative, this group expanded and supported the publication of the *Inner City Voice*, where they started to adopt the vocabulary of Marxism alongside the one of Black nationalism. The tragic urban unrest of 1967, which Black militants dubbed 'rebellion' to emphasise its political import, further polarized the politics of race in Detroit as it pitted against each other competing narratives of what spurred the disturbances that left 43 people dead, thousands wounded and millions of dollars in damage.⁵ In its aftermath, the city factories increased the recruitment of Black workers on the assembly line. The

⁴ James A. Geschwender, *Class, Race, and Worker Insurgency: The League of Revolutionary Black Workers*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977; Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1998; Steven Jefferys, *Management and Managed: Fifty Years of Crisis at Chrysler*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986; Heather Ann Thompson, *Whose Detroit?: Politics, labour, and race in a modern American city*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004; Kieran Taylor, "American Petrograd: Detroit and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers," in *Rebel Rank and File: Labour Militancy and Revolt from Below during the Long 1970s*, ed. Aaron Brenner, Robert Brenner, and Cal Winslow, New York: Verso, 2010: 311–333; David M. Lewis-Colman, *Race Against Liberalism: Black Workers and the UAW in Detroit*. Vol. 308. University of Illinois Press, 2008. Walda Katz-Fishman, and Jerome Scott, "Race, Class, and Revolution in the Twenty-First Century: Lessons from the League of Revolutionary Black Workers." in *The Oxford Handbook of Karl Marx*, edited by Matt Vidal, Tony Smith, Tomás Rotta, and Paul Prew. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019; and, in transnational perspective: Nicola Pizzolato, *Challenging global capitalism: Labour migration, radical struggle, and urban change in Detroit and Turin*, New York, Palgrave, 2013; Owen McDonald, "Revolutionary TransNationalism: The Revolutionary Action Movement, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, and the Black Power Movement in the United States and Brazil, 1961-1972", MA Thesis, University of Kansas, 2019.

⁵ Sidney Fine, *Violence in the Model City: The Cavanagh Administration, Race Relations, and the Detroit Race Riot of 1967*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989. Hubert G Locke, *The Detroit riot of 1967*, Wayne State University Press, 2017. Joel Stone, *Detroit 1967: Origins, Impacts, Legacies*. Wayne State University Press, 2017; Duncan Tarr, "Crossed Wires in the Motor City: A Genealogy and Analysis of the 1967 Riots and the 1968 Strike Wave in Detroit." *New Global Studies* 14.2 (2020), pp. 183-192.

effects of this wider political context, exemplified by the 1967 uprising, and labour discontent within the car factories converged in the Spring and Summer of 1968, when Black workers shut down Chrysler Dodge Main, the flagship company plant in the Motor City. The group initially called themselves DRUM (Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement).⁶ They complained against the relentless pace of work and the discrimination of Black workers at the point of production, usually abetted by union practices and seemingly color-blind regulations. In effect, they put forward a model of revolutionary unionism that, contrary to the UAW's, did not eschew from challenging the politics of production inside the factory. The protest quickly spread to other Detroit automotive plants, which employed sizable numbers of Black workers, such as Chrysler Jefferson, Chrysler Mack Avenue, Ford River Rouge, and beyond, to other types of workplaces. The different revolutionary groups in the plant coalesced in 1969 in the League of the Revolutionary Black Workers (LRBW). The protest created volatile labour relations on the shop floor on a daily basis and made the Black nationalists a disruptive element in the relationship between the companies and the UAW. This had rippled effects on the citywide electoral politics, which in a city like Detroit impinged so much on the balance of power within the auto industry.⁷

Industrial relations at Chrysler were particularly tense. Among the so-called Big Three (the others being General Motors and Ford), Chrysler had fallen behind in the race towards automation and technological innovation. Its aging Detroit plants exemplified

⁶ Martin Glaberman, "The Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement, *Survey: Detroit*, No.36, April/May 1969, pp. 8-9.

⁷ See Heather Ann Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, *cit.*, pp. 103-158.

the problem. During the 1950s and 1960s, as Thomas Sugrue has illustrated, car companies established new plants, away from industrial centres such as Detroit, in suburban and rural areas.⁸ Greenfield locations offered advantages in terms of workers quiescence to management, but relocation meant also building efficient, single-storey plants where the automatic handling of components would be seamless, increasing productivity. This kind of large factories were inconvenient to build in urban areas, where space was limited and real estate expensive. For a comparison, in 1911 Dodge Main was built on 30 acres, in the 1970s the typical automobile plant in the 1970s was built on some 400 acres.⁹

As a result, in the 1960s, Dodge Main, once the company flagship, was downsized to become mainly an assembly plant. It was located in Hamtramck, an independent municipality surrounded by Detroit and north of the so-called Poletown, a neighbourhood at the centre of a changing racial demographics where many of the white ethnic workers had begun to relocate together with the factory jobs and where African-Americans had easily access to.¹⁰ While Black workers did work in the automobile plants before, the demographic transition accelerated in the factories after the uprising of 1967, when white Detroiters moved to the suburbs at more rapid speed.

⁸ Thomas J. Sugrue, *The origins of the urban crisis: Race and inequality in postwar Detroit*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014.

⁹ "Inefficiencies at the plant", <http://www.dodgemotorcar.com/factories/hamtramck/inefficiencies.php> [last accessed 22/4/2020]

¹⁰ James M., Rubenstein, *The changing US auto industry: A geographical analysis*. London: Routledge, 2002, pp. 202-203. Poletown itself was later at the centre of a controversial industrial redevelopment when 1400 homes were cleared to make room to a new General Motors plant see John J. Bukowczyk, "The Decline and Fall of a Detroit Neighborhood: Poletown vs. GM and the City of Detroit." *Wash. & Lee L. Rev.* 41 (1984): 49-76; Jeanie Wylie, *Poletown: Community Betrayed*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989.

Geographers have since identified racism in its economic, social and political aspects as a structural factor of the uneven development of Detroit in comparison to the surrounding suburbs, however the whites who “flew” out of town were also following factory jobs in suburban plants that were expanding in size and number.¹¹ The uprising also suggested that young, unemployed African Americans posed a political problem to deal with and so Blacks were increasingly offered those jobs on the assembly line in a period of industry expansion. Other Detroit Chrysler plants that became hotbeds of radicalism, such as the Eldon Avenue Gear and Axle plant, and Jefferson Avenue, suffered a similar fate of being ‘left behind’ from the cutting-edge automotive engineering trends of the day. Thus, when the Black radicals trumpeted that they were now strategically placed at the core of the industrial process, which empowered them to disrupt it, they were both right and wrong. They were right because a few hundred Black workers could stop a whole plant, and, in the case of the Chrysler Gear and Axle plant (the only one producing such components for the manufacturer), they could hurt the company nationwide by doing so. But, in retrospect, they were also terribly wrong because in fact, as scholars have now established, they were left in facilities that the industry had already somehow consigned to its past, while focusing its investments and plans of growth in suburban and rural areas where Black workers were rare.¹²

¹¹ Joe T. Darden et al, *Race and Uneven Development*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987. See also Kevin Boyle, "The ruins of Detroit: Exploring the urban crisis in the motor city." *The Michigan Historical Review* (2001), pp. 109-127 for a reminder the focus on political polarization might overshadow the changes in the auto industry (pp. 120-121).

¹² Richard D Bingham and K. K. Sunmonu, "The restructuring of the automobile industry in the USA." *Environment and Planning A* 24.6 (1992), pp 833-852. The point here is not to criticise the militants for their failure to predict the future, but to show how their actions were embedded in a wider process of capital accumulation and restructuring.

While failing in its decentralization strategy, Chrysler's CEO Lynn Townsend made a choice that would eventually bring Chrysler on the brink of bankruptcy. A smaller fish than Ford or GM, Chrysler had always focused on a few segments of the car market, especially on large models. Townsend decided instead to mimic his competitors' wide range of models and options for each model. In the mid-1960s Chrysler was offering some 160 different styles, but with a manufacturing base much smaller than his competitors. For a plant like Dodge Main, this meant quicker changes of styles on the assembly line, saving in production time and in workers' safety standards what could not be saved in economies of scale.¹³

Black radicals displayed a sophisticated analytical understanding of the way racial capitalism worked when they coined the term "n*****mation" to describe, in an ironic way, the effects of these strategic managerial choices on their working lives. "What it means—explained LRBW leader Mike Hamlin—is that they will speed up on a particular job. If a guy can't make it or refuses to work at that pace: fire him. They will bring a new guy off the street."¹⁴ The diversion of technological investments to the new suburban plants left the Detroit Chrysler plants with the need to keep up with the rest of the industry in terms of production, but with no means to increase productivity apart from augmenting sheer physical effort. Speed up of the line and neglect of health and safety conditions were the two ways in which plant managers achieved that. "To automate these plants to produce at that level would be too costly for them," commented Hamlin –

¹³ Steve Jefferys, *Management and the managed. Fifty years of crisis at Chrysler*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 152.

¹⁴ Interview with Mike Hamlin, *Leviathan*, n. 2, 1970, p. 35.

though, as we have seen, it was also their location that consigned them to lack of investment. The word “n*****mation” suggested therefore that, in the absence of investment in automation at the par with competitors, it was African-Americans, frequently called with the N word by their racist plant supervisors, who were required to remedy, by increasing productivity, the company’s previous shortfall of profits and the general cutbacks in capital investment.¹⁵ By deploying this strategy, managers knew that they could count on the complicity of a union unlikely to go on strike for the grievances that bore more heavily on its Black membership. Through these methods, in 1968 Chrysler gained a record share in the US car market – perhaps not a coincidence that in the same year industrial relations broke down.¹⁶ These conditions resonated with the experience of Black workers elsewhere in the U.S., most notably those who organised under the name of United Black Brothers in a Ford plant in Mahwah, NJ, in the same period. The parallel with the predicament of Chrysler workers was evident for the organisers and the two groups started a dialogue on how to tackle common problems.¹⁷ A sign of reciprocal influence is visible in *The Black Voice*, the publication from the UBB (renamed United Black Workers, that address the workers of the “Ford

¹⁵ Charles K. Hyde. *Riding the Roller Coaster: A History of the Chrysler Corporation*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003., p. 211-219. See also R. M., Langworth, and J. P. Nortbye. *The Complete History of Chrysler Corporation 1924–1985*. New York: Beekman House, 1985.

¹⁶ Chrysler Corporation Annual Report--1968 (January), America’s Corporate Foundation, p.9. Quoted in Elizabeth Kai Hinton, ‘The Black Bolsheviks. Detroit Revolutionary Union Movement and Shop Floor Organizing’ in *The New Black History. Revisiting the Second Reconstruction*. New York: Palgrave, 201, pp. 211-228.

¹⁷ Wilbur Haddock, “Black Workers Lead the Way,” *The Black Scholar* Vol. 5, No. 3, (November 1973), pp. 43-48; “Wilbur Haddock on the United Black Brothers”, *Souls: a Journal of Black History, Politics and Culture*, Spring 2000, pp.27-33.

Mahwah plantation”.¹⁸ Rather than agitating for merely a local issue, the LRBW’s programme of revolutionary unionism had potentially a national reach.

Dodge Main was typical among Detroit Chrysler plants in that, even though African Americans constituted a majority of blue-collar workers, they were segregated, in specific departments (body assembly line, paint booth, bake oven), specific tasks (low skilled) and often specific shifts (most notably the nocturnal ‘graveyard’ shift). On the contrary, they were rarely employed in finishing units that were less labour intensive. In the vernacular shorthand, they were reserved for the “three Hs”, “Hot, Hard and Heavy”. This division of labour exemplified the racist outlook of both company managers, who recruited on the assumption that Blacks had the lowest skills and abilities, as well as of union representatives, who rarely challenged and, in fact, tacitly endorsed discriminatory managerial policies.¹⁹

In the 1960s, the dangerous and demanding conditions in the departments where Black workers toiled pitted them against the UAW local leadership (just as represented in the fictionalized account of *Blue Collar*). The allegedly liberal auto workers union had enthusiastically supported the Civil Rights Movement and Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society at national level, but, since the post-war defeat of its internal left wing, showed little interest in changing the shop floor racial politics in its Detroit plants, both because it

¹⁸ *The Black Voice. Published by the United Black Workers, Ford Mahwah Plantation*” available at http://freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC32_scans/32.Various.BLM.TheBlackVoice.vol.5.2.pdf [last accessed 19-8-2022]

¹⁹ Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis, cit.*, pp. 91-123.

would have involved challenging managerial claims on the control of production and because its membership also comprised conservative white workers who were sensitive about Black workers' advancement in the workplace. This irony had a long genealogy. In fact, already in the 1950s, surveys of union members' attitudes in Detroit had revealed how local union leadership often violated the allegedly racial progressivist policy of the UAW headquarters creating, in the words of one observer, rather "explosive" situations.²⁰ Historian Kevin Boyle summed up the situation when he wrote that, "the UAW International had neither the power nor the inclination to close the gap between the union's promise and its performance [on race relations]".²¹

In the 1960s, white "ethnic" workers usually controlled the leadership positions in local branches where Black rank and files were, increasingly, the majority of constituents. This was the case for instance at UAW Local #3, which comprised Chrysler Dodge Main. UAW shop stewards and union officials seemed not to understand, or to care, about the tense hierarchical relationships between white foremen and Black production workers, which echoed the ones between the police department and the Black community that had triggered the uprising in the city.²² The racist harassment of foremen and the discrimination in the allocation of jobs were Black protesters' most prominent sources of grievance; in the late 1960s they instigated a short-lived

²⁰ Herbert Hill to Edward M. Turner, Sep. 10, 1952, United Auto Workers, Including Cooperation with the NAACP and Civil Rights Legislation, Papers of the NAACP, Part 13: NAACP and Labour, Series A: Subject Files on Employment and Labour Discrimination, 1940-1955, ProQuest History Vault, 21 quoted in ' "We are Americans Too" Interracial Relations in Detroit's Postwar Industry', p. 10; Arthur Kornhauser, *Detroit as the People See It: A Survey of Attitudes in an Industrial City* (Detroit, 1952), p. 63, as quoted in Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, cit., p. 19; Lewis-Colman, *Race Against Liberalism*, p. 59.

²¹ Kevin Boyle, "'There are no Union Sorrows that the Union Can't Heal": The Struggle for Racial Equality in the United Automobile Workers, 1940-1960." *Labor History* 36.1 (1995): 5-23, p. 9.

²² Detailed accounts of the conflictual relations between the UAW and its Black membership in Detroit are provided by Jefferys, *Management and Managed*, cit.; Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, cit. pp. 58-70; Lewis-Colman, *Race Against Liberalism: Black Workers and the UAW in Detroit*, cit.

movement of wholesale rejection of the UAW in order to substitute it with an alternative model of trade unionism. As we shall see, by that time, Black militants came to see the UAW, progressive by the rather conservative standards of American organized labour, as an accomplice to a system of racial exploitation which they compared to an ante-bellum plantation.

From the plantation to the plant

In the film *Finally got the news* (1970), commissioned by the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and used as propaganda and educational material in the US and abroad, the story of Black workers' upsurge in Detroit is prefaced by a fast-paced montage of images of slaves, interjected with images on workers on the line. The point of the parallel montage is then verbally elucidated when member John Watson, sporting a turtleneck and a cigarette in his hand, explains to the camera that then as in the times of slavery and, "throughout the history of America, Black People have been in the same position".²³ But how credible, to their audience, could the radicals be when they claimed that Black factory workers resembled slaves?

In the publications of the LRBW, such as the plant newsletters of DRUM or ELRUM (pertaining to either the "Dodge" or "Eldon" plant) references to slavery were clearly metaphorical when deployed in a way that usually culminated in a call to action and that

²³ Stuart Bird, Peter Gessner, and Rene Lichtman. "Finally got the news." *Movie. Produced in association with the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. Detroit: Black Star Productions*(1970) available on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gw2Wr-odBJg&t=126s> [last visited 24/8/2019] See also, Chris Robé, "Detroit Rising: The League of Revolutionary Black Workers, Newsreel, and the Making of *Finally Got the News*", *Film History: An International Journal*, Vol. 28, No. 24, 2016, pp. 125-158.

purportedly aimed at creating what Jonathan Flatley has called “a revolutionary counter-mood”.²⁴ “You ain’t nothing but a slave. You do everything the pig tells you to do. The pig controls your whole life and you can’t say a thing about it”²⁵ or “We work the hardest, dirtiest, least paying jobs; we work under the most deplorable conditions; we don’t get any promotions; we don’t get full, sincere, honest, impartial union representation we are entitled to. [...] What it is this but slavery? Stop and think”²⁶. Such phrases peppered the whole propaganda literature of the Black radical groups in the factories, pointing to a strategy that aimed at creating, for the Black worker, an emotional link between factory work and slave labour, rather than evidencing the validity of the claim. Even though expressed in a Black vernacular that cast workers versus “pigs” and “honkeys”, such figurative use of the word had a long pedigree in American history, echoing, perhaps inadvertently, nineteenth century labour complaints of “wage slavery” of *white* factory workers. According to this notion, all wage workers, regardless of skills, were in a condition akin to slavery, as they could not enjoy the fruits of their own labour.²⁷

Like its earlier incarnation, the word slavery, in the context of the capitalist factory, did not mean coerced recruitment, shackles and chains or the impossibility to exit the working relationship. It stretched the conventional meaning of the word to include

²⁴ Jonathan Flatley, “How a Revolutionary Counter-Mood is made”, *New Literary History*, Vol. 43, n, 3, (2012), pp. 503-525.

²⁵ John F. Kennedy Institute, *The Black Power Movement: The League of Revolutionary Black Workers, 1965-1976*, Microfilm 4416, *Black Reel 1*, p. 00151.

²⁶ John F. Kennedy Institute, *The Black Power Movement*, cit. Microfilm 4416, p. 00018.

²⁷ Marcus Cunliffe, *Chattel slavery and wage slavery: The Anglo-American context, 1830-1860*. Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 1979. Helga Kristin Hallgrimsdottir, and Cecilia Benoit. "From wage slaves to wage workers: Cultural opportunity structures and the evolution of the wage demands of the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor, 1880–1900." *Social Forces* 85.3 (2007): 1393-1411.

psychological coercion and lack of other viable alternatives to earn a living. Factory work was “slavery” because it pushed production workers in a position of dependency comparable to that of slaves – an idea that harked back to Marx’s early manuscripts and the claim that “the relation of wage labour to capital [is] the slavery of the worker, the domination of the capitalist”. It was illusory to think that workers were being exploited in the factories on their own free will.²⁸ If the Black worker did not submit to the unrelenting pace of work, claimed the Detroit militants, echoing nineteenth century labour advocates, “he might find himself unemployed again or he may even wind up in prison since he is without means of support. The result of such a condition is [...] that the labour scene has come back full cycle: we are back to the plantation system”.²⁹ LRBW militants were therefore, perhaps unwittingly, building their arguments on a long tradition that considered wage labour, and in particular factory labour, opposite to republican liberty.³⁰

What gave this figurative use of slavery particular salience in the context of the militant propaganda in 1960s Detroit was that it purportedly described the condition of Black workers supervised by white foreman in a highly exploitative context. “The same man that has brutalized Blacks in the 18th and 19th centuries has taken the chains from Black legs and put them in the minds of our people”.³¹ In the nineteenth century, even

²⁸ Quoted in Bruno Leipold, “Chains and Invisible Threads: Liberty and Domination in Marx’s Account of Wage-Slavery” in ed. Annelien de Dijn and Hannah Dawson *Rethinking Liberty before Liberalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2022)

²⁹ “Drum Spokesmen Claim to Lead all Black Labor”, John F. Kennedy Institute, Microfilm 4416, cit., p. 00768

³⁰ Alex Gourevitch, *From slavery to the cooperative commonwealth: labor and republican liberty in the nineteenth century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

³¹ “UPRUM Newsletter”, Volume I, n. 8, John F. Kennedy Institute, Microfilm 4416, cit. *Black*, p. 000787.

after Emancipation, the word “slavery” continued to have a racialised meaning.³² It continued to do so in the twentieth century. “Slavery” bridged the exploitation in the plantation to the toiling on the shop floor, and it linked the degradation of white supremacy to the racial discrimination and the quasi-segregation of tasks, shifts and departments in the automobile industry. One could trace back an expansive use of the metaphor of the plantation to characterize contemporary Black life to the writings of African-American Communists in the 1940s. It was Harry Haywood who in his 1948 classic, *The Negro Liberation*, had argued that, “the corroding effect of the plantation are manifested not only in the South”, but in the North as well. As Black Americans migrated northward, they were followed by the “shadow of the plantation”, a pattern of racial exploitation that had its roots in slavery, but that adapted to new contexts, from New York’s Harlem to Chicago’s South Side.³³

The use of the rhetoric of slavery was most effective when the militants went beyond the mere symbolic resonance to focus on the political economy. In this way, they articulated their own understanding of racial capitalism on the shop floor. “Black People were originally brought to America as slaves,” explained a training booklet for new members of the LRBW. [...] “Since the demise of chattel slavery, the Black population has shifted from the position of the primary source of capital formation and industry builders as an agrarian proletariat, to a primary source of capital formation as the most exploited

³² David R., Roediger, *The wages of whiteness: Race and the making of the American working class*. Verso, 1999, pp. 71-72.

³³ Harry Haywood, *The Negro Liberation*. New York: International Publishers, 1948, p. 70.

section of American industrial proletariat”.³⁴ The relevance of the slave origins of Black labour to the modern labour struggles was confirmed by its prominent presence in the programme of political education envisaged for the League cadre, in which the first part of the syllabus was dedicated to topics such as “Slavocracy”, “Slave Revolts” or “The abolishing of Slavery as a system”.³⁵

In a rare effort to theorize a systematic comparison for mobilization purposes, LRBW’s leader Luke Tripp, drew up a table of similarities and differences between the cotton plantation and the “automobile *plantation*”. He divided it into an “individual” and “systemic” level, attempting to bridge the gap between the personal experience of the worker and the structural functioning of the institution. This was conceptualized in 1969 and later reprinted in a paper on Detroit radicalism.

INDIVIDUAL LEVEL		
Social aspect	Black Slave	Black worker
Labor rights	Legally none	Freedom to refuse to work but not right to work
Market Value	Commodity	Labor power
Right to organize	None	Limited
Remuneration	None	Underpaid
Autonomy	None	Little

SYSTEM LEVEL

³⁴ “The General Policy Statement and Labor Program of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers”, John F. Kennedy Institute, *The Black Power Movement*, cit., Microfilm 4416, p. 000111.

³⁵ “Suggested form for cadre education”, John F. Kennedy Institute, *The Black Power Movement*, cit., Microfilm 4416, p. 000204.

Social aspect	Plantation	Industrial Plant
Supervision	Close/Oppressive	Close/Oppressive
Political	Totalitarian	Authoritarian
Work	Monotonous/Hard	Monotonous/Strenuous
Racial	White Dominance	White Dominance

Tripp’s systematic comparison showed that the factory and the plantation were arguably similar at a systemic level, while recognizing significant differences between the slave and the Black worker. This partly contradicted the group’s radical rhetoric that argued for a compelling identification between the worker and the slave at an individual level. The table also glossed over the observation that in one case coercion had a legal origin, in the other it was economic in origin—a substantial difference. The table did not clarify how radicals would distinguish “totalitarian” vs “authoritarian” power structure, or why the “close/oppressive” supervision of both slavery and factory work could be claimed as being identical. However, the table hinted at the extensive and engaged discussion among the militants that would have informed its content. Tripp’s table also betrayed the Marxist ideas about the predicament of workers in capitalism on which the LRBW drew. This resonated with the position of older American communists such a Walter Wilson, who purported that all waged industrial workers were forced labourers.³⁶ Black workers could refuse to work in one particular factory but they could not refuse to work for the (white) capitalists, so they would encounter similar oppressive conditions elsewhere. In its treatment of slaves (working in a “totalitarian” plantation regime), the table suggested

³⁶ Walter Wilson, *Forced Labour in the United States*, New York, International Publishers, 1933.

that slaves were devoid of autonomy— a statement in uneasy contradiction with the group’s intent to inject the spirit of slave rebellion and resistance on the shop floor (as we will see below).

Was there any validity to point that plantation work and factory waged work had analogous political effect on the Black worker? Two arguments could support this point.³⁷ First, the plantation experimented with a system of division of tasks and regimentation of labour time that has strong links with the practice and theory of industrial management – the plantation realised the *real subsumption of labour* through the transformation of the labour process before Taylor’s scientific management.³⁸ Secondly, it was in the plantation that the principles of race management had first been systematically applied, whereby the lighter skinned African Americans were more likely to be assigned to off-plantation tasks, for instance in domestic service, than African Americans with a darker hue. Principles of race management continued to be applied in dispensing jobs and roles on the industrial production floor, with African-Americans confined in heavy duty jobs and then physically tasking roles on the assembly line.³⁹ In defining supervision as “oppressive” in both cases, one could read an argument about the similar relations of production that both capitalism and slavery produce (which have

³⁷ David Eltis, *Economic Growth and the Ending of the Transatlantic Slave Trade*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 183. See also, Cameron Rowland, *3 & 4 Will. IV c. 73*, exhibition catalogue, London, ICA, 2020.

³⁸ For an analysis of this claim in the literature see Marcel Van der Linden, "Re-constructing the origins of modern labour management." *Labor History* 51.4 (2010): 509-522. It is to be noted how also in the Twentieth century large scale agricultural production was likened to industrial production see Carey McWilliams, *Factories in the Field. The Story of Migration Farm Labor in California*, Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1939.

³⁹ David R. Roediger and Elizabeth D. Esch, *The production of difference: Race and the management of labor in US history*. Oxford University Press, 2012.

led anthropologist David Graeber to provocatively state that capitalism is only a transformation of slavery).⁴⁰

However incongruous in its comparative analysis, the table nevertheless brought home the idea that, notwithstanding the formal freedom, the factory felt like a plantation because of the close managerial supervision, the pace of work and the racial hierarchy. In this view, the factory floor was the ideal place for the Black man (rarely this literature addressed women) to observe the continuity with the plantation. "In times of slavery you weren't allowed to roam from one slave owner to the another, now you are free to roam from [a] factory (plantation) to another. But the conditions are basically the same. You still have a wild-ass honkey cracking a whip over your head, don't you? You still work in the filthy parts of the plants. You are given orders to do this or that."⁴¹

The conceptualization of the factory as plantation placed a Marxist reading of African-American history into a Black nationalist mould. LRBW leader John Watson, for instance, explained that, in the same way in which slaves picking cotton had provided enormous capital then invested in industrialization, the car manufacturers achieved enormous profits due to the exploitation of Black workers.⁴² This echoed two debates about capitalism and slavery in the Marxist tradition that were interlinked, but also distinct. One sprung from Eric William's account, in *Capitalism and Slavery*, about the

David Graeber, "Turning modes of production inside out: Or, why capitalism is a transformation of slavery." *Critique of Anthropology* 26.1 (2006), pp 61-85.

⁴¹ "ELRUM Newsletter", Vol. 1, n. 1, John F. Kennedy Institute, Microfilm 4416, cit., p. 00178.

⁴² 'To the point of production. An interview with John Watson of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers', *cit.* p. 6.

link between the value produced by slave labour in the Caribbean plantations and the capitalist development of Britain.⁴³ The other revolved around the question of whether slavery, as a mode of production, was capitalistic, which included the contribution of Black Marxists such as CLR James and WEB DuBois, but also of Eugene Genovese and, later, criticizing the latter, Fogel and Engerman, and the ensuing debate on the “cliometrics” view of slavery.⁴⁴ Both debates are important to position the Black radicals’ claims, which connected, through analogy as well as a historical genealogy, slaves to the Black workers’ predicament in the factory. One claim, à la Williams, was the analogy that just as British capitalism had developed on the backs of slaves toiling on the sugar plantations, American corporate capitalism, exemplified by the auto industry, had flourished through the exploitation of Black workers, facilitated by the racist ideologies that permeated the relations of production. The other claim strongly, if implicitly, criticised Genovese’s characterization of slavery as a “pre-capitalist” mode of production and, drawing on James and DuBois, focused on the significance of slavery to understand what capitalism is and therefore of slave resistance and rebellion as precursors of the Black radical mobilization of their time: just as slave labour and factory labour were symbolically entangled, Black liberation and the struggle against capitalism too were inextricably linked.⁴⁵

The new slavery historiography

⁴³ Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1945.

⁴⁴ W. E. B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1935); C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins* (New York: Dial, 1938); Fogel, Robert William. *The Slavery Debates, 1952-1990: A Retrospective*. LSU Press, 2003. It also resonated with the attempt, in the 1970s, of Sidney Mintz to break down the dichotomy between slave and proletarian: each of them was a bit of the other.

⁴⁵ See here the classic account of Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism, revised and updated third edition: The making of the Black radical tradition*. UNC press Books, 2020.

At the turn of the 1970s, the Detroit radicals' interpretation of slavery is to be understood within the context a new historiography of slavery had recently put forward.

Simultaneously to the political upheaval of the African-American freedom struggle, a revolution had occurred in African-American history that had transformed the time-honoured conception of slavery as a marginal phenomenon to American history with slaves as its content subjects. After the mid-1950s, Ulrich Phillips' view of slavery as an institution largely benevolent and unprofitable, upheld by non-capitalist values, was rebutted time and again through scholarly work that shed light on different facets of the institution, and which then contributed to the conception of slavery that radicals put forward to interpret the factory as a site of coercion.⁴⁶ Writing in 1956, as concerns over race relations were dramatized by the events of the Montgomery bus boycott, Kenneth Stampf described the "peculiar institution" as harsh and unforgiving, founded on the exploitation and mistreatment of slaves, causing the latter to burst in occasional acts of resistance, but his ethnocentric assertion that "innately, Negroes are after all, only white men in Black skins" did not make him popular with Black power activists.⁴⁷ A few years later, the controversial argument put forward by Stanley Elkins that plantation slavery was a total institution that created submissive and docile "Sambo" personalities sent historians in a flurry of research activities to prove that slaves were less passive than Elkins posited.⁴⁸ Black nationalists vehemently, if implicitly, rejected Elkins thesis on the crushing effects on the slave's personality at the same time as they incorporated in their

⁴⁶ For an overview of such historiography, John David, Smith, *An Old Creed for the New South: Proslavery Ideology and Historiography, 1865-1918*. SIU Press, 2008.

⁴⁷ Kenneth Stampf, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South*. New York: Knopf, 1956, p. vii.

⁴⁸ Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A problem in American institutional and intellectual life*. University of Chicago Press, [1959] 2013; David Brion, Davis, "Slavery and the post-World War II historians." *Daedalus* (1974), pp. 1-16.

view the image of the plantation as one of ruthless racial economic exploitation, which they thought applied also to Detroit factories. Overall, while these historians set the scene for a historiography that would revise old paradigms, Black radicals staked their position primarily in opposition to it.

When, in the course of the 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement became more assertive, historians moved away from considering what slavery had done to slaves to how slaves responded to slavery. This resulted in a new narrative, first historiographical, then political, and eventually colouring popular culture with the book and TV series *Roots* (1976, 1977), which depicted slave resilience. Black Power drew also on the timely republication in 1963 of Herbert Aptheker's work on slave rebellions, which provided an overblown image of slaves as on the brink of incessant revolt.⁴⁹ Between the late 1960s and the mid-1970s Black historians such as John Blassingame, Vincent Harding, Nathan I. Huggins, Leslie H. Owens, Albert Raboteau, and Sterling Stuckey were working on demonstrating how Black people developed a viable, independent culture in front of adversity.⁵⁰ This came on the back of an increased number of Black scholars training in history, most of whom wrote their dissertations in African or Black American history, later turned into books. As Meier and Rudwick noted, "the turn of the decade into the 1970s was an exhilarating time for those undertaking their first work in the

⁴⁹ Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*. New York, Columbia University Press, 1963.

⁵⁰ John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1972; Vincent Harding, "Religion and Resistance Among Antebellum Negroes, 1800-1860," in August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, eds., *The Making of Black America: Essays in Negro Life and History*, New York: Atheneum, 1969, pp. 179-200; Leslie H. Owens, *This Species of Property: Slave Life & Culture in the Old South*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1976; Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1978; Sterling Stuckey, "Through the Prism of Folklore: The Black Ethos in Slavery," *The Massachusetts Review* 9:3 (Summer, 1968), pp. 417-37.

field”.⁵¹ It was also a period of heated confrontations between Black students, intellectuals and activists and an historical profession that debated to what extent should the political agenda of Black nationalism influence their interpretative frameworks.⁵² By the late 1977, both Nathan I. Huggins’s *Black Odyssey: The Afro-American Ordeal in Slavery* and Lawrence Levine’s *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* summarized the spirit of the times. The first by portraying an oppressed group that had resisted to their predicament through autonomous culture, spirituals, oral traditions and folk tales that transmitted and celebrated tactics of survival in a white supremacist order; the second by emphasizing the emergence of the homogenous, race-conscious, resilient culture of African-Americans out of the diverse African origins of slave themselves.⁵³ Such historiography, part of it flourishing after the events we are describing, established that African-Americans had undergone the “ordeal” of slavery without accepting it as a system, and had emerged with their own distinct collective consciousness.

Were the radicals reading this new historiography? Probably not directly. Ironically for a city half populated by Blacks, Detroit was characterized by a the near-absence of books on African-American culture, history and politics, so much so that the LRBW set up its

⁵¹ August Meier and Elliott M. Rudwick, *Black History and the Historical Profession 1915-1980*, Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1986, p. 179.

⁵² John McMillian, "History Makes Its Demands": Identity politics, slavery scholarship and the narrative of Robert Starobin." *Rethinking History* 6.2 (2002), pp. 151-174; Peter Kolchin, "Reevaluating the Antebellum Slave Community: A Comparative Perspective." *The Journal of American History* 70.3 (1983), pp. 579-601.

⁵³ Nathan I. Huggins, *Black Odyssey: The Afro-American Ordeal in Slavery*, New York, Vintage Books, 1977; Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1977.

own Black Star bookstore to cater for this need.⁵⁴ (In this, it reflected a wider trend in the establishment of Black-owned bookstores throughout cities with the highest density of Black population).⁵⁵ The reading lists of the educational programme of the League cited books such as John Hopes Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*, Lerone Bennett's *Before the Mayflower*, WEB Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction* or CLR James' *Black Jacobins*, which reclaimed Black people's agency in their own liberation, but studies published strictly for an academic audience were not mentioned.⁵⁶ Radicals read also Oliver Crownell Cox's *Caste, Class and Race* (1948), which was republished in an abridged version in 1959 by the leftist *Monthly Review Press*, and circulated in socialist circles, which many Black radicals attended in the early 1960s.⁵⁷ Cox dismissed the prevalent idea of a comparison between race and caste, which implied a timeless notion of racial stratification, and insisted that racism had emerged from the development of capitalist class relations when slaves were brought to the new world to work the land.⁵⁸

Black militants were conversant with Marxist radicals' interpretations of those studies that appeared in publications of the left such as *Speak Out* and, later, *Radical America*, where they could read, among others, the work of radical political economist Hal

⁵⁴ Allen Jr, Ernest. "The League of Revolutionary Black Workers: An Assessment." *Workers' Struggles, Past and Present: A "Radical America" Reader* (1983), pp. 288-292.

⁵⁵ See Chapter 2 in Joshua C Davis, *From Head Shops to Whole Foods: The Rise and Fall of Activist Entrepreneurs*. Columbia University Press, 2017.

⁵⁶ "Book list. Black Liberation Works", John F. Kennedy Institute, Microfilm 4416, *The Black Power Movement: The League of Revolutionary Black Workers, 1965-1976*, Reel 1, p.000207.

⁵⁷ Oliver Cromwell Cox, *Caste, class, & race: A study in social dynamics*. New York: Doubleday, 1948.

⁵⁸ Adolph Reed Jr, "Race and class in the work of Oliver Cromwell Cox." *Monthly Review*, 52.9 (2001), pp. 23-23.

Baron.⁵⁹ *Speak Out* was the publication of the radical group *Facing Reality* based in Detroit – the miniscule remnant of a Marxist dissent group which originally included, among others, CLR James, Raya Duneyaskaya (who had left to form a splinter group), James and Grace Lee Boggs and Martin Glaberman. They advocated workers’ autonomy from trade unions and celebrated the revolutionary potential of their “self-activity”, spontaneous forms of protest on the shop floor.⁶⁰ By the time the Black radical mobilization started in Detroit, *Facing Reality* was too small to have any organising impact, but its members did hail the “direct rank-and-file activity”, as Glaberman reported, which they had contributed to bring about through their radicalising influence.⁶¹ The more known *Radical America* was initially associated with the Students for Democracy Society (SDS) and had a major focus on Black liberation and working-class autonomy.⁶² Initially set up by Paul Buhle (who will go on to write a biography of CLR James) in Wisconsin, it started to be printed in Detroit from 1970 by Fredy Perlman, a former member of *Facing Reality*. Its “Detroit Printing Co-Op” printed also materials related to the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and its publishing house “Black Star”.⁶³

⁵⁹ Harold Baron, “The demand for Black Labor: Historical Notes on the Political Economy of Racism”, *Radical America*, 5(2), 1971, pp.1-46.

⁶⁰ Kent, Worcester, *CLR James: a political biography*. Suny Press, 1995. Nicola, Pizzolato, “Transnational radicals: Labour dissent and political activism in Detroit and Turin (1950–1970).” *International Review of Social History* 56.1 (2011), pp. 1-30.

⁶¹ Martin Glaberman, “Dodged Revolutionary Union Movement”, *International Socialism* (1st series), No.36, April/May 1969, pp.8-9. See also Georgakas, Surkin, *Detroit: I do Mind Dying*.

⁶² Paul Buhle, Salar Mohandesi, “The Search for a Usable Past”, *Viewpoint Magazine*, 2 March 2015 <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2015/03/02/the-search-for-a-useable-past-an-interview-with-paul-buhle-on-radical-america/> [Last access 23/4/2020]

⁶³ <https://walkerart.org/magazine/all-printing-is-political-fredy-perlman-and-the-detroit-printing-co-op> [Last access 23/4/2020]; see also Danielle Aubert, *The Detroit Printing Co-op: The Politics of the Joy and Printing*, Los Angeles, CA, Inventory Press, 2019.

Between 1967 and 1969 these publications, which had ample circulation among left-wing militants, had hosted pieces by George Rawick, an associate of *Facing Reality*, who reviewed how this new historiography on slavery shed light of the contemporary situation of the Black (and white) working class in Detroit. In a piece in *Speak Out*, Rawick acknowledged the contribution of Kenneth Stampf, Stanley Elkins, Herbert Aptheker and the Eugene Genovese in debunking earlier, white supremacist views on slavery, but disparaged them for their limited interest in the actual life of the slave (with the partial exception of Genovese, who later developed this aspect in *Roll, Jordan, Roll* though in ways that were criticized from a Black nationalist perspective).⁶⁴ In these accounts, which, Rawick lamented, focused overwhelmingly on the slave's personality, the slave appeared either as a victim or, in Aptheker, as a revolutionary hero, but both perspectives ignored his or her day-to-day life. "While the details of how slaves organized production under slavery, how they developed their religion, the nature of their values and attitudes, philosophies of life, and entertainments, their food, clothing and health may not be very heroic, they are the stuff out of which, not dreams but concrete historical reality are made."⁶⁵ Similarly, Rawick claimed, the life of American workers was characterized by a mundane but relentless struggle against their oppressors. In the widely circulated "The American Negro Movement", Rawick interpreted the African American freedom struggle as a working-class movement

⁶⁴ Eugene D., Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, roll: The world the slaves made*. New York, Vintage, 1976. See Earl Smith's book review "Roll, Apology, Roll" in *Freedomways*, cited in Rzeszutek, Sara. *James and Esther Cooper Jackson: Love and Courage in the Black Freedom Movement*. University Press of Kentucky, 2015, p. 259. For a critique of Genovese's paternalism see Clarence E. Waker, "Massa's New Clothes: A Critique of Eugene D. Genovese on Southern Society, Master- Slave Relations, and Slave Behavior," in *Deromanticizing Black History: Critical Essays and Reappraisals*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991.

⁶⁵ George Rawick, "Toward a New History of Slavery in the U.S.", *Speak Out*, January 1967 and "The Historical Roots of Black Liberation", *Radical America*, Vol.2 No.4, July-August 1968, pp.1-13.

challenging American capitalism. Both the slave and the American worker could be understood through their continuous “revolutionary self-activity” through which they undermined the production goals of managers—or overseers. In other words, both slaves and workers ultimately had the potential to control capitalist production in a way that was politically important to recognize.⁶⁶ In the literature of the LRBW this was reflected by evocative re-interpretations of plantation life, which carried powerful analogies to contemporary workers. “No matter what anybody is saying, the only thing that kept the plantation system running was the Black slaves in the fields [...] without the masters, the Black men could still run the plantation”.⁶⁷

George Rawick will go on to document the daily life of slavery through the massive project of collection and transcription of the 1930s Federal Writers Project (FWP) interviews to surviving slaves, published in three instalments as *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (1972-1979). The first volume was accompanied by Rawick’s own interpretation of that material, the monograph, *From Sunup to Sundown: the Making of the Black Community*. In this underrated book Rawick tried, according to historian Alex Lichtenstein, “to develop an independent Marxist historiography that would both illuminate the American past more of the late sixties”.⁶⁸ The crux of this historiographical project was the one advocated by *Facing Reality*, following CLR

⁶⁶ George Rawick, “The American Negro Movement”, *International Socialism*, no. 16, Spring 1964, pp. 16-24 available at www.marxists.org/archive/rawick/1964/xx/negro.htm (accessed 03/01/2021); for the wider context of Rawick’s involvement with Facing Reality see David Roediger, “A White Intellectual among Thinking Black Intellectuals: George Rawick and the Settings of Genius”, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109:2, Spring 2010, pp. 225-247.

⁶⁷ John F. Kennedy Institute, *The Black Power Movement*, cit., Microfilm 4416, p. 000387

⁶⁸ Alex Lichtenstein, “George Rawick’s *From Sundown to Sunup* and the dialectic of Marxian slave studies”, *Review in American History*, Vol. 24, n. 4 (1996), pp. 712-725, p. 714.

James: the political pre-eminence of the Black working class in the fight against capitalism. The lesson was not lost to Black Detroit radicals such as Ken Cockrel, Luke Tripp and John Watson who crossed path with George Rawick and other Facing Reality militants of a previous generation in the classrooms of Detroit's Wayne State University and in Marxist discussion and study groups: the current struggle in the factories had deep historical roots and slavery offered precious lessons for the present. In turn, the political reckoning in the factories shed a new light on the history of African-Americans, highlighting their centrality as workers throughout American capitalism.

The revolt of the “field negroes”

For the Detroit radicals the reconceptualization of slavery held powerful suggestions for the prospects of Black revolutionary nationalism. “Black people have been struggling for 400 years, our forefathers have raised a glorious and resolute struggle, they have fought with tooth and nails, they have opposed oppression in all shapes and forms, they have met armed resistance with whatever means at their disposal [...]. It is now our solemn duty to carry our struggle forward to the gates of the industry.⁶⁹ Or, in a more vernacular form, in a leaflet about United Parcel Workers: “Get off your asses, Brothers! Denmark Vesey and Gabriel Prosser, former Black Revolutionaries, never would have dreamed that the Black men in the year 1969 would be as docile and as apathetic as the brothers at UPS”.⁷⁰ The reconstruction, in the propaganda literature and in the political educational activities, of a single lineage “from the plant to the

⁶⁹ “DRUM Program”, John F. Kennedy Institute, *The Black Power Movement*, cit., Microfilm 4416, p. 000358.

⁷⁰ “UPRUM, Newsletter”, Volume I, n. 8, John F. Kennedy Institute, *The Black Power Movement*, cit., Microfilm 4416, p. 00787.

plantation” was necessary to recast the factory worker as the rebellious slave, neither a hapless victim nor a nihilistic rebel but an agent of change.

Like many other Black Power groups, the Detroit radicals were drawing, sometimes *verbatim*, on some influential speeches by Malcolm X, who had defined the parameters of what Black militancy would mean in the late 1960s, and they applied those parameters to the context of the factory. Malcolm X had drawn extensively on the rhetoric of slavery. Only a few years earlier, in 1963, in a speech to the African-American congregation of Detroit’s King Solomon Baptist Church, Malcolm X had outlined his famous distinction between the “house negro” and the “field negro”. The former was domesticated, enjoyed a few privileges, and served the interests of his master; the latter “caught hell” toiling in the fields and waited for a chance to rebel. Being better off, “house negroes” deluded themselves in believing to be loved and appreciated by the master, thereby embracing their own oppression. “Field negroes”, because of the harsh conditions in which they lived and worked, could see beyond this ideological smokescreen and were truly opposed to the system that oppressed them. Furthermore, “house negroes” could enjoy their relatively privileged position only because of the profits that the master had accrued thanks to the exploitation of slaves on the fields, so they were accomplices to it. For Malcolm X, the “field negro” was the authentic bearer of the Black identity; “to *become* Black was to identify with the Field Negro, or the Black masses, and want to separate from mainstream America”.⁷¹

Malcolm X had spoken about the “field negroes” praying for their master’s house to be

⁷¹ Andrews, Kehinde. "From the 'Bad Nigger' to the 'Good Nigga': an unintended legacy of the Black Power movement." *Race & Class*, 55.3 (2014), pp. 22-37.

burned down, in turn the Black industrial workers in Detroit talked about “burning the plantation” as a metaphor for bringing down the factory system.

It was therefore Malcolm X who had shown the rhetorical power of the metaphor of the plantation to stoke up a precise theory of race relations in American society. Like the “field negroes” of the Old South, the Black lower classes often looked up to those within their ranks to whom the white power structure bestowed some recognition, but those contemporary “house negroes” abetted the marginalization of the majority of their kind by deluding themselves of succeeding in white America. Thus, the Detroit radicals argued in a ELRUM newsletter, if the primary purpose of the “house negroes” was to inform the master of what was happening in the slave quarters, the second purpose, “was to be someone that the field nigger would look up to as a symbol of tokenism. Someone for the field nigger to take ambition to be the same way”.⁷² In this sense, a consistent thread in their political message, as evidenced in plant newsletters, was to characterise African-Americans who held posts within the company or union structure as “snitches” and “sell outs”, obstacles to achieving the “Black unity” that would underpin revolutionary change.⁷³

According to this rhetoric, psychologically, it seemed that African-Americans still lived in the shadow of the plantation, but there was a way out: the contemporary “house negroes” could redeem themselves by embracing, through the politics of Black Power,

⁷² ELRUM Newsletter, Vol. 1, n. 1, John F. Kennedy Institute, *The Black Power Movement*, cit., Microfilm 4416, *Black* p. 000178

⁷³ See for instance a range of editorials and articles held in this collection John F. Kennedy Institute, *The Black Power Movement*, cit., Microfilm 4416, pp. 000341-00397

the political outlook of the masses. The latter too had to become their authentic selves, rejecting the ideological traps of mainstream white America. “Opposition has mounted among the white bigots and the Uncle Toms to stop DRUM at all costs” – wrote the radicals. “The voice of Black unity must and will be heard [...] If you are not thinking Black at this late date, get Black or get back”.⁷⁴ It is worth noting here, together with philosopher Nina Hagel, that appeals to authenticity characterized many of the social movements of the 1960s.⁷⁵ In the case of Black radicals, the discourse of authenticity had emancipatory connotations – it provided a political asset for an oppressed group – but was also exclusionary; it was binary in character, stigmatizing those Blacks deemed inauthentic as “Uncle Toms”.

In fact, “Uncle Tom” (often shortened in “Toms” and sometimes conjugated into a verb, such as “tomming”) was even a more popular an image of a “sell-out” than the “house negro” in the Black power vernacular. Who was an “Uncle Tom”? “Thriving off the crumbs of integration, these bourgeois elements have become de-racialised and de-cultured, leaving the Negro working class without a leadership, while serving the negative role of class buffer between the deprived working class and the white ruling class elite”, explained one commentator, following up the arguments by E. Franklin Frazier and Nathan Hare, who had explored in their studies the political meaning of this vernacular expression.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ “Editorial Page”, John F. Kennedy Institute, *The Black Power Movement*, cit., Microfilm 4416, p. 000347.

⁷⁵ Nina Hagel, “Truth, the Self, and Political Critique: Authenticity and Radical Politics in the 1960s America”, *Polity*, vol. 49, n.2, (2017), pp. 220-244, p. 222.

⁷⁶ E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie*, New York, Free Press, 1957; Nathan Hare, *The Black Anglo-Saxons*, New York: Marzani & Munsell, 1965; Larry Neal, “New Sense -- the Growth of Black

While its cogency dissipated over time, Malcolm's message of uncompromising conflict between the masses of African Americans, the Black middle classes ("Uncle Toms"), and the white power structure was a compelling one for Detroit's Black radicals. It enabled them to consider the industrial shop floor, where they felt degraded by the poor working conditions and abused by the racist corporate culture, as a breeding ground for a political opposition and an autonomous Black agency. When Black workers established a revolutionary caucus in a General Motors plant they fittingly entitled their newsletter, "Voice of the Plantation".

In fact, by casting African-American union bureaucrats as "house negroes" or "uncle toms", radicals used the metaphor of the factory as plantation to critique organized labour and to claim workers' autonomy vis-a-vis the union. This involved stretching the political category of "uncle tom" to include not only the Black bourgeoisie, but also Black workers who were co-opted by the union, usually at branch-level administrative positions or as shop stewards. "The foremost obstacles standing in our way are the notorious Toms in our mist. [...] We have Toms snitching at plant level at Hamtramck Assembly Plant, Huber Foundry and (UAW) Local 3. We have Toms snitching on the department level inside the plant".⁷⁷

Consciousness in the Sixties", cited in William A. Sampson, Vera Milam, "The Interracial attitude of the Black Middle Class: have they changed", *Social Problems*, Vol. 23, no. 2 (1975), pp. 153-165, p. 154.

⁷⁷ "DRUM Leaflet", John F. Kennedy Institute, *The Black Power Movement*, cit., Microfilm 4416, *Black* p. 000420.

The language of Black nationalism linked back, to a certain extent, to one of Detroit-grown strand of left-wing activism that had argued for workers' self-activity independently, and even in opposition to organised labour. It was in Detroit that the socialist splinter group Johnson-Forest Tendency, led by CLR James and Raya Dunayeskaya, argued in the 1950s and early 1960s against the "normalization" of industrial relations that channelled class conflict into mere requests of better remuneration through a stifling bureaucracy. Against the union's attempt to defuse conflict and buttress the capitalist system, these older Marxists argued that workers resisted spontaneously to the regimented life of the factory, "autonomously" of any actual union organization; they also had an instinctive ability to organize their work in a more humane, but effective way.⁷⁸ Thus, the autonomist idea (the unions, if set up in the mould of the UAW, stood in the way of workers' emancipation), was part of a large tapestry of Marxist doctrines, including Maoism and Trotskyism, which influenced Black radicals, who cross-fertilized it with the figurative language of the plantation and the metaphor of slavery.⁷⁹

Conclusions

Between 1973 and 1980, the year Chrysler shut Dodge Main, the crisis of the American car industry and of Chrysler in particular cleared the ground to eliminate Black radicalism from the plants or created the conditions to undermine their political import. In the "Lean Years", Chrysler's workers survival depended on concessions on pensions,

⁷⁸ Nicola Pizzolato, "Transnational radicals: Labour dissent and political activism in Detroit and Turin (1950–1970)." *International Review of Social History*, 56.1 (2011), pp. 1-30.

⁷⁹ Robin DG Kelley and Betsy Esch. "Black like Mao: Red China and Black revolution." *Souls: Critical Journal of Black Politics & Culture* 1, no. 4 (1999),pp. 6-41.

benefits and, eventually, wages as well as on a skilfully negotiated bailout from the government in 1982.⁸⁰ Management fired Black agitators from the plants at the same time as racial discontent was soft-pedalled by the hiring of more Black supervisory staff. The union, which previously actively discouraged Black workers from joining skilled trades training, now readily admitted them. Moderate Black trade union members rose through leadership ranks at an unprecedented rate.⁸¹ However, the benefits of these gains were diluted by the devastating impact of the rampant deindustrialization of the city throughout the decade.

These reformist gains were shunned upon by the former Black radicals: if anything those pointed towards integration, not the separation that Black power advocated. However, even after its demise, the League had a radicalising effect on the young white Detroit working class. This was visible in the vast, interracial, wildcat mobilization of 1973 in the Detroit plants, in particular the Mack plant, which the UAW harshly repressed, fearing another season of dissent among its ranks – a story that is movingly recounted by former IS (International Socialism) activist Mark Levitan.⁸²

These developments were the outcome (or the legacy) of a political mobilization at industry level that drew upon a radical re-reading of the industrial workplace as a site of deeply-rooted racial and class usurpation. In this article I argued that the

⁸⁰ Charles K. Hyde, *Riding the Roller Coaster: A History of the Chrysler Corporation*, p. 207.

⁸¹ Kai Hinton, 'The Black Bolsheviks', cit., pp. 223-224.

⁸² Mark Levitan, "Putting in Time on the Line at Dodge Main", *Jacobin*, 14/8/2021 <https://jacobin.com/2021/08/mark-levitan-detroit-dodge-main-international-socialists-labor-activism-racism-auto-work> [last accessed on 18/8/2022]; see also Thompson, *Whose Detroit*, cit., pp.199-203.

reconceptualisation of the factory as a site of coercion provided Black workers with a powerful repertoire of contention – a rhetoric that enabled them to challenge, within the ideological framework of Black Power, structures of institutional inequality. This language exposed the coercion implicit in the factory regime emphasizing the political and ideological aspects of such coercion. While other studies of Detroit’s LRWB have discussed plant-level organizing, trade union politics, political ideology, or race relations on the shop floor, this article provides the context to consider how political language and vernacular representations of history play a decisive role in fuelling social movements.⁸³ Through this language, Black activists were able to creatively understand the politics of history that underpinned labour relations and consent to organised labour in the factories. They used the metaphors associated to the “plant-ation” within the broader shift to Black Power vernacular that coloured the political language that workers used in the factory. Their rhetorical inventions resonated with, but not necessarily aligned to, a wider historiographical revolution which looked at slavery as foundational to capitalism (as a source of capital accumulation) and at slave rebels as inspiration for the political revolt that could undermine it. Black radicalism, pointing at labour relations inside the factory, posited racism and capitalism as constitutive of each other; it “troubled” the distinction between slavery and freedom (as Justin Leroy puts it), and moved race at the centre of how capitalism *works*.⁸⁴ Roughly a decade after the facts recounted here, Cedric Robinson would popularize the term “racial capitalism”, arguing that racism was central to capitalism’s origin story; much before that historiographical contribution,

⁸³ See footnote 4.

⁸⁴ Justin, Leroy and Destin Jenkins, eds. *Histories of racial capitalism*. New York, Columbia University Press, 2021.

Detroit activists and workers had articulated their own understanding on that notion as it applied on the factory floor..⁸⁵

Calling the factory a plantation enabled the radicals to articulate a political project that joined up Black nationalism and revolutionary Marxism, thus combining the two antagonist traditions most readily available to them. What was at stake in the metaphorical juxtaposition between the plantation and the factory, was the very success of that political mobilization: it hinged on Black workers recognizing the salience of the metaphor for the actual reality of factory work, grasping the entanglement between capitalism and race that it exemplified.

This project purported racism and its manifestations within the factory, often condoned by the union, to be a central pillar of the capitalist exploitation that put Black workers at the bottom of the totem pole. The limits of such a project was that it left little room for the white workers to join the struggle of a “plantation” symbolically and culturally inhabited only by Black workers. By and large, Black radicals between 1968 and 1971 mobilized, in numerical terms, only Black workers (while attracting the sympathies of white radicals). One can presume that white workers did not identify with the framework of racial capitalism nor acknowledged their place in it, and did not mobilize collectively until the hazards and the exploitation at the point of production became the only focal point of the protest (like, as mentioned above, in the 1973 wildcats, which could be considered a legacy of the labour turmoil set off by the League). Eventually, while the

⁸⁵ Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism. Black Marxism, revised and updated third edition: The making of the Black radical tradition*. UNC press Books, 2020.

“rhetoric of confrontation” that drew on the lexicon of slavery was effective in garnering momentum for the strikes in the late 1960s, it was not enough, in the absence of any militant strategy on the part of the union, to consolidate wider coalitions that would have shifted power relations in the factory. Between 1969 and 1973, as the repressive response of both the company and the union hit the radicals, the “plant-ation” rhetoric could not provide fodder for the wider working-class mobilization, that, in the context of the decline of organised labour, would have stave off the nearly total relocation of automotive production away from Detroit.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ This story is chronicled in much detail in Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit I Do Mind Dying*, cit. and Thompson, *Whose Detroit*, cit.