Λ Economy and Space

Labour, Efficiency, Critique: writing the plantation into the technological present-future

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Abstract
In this commentary, we call upon critical labour scholars, including labour geographers, to feature
what sociologist Palmer called the 'thrust of efficiency' more centrally in their work. We put forth
that the push for efficiency, as made possible by digital technology, needs to be analysed in terms of
its historical lineage as well as in terms of its geographical scope. Centreing efficiency in critical
labour studies, necessitates three scholarly moves. These are particularly relevant for labour geog-
raphy, a field that has so far tended to circumvent questions of coloniality/labour, digital Taylorism,
and the politics of (re-)writing economic geographies, in by-passing the literatures that deal with
them. The plantation, an analytical category and ontic reality that stretches across several yet often
unconnected bodies of literature – literary studies, Black Geographies, Caribbean studies, and the
Black Radical Tradition, as well as in Global History – is central to our effort. Eventually, writing
the plantation into the technological present-future can be the starting point for a larger and his-
torico-geographically informed critique, in economic geography and beyond, of efficiency, a mode
of thinking-cum-praxis based on input–output calculations, objectifying practices, violent value
extraction and the removal of undesired 'social frictions' for the sake of capital accumulation.

Keywords
digital Taylorism, plantation, Black geographies, surveillance capitalism, labour geographies

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Introduction

In this commentary, we call upon critical labour scholars, including labour geographers, to feature what sociologist Palmer (1975) called the 'thrust of efficiency' more centrally in their work. Discussions about a new rank-and-yank revolution abound (The Economist, 2015), spanning such diverse sites such as Amazon warehouses (Delfanti, 2021; Pero, 2019), Foxconn factories (Chan, 2013) and Italian car manufacturing companies (Moro et al., 2019). Despite significant geographical differences between these quantified workplaces, in each of them digital technologies and algorithmic governance have helped to co-construct new labour regimes through which 'human slack' is being minimized and the hyper-capitalist ideal of a friction-free world is being approximated.

The drive for efficiency is not new, as Palmer and several other scholars have shown (e.g. Greenbaum, 1979). But with the rise of 'digital Taylorism' (Cole et al., 2020; Salame, 2018) and associated projects it becomes ever more important that critical labour scholars engage with its novel articulations, perform empirical studies of it, and contribute to projects that seek to imagine radically different futures than those put forward by Silicon Valley visionaries and other prophets of the fourth industrial revolution (Fuchs, 2018; Pfeiffer, 2017; Rainnie and Dean, 2019). While the promised friction-free world has not fully arrived yet, 'imaginative futures' (Beckert, 2018) about it already shape the present and limit the future space of possibles. Therefore, one could speak of this amorphous condition as the technological 'present future' (Kinsley, 2019).

We put forth that the push for efficiency, as made possible by digital technology, needs to be analysed in terms of its historical lineage as well as in terms of its geographical scope. Centreing efficiency in critical labour studies necessitates three scholarly moves. These are particularly relevant for labour geography, a field that has so far tended to circumvent questions of coloniality/labour, digital Taylorism, and the politics of (re-)writing economic geographies, in by-passing the literatures that deal with them.

The case for interdisciplinarity: trans-atlantic roots of the objectification of labour

The first move is one of broader citational practices, which allows likewise for historical and empirical expansion. The thrust for efficiency has a distinct historical geography, which is often sidelined in contemporary accounts of digital Taylorism and its analogue forerunner. The plantation, an analytical category and ontic reality that stretches across several yet often unconnected bodies of literature – literary studies, Black Geographies, Caribbean studies, and the Black Radical Tradition, as well as in Global History to name a few – is central to that historical geography. We think labour geography and critical labour studies scholars more generally would benefit from engaging with these literatures.

We are not the first to make the connection between recent modes of organizing work under capitalism, and plantation logics. In the last decade, scholars of the New History of Capitalism school (Beckert and Desan, 2019; Hudson, 2016) have come to prominence by arguing that the objectifying calculating apparatus of contemporary capitalism can be traced back to the plantation. Until recently, many, starting with Marx, understood the plantation as a pre-modern form of production, using unfree labour and violence to extract value from Black bodies, sanctioned by racist state laws. The plantation has often been contrasted with the more 'progressive' and wage-labour based forms of industrial production emerging in the US Northeast and later Midwest, which operated via sophisticated organizational structures. Cooke (2002) shows that Alfred Chandler, a central

figure in the history of 'modern management', maintained that the plantation had no place in that history.

The plantation has also often been deemed 'primitive' in terms of its uses of technology. It is widely assumed that the big scientific developments that drove the Industrial Revolution, were located in the textile and metal factories of England and the US Northeast, in the 18th and 19th centuries. However, relying on both older and more recent work, it is clear that the plantation, even before the rise of multinational agribusiness companies in the early 20th century (Manjapra, 2018), was actually a modern industrial undertaking (Cooke, 2002: 5; Scott, 2004: 198).

The plantation most powerfully reminds us that 'control over the work process is at the core of the capitalist development since its inception' (Moro et al., 2019: 348). As soon as one roots these attempts on the transatlantic plantation and not in the factories of England and the US Northeast, then the drive for efficiency appears in a different, much more violent light. In addition, the most sophisticated plantation enterprises would probably pass as multinational corporations today (Rosenthal, 2018: 18). Economic historian Caitlin Rosenthal's work also shows in great detail that modern accounting techniques, usually associated with the factories of the US Northeast and England, were first used in the management of plantations in the Antebellum South and Caribbean, connecting these often-opposed forms of economy-making. The plantation might indeed better be understood as 'a synthesis of field and factory' (Scott, 2004: 200).

The scientific management approach of the American mechanical engineer Fredrick W. Taylor, who tried to establish total control over labour using highly rationalized management techniques, seemed to have borrowed from the earlier plantation system in both rhetoric and style. Often titled the 'prophet of modern work' (Bell, cited in Aufhauser, 1973: 813), he embraced three rules: 'break complex jobs down into simple ones; measure everything that workers do; and link pay to performance, giving bonuses to high-achievers and sacking sluggards' (The Economist, 2015).

While Taylor's personal history and his own distancing from slavery complicates the picture (Rosenthal, 2018), his condescending view of labour bore striking similarities to how slaveholders and plantation managers viewed enslaved workers as childish, sluggish, beastly and born for disciplining (Aufhauser, 1973; see also Manjapra, 2020 on a planter's view of labour). Thus, it was no surprise that when introducing the system, Taylor was accused by workers of promoting a form of 'pushing' and 'driving' – an extension of slavery's regime of labour, which had mixed tight control, innovation, and incentives earlier, albeit in a much more brutal way (Rosenthal, 2018). Indeed, Rosenthal finds that 'violence, accounting and innovation worked together' (ibid. 2018: 240) on the plantation, where 'innovation in technology was underpinned by innovation in violence' (ibid. 2018: 244). Rosenthal and others have shown how authorities in plantation management, such as Thomas Affleck, provided scientific advice on how to best achieve the 'completeness of control and ruthless attention to the bottom line' (Goodman, 2018: 392) that many have associated only with industrial expansion in the post-Civil War period, and Taylorism in particular.

The use of technologies to manage labour extracted from human bodies has a long history, and the quantified workplaces of the smart factories and warehouses owe much to the past when it comes to the captivating thrust and bodily intrusiveness of capitalist discipline (Benjamin, 2019; Browne, 2015). While one of the most prominent voices of the New History of Capitalism school who has worked on the calculative apparatus of the plantation, Rosenthal (2018: 119), is careful to emphasize that the influence of slavery on Taylorism was not direct, both 'reflected the same mechanistic view of human labour, and both relied on the belief that careful observation would reveal the physical laws that govern maximum output'.

This led sociologist Matthew Desmond, a contributor to the prominent *New York Times 1619* project, to offer the most direct connections between the quantified past and present, via the plantation:

> The technology that accompanies this workplace supervision can make it feel futuristic. But it's only the technology that's new. The core impulse behind that technology pervaded plantations, which sought inner-most control over the bodies (Desmond, 2019: 35).

These findings appear as striking, and they are often backed by new empirical material. Yet if one broadens the citational horizon, then one finds that the Black Radical Tradition, going as far back as James and Du Bois, has long argued that 'slavery and the plantation are not anathema to capitalism but are pillars of it' (Woods, 1998: 6; see also James, 1938; Williams, 1944).

While we think that we should flag the citational politics of the New Capitalism school (Hudson, 2016), we still would argue that a combined reading of older and newer insights on the genesis of capitalist discipline are a call to critical labour scholars to move back in time, in order to effectively critique the technological present and the narrow imaginative futures emerging from it. In the age of smart warehouses and factories, of machine learning, big data-analytics and predictory planning, a historico-geographically informed critique of efficiency is what is most needed if we want to lay the foundations for more sustainable, humane and just futures.

The plantation enables the development of a *longue durée* critique of efficiency via the redistribution of 'our historical [and spatial] consciousness and understanding' (Manjapra, 2018: 382, the insertion of the spatial element is our own). It allows us to pluralize labour history and geography in the sense of Woods (1998: 7), by building on the intellectual project begun as early as the 1930's, and which was later emboldened by further work in economics, anthropology, history, sociology and cultural studies that uncovered the ways in which slavery was constitutive of modernity (modernity and efficiency being inextricably linked), rather than a pre-modern hangover (Hall, 1993; James, 1938; Williams, 1944).

The purpose of recentring the plantation in the history of the thrust for efficiency then is not to equate contemporary conditions of work with those on the plantation, and thereby risk reducing the specific abhorrence of Euro-Atlantic slavery, but to offer 'a foundation for thinking about how coercion and control continue to shape modern practices' (Rosenthal, 2020: 22). Without falling into the trap of using slavery as a metaphor for modern labour, thereby comparing two unequal entities, the *longue durée* study of modes of control is meant to challenge the objectifying tendencies of capitalism, and a 'managerial' view of labour.

Historicizing resistance: Uncovering alternate futures

The second scholarly move that is meant to equip critical labour scholars with the tools to take on the contemporary drive for efficiency involves rethinking resistance against this thrust in more historical terms. Again, this takes us back to 'the plantation'. When reading across the different literatures that have engaged with plantation as category (analytical device) and form (ontic reality), we are struck by how much we can learn about the spatialities and organizational forms through which capitalism has historically produced and extracted value. Caribbean economist George Beckford mobilized the plantation to replace the neoclassical model of the firm with an 'institution-centred' one that was deeply informed by the Caribbean economic experience (Beckford and Levitt, 2000; Witter, 2016). The plantation as a 'total institution' (Beckford and Levitt, 2000: 245), building on the earlier work of sociologist Erving Goffman and anthropologist Smith[1], captured so much better the socially embedded nature of production and exchange than the world of neoclassical economics, though it was social embeddedness of cruelest dimensions.

Plantation scholars of the Black Radical Tradition (see also Rodney, 1983) provided early tools to critique the neoclassical model of the firm and thus offered a largely unrecognized exercise on the 'networked firm' that economic geographers only started to embrace in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Yeung, 2005). Still, against the absence of violence and control in most contemporary accounts of even the 'socialized firm' in economic geography and related fields, the plantation reminds us that innovation in the service of efficiency often manifests with violence.

Though incomparable to the racialized inscribed violence of the overseer, algorithmic governance as 'digital overseer' (Pero, 2019) imbues an authority so complete that is increasingly difficult to be challenged. However, like many accounts of plantation life, the thesis of the digitally mediated real subsumption of labour (Moore, 2018) denies or erases spaces and practices of resistance. Scholarship about conditions on the plantation has emphasized 'the plot' as a locus of enunciation of alternative futures to racial-sexual oppression, and their specific bodily dimensions as manifested in slavery (Davis et al., 2019; McKittrick, 2013; Wynter, 1971). The plot as 'private garden' was outside of the plantation economy; it granted enslaved people a level of autonomy and space for creativity and resistance and new cultural practices, even though it was functionally linked to slavery's mode of accumulation. While the plot always leaves us with the question as to how far an outside is really outside to capitalism, or rather integral to its operations (Sanyal, 2007), it still reminds us of the need for thinking creatively about spaces of resistance in even the most total institutions as well as about different kinds of technological futures.

Writing reflexively

The third move we advocate for calls for reflexivity with regard to how we rewrite economies and redistribute our historico-spatial consciousness (Manjapra, 2018). Citational, and by implication historical and empirical broadening can be a generative activity, but also faces challenges, such as tracing a lineage of certain logics without losing historical and geographical specificities, pertaining in particular to the condition of Euro-Atlantic slavery. While one could argue that the contemporary thrust for efficiency is about constructing a social order 'where supervision is never-ending' (The Economist, 2015) and highly intrusive rank-and-yank systems are put in place (Pero, 2019), smart warehouses and factories across the globe do not match the racializing violence and terror on the plantation, where 'management decisions [had been] a matter of life and death' (Woods, 1998: 7).

Obviously, critical labour studies, which includes fields such as labour geography, industrial relations, and labour process literature, as well as critical management studies, do not often engage directly with thinking about the act of writing. We should borrow from others here. Black geographies scholarship, which often has been influenced by the work of Caribbean literary scholar Sylvia Wynter, can take us forward. Her writing helps us to recover the plantation as a starting point for a 'stretched critique' (Hawthorne, 2019: 4) of the thrust for efficiency, while at the same time allowing for being sensitive to the embodied experience and the racialized specificities of plantation relations among White people and the Black people owned by them (Bledsoe and Wright, 2019; McKittrick, 2013).

The writing we seek to promote cannot be a disembodied and disengaged form of writing. Neither can it be a purely metaphorical or evocative one, where Black suffering experienced through the most violent 'scenes of subjection' (Hartman, 1997; McKittrick, 2013: 9) on the plantation and beyond, is marginalized or equated with more contemporary workplace scenarios where the thrust for efficiency objectifies labour and leads to coercive forms of labour control. We say this because there is always the risk that exactly this happens (Jackson, 2015) and that the interest in capitalism's history becomes a merely academic exercise rather than 'an integral part of the modern project of emancipation' (Hudson, 2016). For instance, even though Aufhauser (1973)

establishes the links between Taylorism and slavery, his moral agenda is rather unclear, especially due to the reaffirmation of the oppressor's gaze in various parts of the paper (e.g. on p. 816).

An example of the danger of metaphorical writing is surprisingly Linchuan Qui's (2019) work on iSlavery. Despite underlining that to him, 'slavery is much more than a past condition or a provocative metaphor for contemporary reality [...] [and] more precisely, a comparative method that re-historicises our thinking about digital media and labour' (Linchuan Qui 2019: 151), his transhistorical focus on labour conditions and labour experience clearly marginalizes past and contemporary Black suffering, its very uniqueness, and the political projects that have emerged from this (Bledsoe and Wright, 2019; Hawthorne, 2019; McKittrick, 2013; Wilderson, 2020).

We suggest that a flattening use of metaphorically writing the plantation into the digital workplace risks erasing the following: first, industrial workers have always had more rights and entitlements than enslaved labour in the so-called New World, and unions have made great strides across many countries in the 19th and 20th centuries to humanize labour relations. The plantation was a 'differentiation machine', which established the very grounds for who counts as (hu)man and who not, based on the signifier of the race (Davis et al., 2019). The violence that Black people continue to experience until today is a stark reminder of this. It can be expected that in the digitalized workplace, the logic of racialized capital accumulation competes with other logics of control, which challenges sweeping generalizations about an undifferentiated digital Taylorism.

Second, the difference between waged, formally free labour and enslaved, non-wage-based labour cannot be ignored even in the most extractive and coercive digitalized workspaces. Third, recent writing about the plantation has been profoundly empirical, often drawing on various types of sources that have allowed us to further locate 'calculative modernity' in the assumingly archaic space of the plantation. This empirical saturation is difficult to achieve for the black box factory/warehouse, where the power of algorithms remains largely opaque. Fourth, with the rise of full automation, labour is no longer *the* subject to be controlled, but increasingly conspicuous by its absence. Finally, those Black scholars writing most powerfully about the plantation promoted a politics that centred abolitionist praxis, a call that can be easily marginalized if the plantation is suddenly extended to make sense of the 'condition of almost anyone'.

A writing strategy that stretches the plantation into the present without enough care dissolves into 'dangerously nonmaterial mode of symbolisation' (Garba and Sorentino, 2020: 771). This connects to a long-standing problem of metaphorical writing: 'When we use words metaphorically, that is in other senses that they were ordained for; [...] [we] thereby deceive others' (Hobbes 1962: 34; cited in Barnes and Duncan, 1992: 10). Additionally, writing about the plantation is complicated by long-established practices of either invisibilizing Black suffering or exploit it for academic and political gain. As Hepple (1992: 142), citing Hesse (1963), puts it: 'The strategic silences of the metaphors we use are as important as the aspects that are thrust centre-stage in the language and vision. Nor are statements and silences innocent: they help sustain and legitimate particular social and political orders.'

We think that with this scrutiny in mind, there is a justification for writing the plantation into the (technological) present, once we do this via a writing style that is both affective and reflective, and whose major concern is to broaden labour histories and geographies and to show how the objectifying tendencies of capital, carried by the thrust for efficiency, articulate and rearticulate in different geographical and historical contexts. In other words, it is a writing which assumes that the history of surveillance cannot be thought of without the history of the plantation (Browne, 2015: 5). It is a writing that eventually reminds us about the 'the origins and conditions of capitalist modernity' (Hawthorne, 2019: 5) and makes connections that are 'are not linear and chronological, but characterized by an interconnected relationship between different times and places' (Manjapra, 2020: 5).

This way of writing interlocking histories of the thrust of efficiency is a way to look beyond the veil of discursive deception through which violence, coercion and eventually dehumanization and objectification pass as grand narratives of progress and improvement. The plantation condition was not just marked by the fact that 'labour was capital' (Rosenthal, 2020), but also that capital could enslave labour and treat it as a calculable object. In the smart warehouse or factory, even if not yet fully materialized, commodifying, and objectifying tendencies, drawn from the same pool of modernizing impulses must be scrutinized.

Conclusion

To bring our ruminations to a close: one of the characteristics of plantation slavery from the perspective of capital was that it treated labour as a mere object. While we recognize the specificity of the plantation as a racializing apparatus of value extraction, this objectification, less the human-as-property feature and the bodily and emotional violence of plantation slavery, can teach us something about how to analyse the proliferation and organization of digitalized workplaces. Thus, the plantation allows us to uncover the continuities and re-inscription of certain logics that underlay colonial era formations, while we continue to refuse to conflate plantation-era slavery with contemporary working conditions.

Eventually, writing the plantation into the technological present-future can be the starting point for a larger and historico-geographically informed critique, in economic geography and beyond, of efficiency – a mode of thinking-cum-praxis based on input–output calculations, objectifying practices, violent value extraction and the removal of undesired 'social frictions' for the sake of capital accumulation. Such a project might culminate in the questioning of the narratives of the digital present-future, fuelled by a techno-utopianism that lauds the Musks and Bezoses of this world as visionaries of the future (O'Shea, 2019), rather than alpha digital Taylorists.

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Note

1. A note on Smith (1967: 230), who originally applied Goffman's notion of the plantation, is important here. For him, a plantation/plantation society was 'a bureaucratically organized system in which whole blocks of

people are treated as units and marched through a set if regimentation under surveillance of the small supervisory staff' (cited in Beckford and Levitt 2000: 245). It should be noted that Smith emphasized that people enter any total institution in 'as already formed human beings' (Beckford and Levitt 2000: 246) whose ascribed social characteristics are used against them to form somebody, and in the worst case, something, new.

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