

[Schell on Tomich, 'Through the Prism of Slavery: Labor, Capital, and World Economy'](#)

Review published on Monday, August 1, 2005

Dale W. Tomich. *Through the Prism of Slavery: Labor, Capital, and World Economy*. Lanham: Bowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004. xv + 210 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7425-2938-0.

Reviewed by William Schell (Department of History, Murray State University) **Published on** H-LatAm (August, 2005)

To Theorize or Not

Through the Prism of Slavery by sociologist and historian Dale Tomich assembles in book form nine journal articles published between 1987 and 1997. His purpose is to examine how "particular slave formations in the Americas have been shaped by the ways they were integrated into the world market, the division of labor, and the interstate system and, conversely, rethink from the perspective of New World slavery, the historical development of modern capitalism as a world economy" (p. xi). To do this he undertakes a "critical appraisal" of "three influential approaches to the political economy of slavery: new economic history, Marxism, and world systems theory" (p. xii). He finds all deficient because all "share theoretical assumptions and methodological conditions that preclude adequately comprehending of [sic] the specific character of diverse production relations and the particularity of individual local histories within a unified theoretical-historical account of capitalist development as a world-historical process" (p. xii).

Tomich proposes to correct these deficiencies by formulating a "unified conceptual field" to allow his readers "to apprehend the course of historical development of both individual slave formations and the world economy as a whole through the ongoing interplay of structure and contingency across multiple analytical levels" (p. 31). His goal is not to "create abstract models" but rather to "develop methodological procedures and analytical frameworks that concretize theoretical categories [by allowing the reconstruction of the] social economic whole in its historical complexity by specifying relations, establishing their historical interconnections and contexts, and ordering narrative accounts" (p. 55). Tomich employs an approach that he calls "incorporated comparison" to trace the "interaction of multiple relations and processes operating simultaneously across varying temporal and spatial scales" (p. 54). By rejecting the dualism typical of Marxism, world systems theory, and the new economic history, he treats his historical cases as "singular instances of unified global processes which they themselves constitute and modify" (p. 120).

Albert Einstein once remarked: It is the theory that determines what we can observe. Similarly Tomich warns that over reliance on "historical theory" can lead to "theoretical history." He criticizes the practitioners of the "new economic history" of cliometrics for treating "market and market rationality [as] the beginning and the end point of historical change as well as the prime force behind it" which results in a "linear process of rationalization" that "progressively subordinate[s] time and space to the universal criteria of the market" (p. 9). Likewise he faults Marxists for making their theory of historical laws "a surrogate for historical analysis and interpretation" (p. 13). Immanuel

Wallerstein fares no better. Tomich dismisses his "historical system" as one that "has no history or whose historical development is predetermined by a static structure" against which Wallerstein "counterposes the virtually infinite empirical details of 'real history'" (p. 17).

At some points Tomich seems to suggest that meaningful historical generalization is all but impossible. "Following the logic of the approach presented here, production (and similarly distribution, exchange and production, indeed the 'whole' itself) remain an abstract and general category unless and until we are able to theoretically specify and historically reconstruct its various material processes and social forms in their relation to one another through the division of labor and mediating structures of market and state." Rather theory's purpose is "to reconstruct this social economic whole in its historical complexity by specifying relations, establishing their historical interconnections and contexts, and ordering narrative accounts [in order] to identify significant difference within a spatially and temporally unified historical whole" (p. 55).

At other points, Tomich generalizes freely. He attributes the emergence of what he terms the "Second Slavery" to a rapidly increasing global demand for cotton, sugar, and coffee rooted in Britain's industrial revolution and subsequent hegemony, which also gave rise to the abolition movement. The conjunction of these antithetical trends "cannot be seen as a linear evolutionary process but [rather as the result of] complex, multiple, and quantitatively different relations within the global processes of accumulation and division of labor" (p. 69). Britain's banks provided loans necessary to expand commodity production, while its political and religious leaders spearheaded the global antislavery movement. The combined effects transferred economic advantage from the sites of the First Slavery (West Indies, British Caribbean, North American Old South) to those of the Second Slavery (Cuba, North American cotton South) where new land and technologies allowed slave labor to adapt to the demands of the (now) capitalist world system. Tomich clarifies the distinction between First and Second Slavery through an "incorporated comparison" of the plantation slave systems of Martinique and Cuba "as parts of a differentiated spatial-temporal whole, a singular historical world economy [that] brings the process of transformation in each as 'instances' of world processes that are formed and reformed by their relation with one another" (pp. 133-134). In doing so he shows how "on a world scale, the processes of capitalist development simultaneously unify and differentiate temporal and spatial relations" but unevenly "as a specific historically evolving constellation of processes and relations ('bundle of relations') linked through definite modes of economic and political integration" (p. 136).

Tomich's concluding chapters explain how slaves turned to their advantage the efforts of plantation managers to cut costs by granting so-called Free Saturdays to slaves to produce their own subsistence on parcels of land dubbed provision-grounds. This simultaneously lowered plantation operating costs while subverting the masters' control of "the labor routine, discipline, and organization of time. The result was to simultaneously strengthen and weaken the slave system" (p. 151). Despite "repeated attempts to suppress [these practices] by the nineteenth century, they had become more and more central to the functioning of the colonial economy" (pp. 146, 157). After the abolition of slavery on Martinique, as a result of local uprisings in the wake of France's 1848 revolution, the system of provision-grounds and Free Saturdays was reinvented as a form of peonage called "association" which, although favored by the planters for the social control it provided, was rejected by the now free workers who preferred wage labor. In the end, however, all came to recognize that, in the words of a French official: "Everywhere that association is in existence, work is

illusory. Where a regular wage is established, work begins to merit the name" (p. 190).

Tomich's book is redundancy cubed. There is no evidence that he reworked his previously published articles. On the contrary, multiple hunks of text repeated verbatim from one chapter to the next evidence a lazy approach. The prose is crippled (there is no other word) by buzz words and empty jargon and the index is useless. This book has nothing whatever to recommend it either to students or mature scholars.

Printable Version: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=11112>

Citation: William Schell. Review of Tomich, Dale W., *Through the Prism of Slavery: Labor, Capital, and World Economy*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. August, 2005. **URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11112>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.