

TGP's Book Reviews: The Expense of the American Dream

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A book review by T.P. Wilkinson

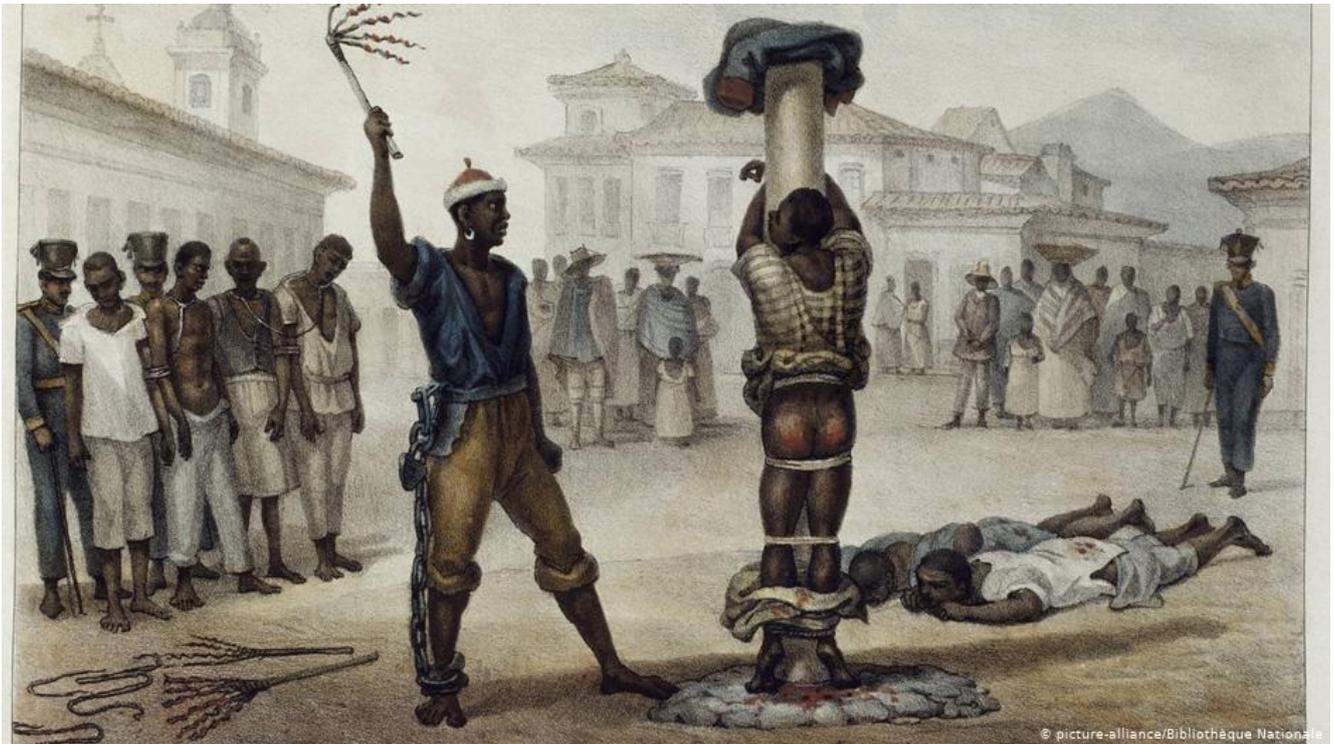
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The Apocalypse of Settler Colonialism: The Roots of Slavery, White Supremacy, and Capitalism in Seventeenth Century North America and the Caribbean

by Gerald Horne

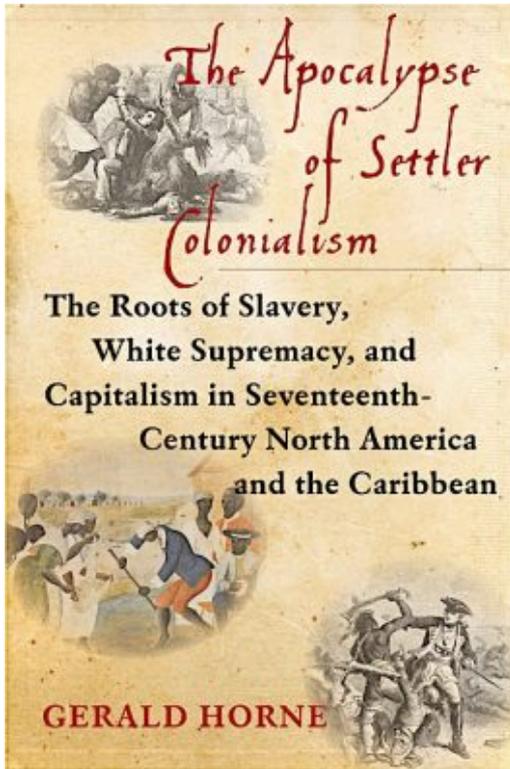
Monthly Review Press, 2018.

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Half of the slaves that crossed the Atlantic ended up in Brazil.

Political analysis, alas, is no less immune to what has been called the “fashion system” than any other segment of human consumption habits since the end of the Great War bequeathed the industrial form of indoctrination that prevails—now in digital form—today. The polemics offered as contemporary insights can be found in older documents, the sources we call history. Like fashion and pageantry, the writing for daily consumption is always presented as “new” and or “improved”. Sometimes it is presented as “classical” with the veneer of ancient authority. Yet the misery to which the vast majority of humanity is subjected has been altered only minimally since 1492 gave the Roman Catholic and later Protestant elites in Europe the impetus to seize the rest of the planet, dominating the world’s population and the rest of nature.



Gerald Horne is Moores Professor of History and African American Studies at the University of Houston, and has published three dozen books including, *The Counter-Revolution of 1776: Slave Resistance and the Origins of the USA and Race War!* *White Supremacy and the Japanese Attack on the British Empire.*

Despite this power the Eurocentric cultures have never transcended their propensity or vulnerability to the millenarianism that is pejoratively attributed to the medieval period, the previous era of Roman Catholic domination over the peoples of Christendom. Perhaps this is a condition of the unique solar-based calendar system that prevails in the Dark Peninsula of Europe. Ironically, it is the darkest part of the

planet Earth (at least in terms of days of sunlight) that has acquired the habit of calling the rest of the world—where in fact there is more sunlight—“dark”, e.g. Africa. It is also this relatively small region of the world whose population claims to have ennobled humanity with the supposed escape from its pathological violence with the Enlightenment.

The countries in which this Enlightenment was to have occurred—as an end to its shameful “darkness”—have nevertheless been the source of the greatest violence and destruction ever caused by humans. In the course of a mere 500 years, the peoples from the European peninsula managed to systematically decimate three continents and develop weapons and business practices capable of killing the rest. At the same time, this homicidal culture is managed and perpetuated by people who now believe the world is doomed because of climate change. Hence they have begun preaching that all those who happened to survive the vicious onslaught of half a millennium are at fault now for the immanent destruction of life on Earth—as they have come to know it.

The “dark” world—meaning in fact the non-white part—is alleged to be the cause of this impending apocalypse through overpopulation, overconsumption, overdevelopment, or mere striving for equality of life with those Enlightened who have plundered the planet.

Gerald Horne asks us to reconsider this perverse reversal of the facts. He is not talking about the impending apocalypse, but about the one that already occurred and thus the processes that apocalypse already set in motion. Although his 2018 book is clearly a response to the 2016 US Presidential elections, Professor Horne is simply asking a question that should be obvious. Why does the world have to suffer at regular intervals the messianic anointment of rich white people whose mission is to impose their will on whole nations and continents? Why have two revolutions in the dark centres of power been unable to stop the homicidal juggernaut of European

culture, controlled by a tiny elite in the North Atlantic basin? Professor Horne focuses on the events in England, North America, and the Caribbean in the Seventeenth Century. In his view, the so-called Glorious Revolution in England constituted a crucial turning point launching the ascendancy of the English-speaking peoples; making them the premier "white" race upon whose domination the sun should never set and the blood should never dry.

The countries in which this Enlightenment was to have occurred—as an end to its shameful "darkness"—have nevertheless been the source of the greatest violence and destruction ever caused by humans. In the course of a mere 500 years, the peoples from the European peninsula managed to systematically decimate three continents and develop weapons and business practices capable of killing the rest.

Establishment history defines the Seventeenth Century as the beginning of progress. In North America that "progress" led to the founding of the new Eden later to be constituted as the United States. On the older side of the Atlantic basin, the great hope was to be the United Kingdom. By the end of the Great Slaughter of 1914-1918, these two pretenders to civilisation joined for all intents and purposes to embody the new Jerusalem, even recreating the Crusader fortress to restore imperial control over the inhabitants of the old Jerusalem by mid-century. The United Kingdom fought nearly forty years to defeat the French Revolution in Europe, while the United States helped to defeat it in the western hemisphere. It took some seventy years for their combined forces in the "special relationship" to defeat the Russian Revolution.

The question that must be asked is, if there was in fact Enlightenment in the dark peninsula of Europe, among the most backward societies on the planet, why did the inhabitants of those societies find themselves compelled by the supposedly most enlightened among them to destroy any and every attempt to follow the principles of that Enlightenment—liberty,

fraternity, equality—in the most ferocious manner, developing for that purpose the capacity to annihilate millions and poison the environment for man and beast alike?

Of course, this question has been asked, especially by European scholars writing in the wake of the Second World War. Much has been said about the internal contradictions between equality and social order or the defects of secularised Christianity. There has been a good deal of criticism directed at the imperatives of modern science and the ideology of progress. In the end there seems to be a consensus that it is man's weakness (dare we say "sin") in the face of forces he has unleashed—the indeterminacy of even the best planned actions—which has led us all to the realisation that the Enlightenment was not that bright after all, that liberty, fraternity and equality are quaint illusions, the pursuit of which has most recently burdened us with "climate change" due to "global warming".

James Baldwin Debates William F. Buckley (1965)

Professor Horne's reply to this question, I suppose—were he to breach academic decorum—would not be "man's weakness" or that the trinity of Enlightenment virtue was illusory. Rather he would—and in fact does—argue that the Enlightenment was not the cause of European improvement (which did not occur) but a polemic that emerged mainly in the countries that became the greatest colonisers and traders in non-white human flesh. In other words, Enlightenment discourse was a product of the ideology of white supremacy, which preceded it in development. The Enlightenment emerged as a style for rationalising the creation of "white" identity or "European" identity. That meant suppressing the urges to murder and steal from each other based on differences of language, religion, family or ethnicity or general brigandry. Why after the slaughter of the

Thirty Years War was that necessary? The European population itself had been seriously depleted. And the hope of further enrichment from abroad required every available hand for its achievement.

Andre Gunder Frank gave a plausible economic explanation for how the backwater of the Eurasian continent began to undermine the largest and most developed economy of the time after 1492. He argued that the Spanish conquest of South America introduced masses of new precious metals, primarily silver, which opened the Chinese economy to Europeans for the first time on a large scale. China's silver-based economy was increasingly destabilised by the inflow of new money into the Asia-Pacific region China had traditionally dominated. Of course Spanish gold and silver also destabilised the economies of Europe, leading to competition and more wars. However this would not have been possible without the annihilation of the indigenous population in the Americas, whose land and labour had to be stolen for this purpose. Spanish loot became the target of England's pirate fleets, ultimately exhausting His Most Catholic Majesty's treasury. The defeat of the Spanish Armada was to leave Britain to become the ruler of the waves.

When the supply of precious metals became insufficient to award unearned wealth, Europeans shifted to drugs. The principal drugs of that era were sugar and tobacco. Unlike mining, which ends when the lode has been exhausted and the metal has found its way into foreign treasuries, drugs are a renewable source of wealth. However prior to the emergence of the chemical industry, most drug production was labour intensive and plantation based. The only way to keep the industry profitable was low input costs and monopoly control of supply and price. With little labour in Europe to spare, what remained of the indigenous populations was enslaved along with a new source was found in Africa. For Europeans, Africans were a population surplus that could be used to drive the sugar plantations of the Americas. Sugar was foremost a

product of Caribbean islands and hence every striving European ruler sought islands for his own domestic drug market. At the same time competition for slave labour intensified to permit the maximum volumes for the least possible cost. The competition was finally reduced France (with Saint Dominique), Spain (with Jamaica and Cuba) and Britain (with Barbados and the neighbouring islands). France's colony was by far the richest and most profitable until it was lost by the Haitian Revolution. Britain finally drove Spain out of Jamaica and with its superior naval forces emerged as the leading drug producer of the Caribbean and ultimately Europe's leading drug pusher.

The island economies had two serious disadvantages in the Seventeenth Century. At some point, especially the smaller islands like Barbados would be fully exploited. New territory was needed for new profits. Far more serious however was the population problem. European colonisers had been unsuccessful at inducing or forcing enough of their subjects to leave their homes and work as serfs in the Caribbean. The importation of African slave labour soon led to overwhelming African majorities on the sugar islands. These majorities were not passively resigned to their lot. On the contrary it became increasingly dangerous for Europeans to live among these large slave populations without the use of extreme violence and military force. The cost of maintaining military domination of the slave populations and fighting drug wars against rivals was decreasing the profitability of these colonies steadily. Thus in by 1688 and the Glorious Revolution new means had to be sought to maintain the profitability of both African slavery and the drug economy it was used to support.

Professor Horne shows that the new monarchical dispensation created by the election of William and Mary to the British throne opened the market for the trade in Africans by abolishing the previous royal monopoly on the slave trade. Moreover the reconciliation of mercantile interests with those

of the landed aristocracy created an ideological consensus, which would reduce the historical tensions within Christendom. The ideology of free trade, expressed in Adam Smith's canonical text, was an outgrowth of the reorganisation of the European drug trade and slavery as its principal labour policy. While the State, in Britain's case the Royal Navy, would continue to protect the essential trading infrastructure and fend off competition, the rest of the business would be opened to private enterprise. As in the economy today, the expenses were socialised and the profits privatised.

A solution had to be found to the labour crisis in the Caribbean. The problem was complex. On one hand the island drug economies relied on African slave labour. However, since the Africans soon outnumbered the Europeans, increasing degrees of violence were needed to subjugate this workforce. The competition between rival national gangs, especially between Britain and Spain, meant that enslaved labour (including the residue of indigenous people among the slave population) was not only tempted but were often successful at alleviating their condition by changing sides in the various drug wars that plagued the islands. In Jamaica, the entrenched free African enclaves, fought alternatively with the Spanish against the English or the English against the Spanish in order to obtain relative advantages.

On the other hand indentured European labourers were just as likely to join Africans to rebel against their oppressors, especially Irish Catholic labourers against their English Protestant lords. The necessity of reducing the cost of violent control over Africans led the owners of the plantations to look for another strategy.

As Theodore Allen also argued in an earlier study, the solution was found in a new legal regime. African labourers were to be subjected to very strict and harsh controls from which Europeans were exempted. Europeans were to be punished for cooperation with Africans. Europeans were to be released

from their bondage after a term of years while Africans would not only be bonded for life but also as a class. White's study focussed on the British colonisation of Ireland and the creation of the race regime in North America. Gerald Horne shows that this process began even earlier in the Caribbean. Moreover in Horne's work the process is fundamental for the inception of the United States. It was, in his view, the threat by the United Kingdom to revise its labour regime by abolishing bonded labour that led the English colonists on the mainland (many of whom had moved their wealth from the Caribbean to North America) that led to the war creating the United States.

Professor Horne's argument, published in several books over the past decade, explains the roots of Anglo-American empire and the so-called free market/ free enterprise or capitalist system in a manner consistent with Marx but with more reliance upon the insights of Walter Rodney and Eric Williams. While Karl Marx may have provided the most useful theoretical description of the system called capitalism, it is apparent that the program derived from Marxism by various European and North American political parties has been insufficient to remedy the fundamental crimes of African slavery. He says this failure is not an oversight but due to a fundamental error. By treating industrialisation and modernisation as the results of the Enlightenment and the product of European humanism, a reversal is made. Slavery made industrial capitalism possible. It was the obscene profitability of the Caribbean drug trade, later expanded to other primary commodities, based on African slavery that gave Britain and to a lesser extent the Netherlands the enormous capital resources to develop its industry. Moreover it was the culture, the ideology of white supremacy that the Enlightenment first theorised. For that reason there should be no surprise that the leading Enlightenment leaders of the day, e.g. Thomas Jefferson in the United States, should have felt no compulsion to include Africans among the beneficiaries. Quite the contrary, the

Haitian Revolution forced the “enlightened” French in Bordeaux to accept that liberté, égalité et fraternité was not meant just for Europeans—but for all the French. Admittedly this class has never fully accepted the Haitian argument. But according to Professor Horne that should be no surprise since the slogans were intended by the emergent bourgeoisie to unite Europeans against Africans, not with them.

Without abandoning the Marxian analysis of capitalism, despite its historical limitations, the questions have to be asked, why does the United States claim to “exceptionalism” retain its high level of acceptance even among the anti-establishment? Why is slavery, despite the historical and economic data, still treated as incidental to the foundation of the exceptional US? Professor Horne poignantly recalls that three hundred years of slavery and genocide are ignored when the origin of the United States is described, but the Russian Revolution and the Soviet Union are reduced to the ten years of Joseph Stalin’s wartime rule. African slavery is treated as mere collateral damage in the pageant of Manifest Destiny.

Much of the historical data has been compressed but can be found elsewhere in Gerald Horne’s earlier works. The core is argued in depth in *The Counter-Revolution of 1776*. In *The Apocalypse of Settler Colonialism* he summarises his previous work as an explicit criticism of the political inflammation exposed by the 2016 election of Donald Trump to the slave-built mansion at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. He says that the present US government is extreme in its expression but of a deeply held faith shared across the US political spectrum.

Donald Trump has been the target of attack on both sides of the Atlantic basin. It is hardly possible to find anyone who can say anything about United States policy without blaming the real estate mogul from New York. The revulsion is obvious in this short essay. However, a careful reading will reveal that the present POTUS is merely a more obvious and inane expression of the consensus forged by the ideology of white

supremacy, the driving force of cross-class capitalism. That ideology was necessary for Europeans to suppress their other homicidal differences, e.g. religion, language, nationality and greed.

Professor Horne shows that the Dark Continent was Europe, not Africa. The Enlightenment was made possible by a bonfire of African slaves. And as James Baldwin once told the Cambridge Union, the American Dream was at the expense of the American Negro—who built the country: picked the cotton, dug the canals, laid the railroads, for nothing, for nothing.

Today the world is still dominated by states and corporations warring for control of the drug traffic and other primary commodities. Africa is still being plundered and apparently its inhabitants can be enslaved, displaced, starved or killed at will. There is virtual silence among those Enlightened.

The first rule of any successful crime is to make the victim feel he or she deserved it. The darkness that has hung over the non-white world for the past half a millennia could only be maintained by the fiction that the light is “white”.

NOTES

1 Probably the most well known of these is *The Dialectic of the Enlightenment* by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1944).

2 Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age*, 1998.

3 Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 1776.

4 Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, 1994

5 Walter Rodney, *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast 1545 to 1800*, 1970 and *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, 1982

6 Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, 1944

7 C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 1938

8 James Baldwin v. William F. Buckley, debate before the

Cambridge Union, 26 October 1965

About the author

TP Wilkinson has collected academic degrees in lieu of remuneration, rather than suppress the urge to read, listen, talk and write. Frequent relocations and accidents have led to a variety of historical experiences, e.g. 1985, 1986, 1989, 2002 which forced a reluctance to accept textbook explanations. He has taught in secondary and tertiary education, coached cricket, directed theater, waited tables and even pumped petrol. Currently he divides his time between writing, translating and learning the Portuguese guitar, sometimes while just watching the cats in the back of his building.

SPECIAL BONUS FEATURE

Gillo Pontecorvo's masterpiece, *Burnt!* (Queimada), is easily the best and only film dissecting the story of slavery and colonialism in the West Indies and the "New World." Thought-provoking and highly didactic, as all films by this director (*Battle of Algiers*), himself a former anti-Nazi partisan in Italy and lifelong communist, *Burnt!* makes colonialism and liberation struggles come alive, clarifying their promises and betrayals. This film, a poignant drama, is also unique for having Marlon Brando in the lead, perhaps in his most memorable role as a "Brittannic majesty's agent", yet most Americans have hardly heard about it since it was not a film released by a big studio. Be sure to watch *Queimada*, there's nothing like it.

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