



# Long-range continuities in comparative and historical sociology: The case of parasitism and women’s enslavement

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## Abstract

In this methods-building article, I show how attention to long-term continuities in female enslavement patterns helps us understand the emergence of the Black Atlantic. Slavery, I argue, is one form of human parasitism. I extend Orlando Patterson’s theory of human parasitism to examine the phenomenon of *parasitic intertwining*, wherein the forced labor of women became integral to broader social projects including household functioning, elite status maintenance, and population expansion. The thousand-year period between the fall of Rome and the rise of the transatlantic slave trade was once described as a rupture in European slavery, with serfdom gradually supplanting slavery. The mass capture, transport, and enslavement of women, however, continued even as male slaves and ex-slaves gained significant status changes. The entrenchment of women in zonal slave trades generated both a potent cultural logic and a structural blueprint for the transatlantic trade.

**Keywords** Human parasitism · Female domestic labor · *longue durée* historiography · Culture · Zonal slavery

It has been said a thousand times: slavery is historically ubiquitous. In various forms and through diverse, ingenious mechanisms of predation, slavery has outlasted conquerors and kingdoms, firmly anchored in human society even as the years go by. The implication of this observation is that freedom, not slavery, is the “peculiar” social institution in need of explanation. This basic point is now widely accepted by scholars of slavery. To operationalize it, sociologists, anthropologists, and historians have challenged the “slave society” model of scholarship. That model had emphasized close examination of the historical conditions (culture, politics, ideas, and so forth) to explain why particular past polities relied on slavery. They assert instead that the definition of

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slavery should be much broader in order to encompass a range of commodification practices that characterize the neoliberal global economic regime: sex trafficking, forced organ harvesting, and low-wage manual labor without workplace protections, to name a few (Bales and Soodalter 2010; Campbell, Miers & Miller 2007; Kara 2009). Rejecting the paradigm of “slave society” as an outmoded unit of analysis, the exploitation approach insists that unfree labor is a feature of *every* society. This work has been productive. It has pushed back on the idea that an arbitrary set of legal conditions must be satisfied in order for slavery to be present. It has generated important new insights into the entanglements of capital, empire, nation-state, and unfree labor in the current moment. It has forced us to acknowledge our collective dependence on men, women, and children who work for little to nothing, often with no control over the conditions of their labor and living arrangements.

The new framework has come at a cost, however. First, when “slavery” became a catchall for any form of labor exploitation, the word’s explanatory power was diluted. Exploitation is an economic concept, and yet Orlando Patterson’s core argument is that slavery *cannot* be reduced to economic interests. Much of what constitutes slavery is not exploitation. A second problem with the slavery-as-exploitation framework is that it is vague with respect to historical continuity. The specific economic conditions that illuminate the workings of sex trafficking in Southeast Asia for example have superficial similarities with the market conditions for itinerant construction labor in the Gulf States, but are rooted in very different historical and cultural logics (Gardner 2010; Hoang 2015; Johnson 2018; Mahdavi 2011). When slavery is dehistoricized and distilled to economic forces, we lose sight of the broader social factors that explain slavery’s embeddedness and its changes and continuity over time. Conflating the concepts colonialism, capitalism, and slavery are no more helpful. Much of colonialism was not economic in focus, and capitalism is neither the goal nor the outcome of colonial slavery regimes (Go 2016; Steinmetz 2007). What both these reductions are about—slavery as exploitation, and colonialism as capitalism as slavery—is an attempt to explain continuity of suffering. In the case of slavery, it is *parasitism* rather than economic exploitation that is persistent over time and place. Slavery, understood here as the permanent and violent domination of generally dishonored and socially isolated persons, is one possible outcome of parasitism (Patterson 1982: 13). This observation must be the starting point for a fully historicized account of the persistence of enslavement. The challenge is conceptual and methodological. Comparative and historical sociologists have generally guarded against false continuities, the sort of topical patterns that obscure transformations in social experiences. We have done this work so well, however, that theorizing social change is almost incompatible with continuity. Rupture and break, caesura and creation: these are our stock in trade, they are what we are trained to look for, to treat as counter-instinctual and the basis of our research puzzles (Kiser & Hechter 1991; Ragin 1989). We champion processualism, dynamism, and contingency as the antidotes to stasis and persistence, but in doing so we overlook the continuities that outrun (and possibly explain) change (Pierson 2003).

Parasitism is an orientation to the world. It informs the social imaginary that makes slavery possible, and it continues even where slavery changes or disappears. In this article, I use the concept of human parasitism to study continuities in female enslavement (Patterson 1981). My argument is that parasitic dependence on captive female domestic labor served as a primary cultural support for slavery and became socially

embedded through motifs, language, and practices. My endeavor is catalyzed by the fruitful and intellectually invigorating contributions made by critical race studies. This body of work insists on the primacy of place of the experience of enslaved Africans and people of African descent and the long-term effects of the violence inflicted by forced zonal crossings and deracination (Gilroy 1993; Mbembe 2017; Magubane 2005; Matlon 2019). The rich conceptual and theoretical framework generated by this work, however, overlooks *parasitism* as having specific explanatory power. Instead, the framework subsumes parasitism into the broader colonial projects of expansion and conquest. This is a problematic move, I argue, because parasitism brings into sharp focus two related facts of slavery: First, it always involves a corporeal and psychological conjunction of interests; and, second, it normalizes the oppression of particular people. In this article, I trace the continuity of parasitism through a specific cultural motif, that of female domestic docility. As with all motifs, it was historically transmitted not as an accurate record of social reality but rather as a narrative of elite aspiration, human commodification, and biologized exclusion (cf. Somers & Block 2005).

I begin by considering extant approaches to continuity in comparative and historical sociology. I then set out a working model of parasitism, using Patterson's definition to explain parasitism's importance as a heuristic device. There follow three historical moments through which I trace parasitism at work: imperial Rome, medieval Ragusa (Dalmatian coast), and the African Gold Coast slave factories. For each of the settings, I focus on cultural objects, images, and practices. These are an important source of information, because they have the power to create, reinforce, and perpetuate social constructs such as worldviews and cultural motifs (Greenland 2017). The article concludes with an argument for why sociologists should think in terms of *varieties* of continuity at different socio-historical levels rather than a single line of continuity that may or may not reveal itself in the standard sources.

Ancient Rome is my starting point because of its preponderance of evidence and traceable motifs. There could easily have been an earlier case in this article. Archaeological and paleoanthropological evidence continue to push back further the record of long-distance trade, commodification strategies, goods distribution, and complex social arrangements (Horden & Purcell 2000; Pierson 2003). There is no sign that they will cease doing so. I should, then, lay all of my cards on the table: absolute social origins are, it seems to me, elusive, and the search for ever-earlier foundation points can quickly devolve into a game of history trivia. It devolves as such if we fail to specify what the expansion of historical scope does for us, sociologically—that is, how it adds to our research and informs the kinds of questions we can ask.

## Continuity and change in comparative and historical sociology

Comparative and historical sociologists have largely attended to “the processes by which social structures and social actors were created and transformed over the course of the transition from ‘traditional’ or feudal societies to some distinctively modern social life” (Adams, Clemens & Orloff 2005, p. 3). In charting this transition, scholars have trained their sights on different phenomena: the rise of capitalism and class-consciousness, the formation of the disciplined bourgeois subject, the onset of rationalized collective life, the formation of nation-states and the modern political order, or

the twinned realization of Enlightenment and racial subordination (Moore 1966; Skocpol 1979; Tilly 1995). The challenge in these studies is the reduction of social evolution to structural determination and utilitarian models of action. What is lost, *inter alia*, is the salience of culture and identity in forming “selves and discursive positions” (Adams, et al. 2005, p. 8).

There is a long tradition of continuity in sociology. Du Bois argued that the structural vulnerability of African-Americans could only be understood by tracing processes of domination and repression through US slavery, for example (Du Bois 1935). and Marx saw capital inequity as the outcome of long-term arrangements of labor and production. Patterson identified four kinds of continuity processes in sociological work, which he called identities (or self-determining processes), direct processes, hierarchical processes, and post-inception (or hysteretic) processes. Causality is the common thread: “All claims of continuity,” Patterson argues, “except those that are wholly invented, are really claims about the persistence of causal processes, and this is true even of persistence in the identity of objects” (Patterson 2004, pp. 74–75). Models of continuity in sociology include genealogical, mnemonic, institutional, and essential—the last of these being the realm of biology and structural positivism. The fuzziness of continuity over long stretches of time introduces challenges at a number of levels of enquiry. Hence, historical questions (i.e., Was there a structurally similar slave trade back then?) easily morph into epistemological challenges (What, if anything, can we know about which structural features “mattered” for later trades?) and then into methodological ones (How can we arrive at the kind of evidence that we judge sufficient for claiming continuity?).

One solution is to approach continuity as causal chains. As a heuristic device, the causal chain traces the linking, uncoupling, and persistence of ideas, practices, and structures over time (let us call these artifacts). A particular artifact may fall out of the chain but retain its influence by having spread its influence to other, more visible and current ideas, practices, and structures. A “quasi-permanent internal causal structure” can decline even as other attributes of identities or institutions decline (Patterson 2004, p. 100). The point is made squarely with the example of slavery in history:

When we ask a question such as how the institution of slavery influenced some area of modern life, the answer is not necessarily found in the identification of cultural patterns that are similar to those found during the period of slavery. Continuities may, and usually do, exist where there are no similarities in cultural objects. This is because of the operation of continuities through causal chains. By these means, one cultural complex or event in one period can have a relation of continuity with an entirely different object or type of event in a later period. [...] The economies and industrial relations of modern Jamaica and Cuba are profoundly different from plantation economies and labor relations of the slave past; yet, it is possible to demonstrate striking causal chains of continuity between past and present. (Patterson 2004, pp. 100–101)

Within this definition of continuity, continuity and change are the outcome of causal chains of social relations. Causality emerges as part of the “internal structure” of the “time-laden stream of potentially changeable attributes” that generate persistent

artifacts (Patterson 2004, p. 99). Relational social theories see societies as “pluralities of associated individuals” and place individual persons at the center of change and continuity (Emirbayer 1997, p. 287). Further, relational analysis “embeds the actor within relationships and stories that shift over time and space and thus precludes categorical stability in action,” and protects against detaching social things (people, practices, motifs, and artifacts) from their spatiotemporal context (Somers and Gibson 1994, p. 65). We can approach context as a relational social structure—consisting of nothing but relations, in some sense—but as one with definite effects. These effects are caused partly by the field, partly by the actors occupying positions in the field and negotiating various relations (Hirschman & Reed 2015).

With this discussion, I aim to build a framework for long-term historical work in sociology that approaches continuity and change as an assemblage of motifs that are periodically redeployed in such a way that they provide the ideational and structural supports for enslavement. One component of this interpretive work is to create connections between nonidentical things, making sense of them as having power in the world. Habits of interpretation generate and are generated by motifs and narratives, creative products of interpretation and experience that have tangible consequences for social life and outcomes (Reed 2011; Steinmetz 1992 Zubrzycki 2016). My approach requires two concessions. The first is that I grant leeway to imperfect boundaries between myth and history, cultural *topoi* and scholarly concepts. It is not always possible to capture the contemporary resonances and reverberations of a motif or artifact at the moment of its deployment. Some scholars insist that we treat them as speech acts, intended for specific audiences and rhetorical exchanges. This method is too limited, I believe, and it contrasts with available evidence. The second concession, then, is that I grant cultural motifs sufficient power to shape our perceptions of and actions in the world (Hirschman & Reed 2015).

*Longue durée* historiography of slavery, of the type exemplified by Patterson—has mostly vanished from the scene.<sup>1</sup> The turn to the Black Atlantic as a specific field of study, focused on the experiences of Black Africans and their descendants in the triangle trade and the New World plantations, has been enormously productive for theory-building and long-range historical study. It has turned our attention to the micro-ecologies that radically reconfigured global politics and the Black Diaspora, and to the ideas about people, sovereignty, and religion that served as the vehicle for the blood-thirsty project of colonialism. Feeding this toxic river of colonial thought were cultural motifs and ideas flowing from centuries-old practices of enslavement. **The long-range, mass trade in women from the Balkans, I argue, was one of those motifs. I have found it essential to move well beyond the bounds of traditional modernity in sociology because the evidence demonstrates that the kinds of continuity that persisted into the transatlantic trade developed from deeply embedded conceptual and cultural motifs of female enslavement. Such motifs were redeployed in images, texts, and domestic norms, and were crystallized in law.** Funerary monuments, inscriptions, language, and cultural practices serve as my evidentiary basis for documenting the endurance and ideational strength of old motifs as they were intertwined with new institutions and political projects.

<sup>1</sup> A noteworthy exception is David Brion Davis and collaborators in the *AHR* volume *Crossing Slavery's Boundaries* (2000).

Long-term analysis of enslavement across societies blurs the significance of individuals and events. As Braudel put it succinctly, “Annihilating innumerable events—all those which cannot be accommodated in the main ongoing current and which are therefore ruthlessly swept to one side—[*longue durée* analysis] indubitably limits both the freedom of the individual and even the role of change” (Braudel 1972, p. 1244). For this reason, he concluded, “the long run wins out in the end.” The challenge posed by Braudel for sociological study of slavery is ontological as well as methodological. Our commitment to agency and contingency has problematized hegemonic models of domination, such that past episodes of resistance highlight power, organization, and dignity among enslaved people. The same intellectual commitment has dismantled historical teleologies that suggested that racist oppression is eternal and inevitable. Rather than shrug off the long history of enslavement as the tragic byproduct of essential human savagery, we now insist that specific processes, structures, individuals, and actions influenced the outcomes in particular ways. Among other achievements, this insistence has greatly expanded our conception of the archive, and its capacities and limitations for explaining the past (Gaddis 2002: 41). The archive, Mbembe argues, is “fundamentally a matter of discrimination and of selection, which, in the end, results in the granting of a privileged status to certain written documents, and the refusal of that same status to others, thereby judged ‘unarchivable’.” The archive is, therefore, not a piece of data, but a status” (Mbembe 2002, pp. 18, 20). Status includes imaginary status, wherein the bits and pieces of the past, preserved as codices and letters, papyrus rolls and parchment, and as artifacts and photos, suggest completion and unity. But completion and unity are illusory because archives impose a qualitative distinction between present and absent people. Those who show up in the archive have a chance that their experiences will be conveyed through our narratives. Those who do not are without testimony. Part of the work of long-term critical historical sociological work, then, is to acknowledge the archive as but one (imperfect) source, and to try to shine a bright light on the forgotten subjects swallowed up by the crest and swash of big history. The gendered aspect of this forgetting takes on new significance when we reflect on the habitual omission of women from *longue durée* historical analyses, and from histories of slavery that assume manumission for men meant freedom for women. It did not.

The “disappearance of slavery from northwestern Europe” is established fact among many historians (Davis 2009, p. 13). The point having been settled, critical histories of slavery over the long term have asked what precipitated the re-ignition of long-distance slave trades in the fifteenth century. Historians of the medieval period, on the other hand, insist that slavery never disappeared from Europe; in the run-up to imperial expansion and colonialism, in fact, zonal slave trading across the Mediterranean, Adriatic, and Black Sea region supported economic recovery and growth (McCormick 2002). For scholars of the transatlantic trade, nevertheless, the African trade opened a new chapter in the long history of enslavement (Berlin 2003; Vogt 1982). Novel elements include specifically racist ideas and categories, the scale of the enterprise, and the institutionalization of lifelong extractive laboring (Holsey 2007). Whereas enslaved populations in the Caribbean and North America had been multiracial—comprising people of white European, Amer-Indian, and African background—from the mid-seventeenth-century forward slavery in the New World was overwhelmingly the experience of Black and brown people of African heritage.

Mbembe writes, “Between 1630 and 1680, a bifurcation took place that gave birth to plantation society as such. The principle of lifelong servitude for people of African origin stigmatized because of their color gradually became the rule. Africans and their children became slaves for life. The distinctions between White servants and Black slaves became much sharper” (Mbembe 2017, p. 19). Racialized distinctions were concretized in legislative changes that eliminated Black captive laborers’ legal standing and classified as slaves all children born to enslaved women, a tangled web of interests that required new ways of thinking about ethics, power, and the human experience. Zonal slavery, the long-distance trade in human beings who were trained to work and serve without pay and without rights, was built on nomological codes in which biology, culture, and place were subject to disciplining and restructuring via parasitic invasion.

### The concept of parasitism and the case of Rome

In *Slavery and Social Death*, Patterson explains parasitism as follows: “in the process of dominating and making another individual dependent, he also makes himself (the dominator) dependent” (Patterson 1982, p. 336). Masters and owners have, throughout history, used law, cultural myths, and social isolation to generate enslaved persons’ “dependence.” Among the many techniques of social isolation developed by slave masters—including disenfranchisement, the denial of personhood, and the fiction of race-based difference—deracination figures prominently. Deracination is the cutting off of a person or thing from its *radix*—literally its “roots” or natural environment. Forcibly removing people from their homes and communities, transporting the removed persons long distances into new ecologies, and dissolving their linguistic and cultural ties are tried-and-true tactics of deracination. The violence embedded in deracination becomes clear when we recall its etymological relation to *eradicate*—to extinguish. The core features of zonal slavery are those of deracination. Not every form of slavery involves long-distance crossing, but slavery always involves parasitism and deracination.

Parasitism, then, is more than a technique of domination. It is a particular orientation to the world. In chapter 12 of *Slavery and Social Death* Patterson argues,

Conceiving of slavery as a relation of parasitism has many advantages. Parasitism emphasizes the asymmetry of all such unequal relations: the degree to which the parasite depends on the host is not necessarily a direct measure of the extent to which the host is exploited in supporting the parasite. A parasite may be only partially dependent on its host, but this partial dependence may entail the destruction of the host. Or the host may be totally dependent on the parasite, but the parasitism may only partially influence the host—or may have no effects beyond being a minor nuisance, in which case the relation approaches what biologists call commensalism. (Patterson 1982, p. 335)

With characteristic polychronic fluency, Patterson builds the argument with evidence from colonial Jamaica, the antebellum southern United States, and ancient Rome. Parasitism, it is clear, flourishes wherever there is enslavement. It is not a peculiar

feature of Kingston or South Carolina or the eternal city. And yet, the concept has been taken up with particular enthusiasm by historians of ancient Rome and its successor empires (Toledano 2017). This is explained in part by parasitism's destabilizing implications for the "field of honor" characteristic of Roman society (Roller 2001). In Rome, the *cursus honorum*, or social status trajectory of a male elite, was sustained by a silent cast of enslaved men and women whose role in life it was to serve the needs of the owner. By necessity, enslaved women and men subordinated their own wills to his paternalistic force. The respectability of the owner's household and family name was deeply bound up with the deference and industry of his slaves. The forms of servitude varied, and included debt-bondage, helotage, temple slavery and serfdom, but also chattel slavery, an absolute form of unfreedom in which enslaved persons were assimilated to commodities, over whom owners enjoyed complete mastery (Finley 1980; Hopkins 1978). The system of Roman slavery persisted for a millennium, pervading all aspects of society (Bradley 1987; Garnsey 1996). Roman generals captured hundreds of thousands of people through military conquest. Slavery rather than massacre became the preferred method for asserting Roman power. After this, slaves were omnipresent. They could be everywhere in the economy, performing menial tasks as well as highly skilled, specialist functions.

Roman elites loathed themselves for their dependence on slaves. They loathed their slaves for their integral role in the functioning of Roman society. Let us consider a text from Pliny the Elder, an experienced Roman slaveowner living in the first century CE. He wrote:

We walk with the feet of others, we recognize our acquaintances with the eyes of others, rely on others' memory to make our salutations [to remember people's names and titles when we greet them], and put into the hands of others our very lives; the precious things of nature, which support life, we have quite lost. We have nothing else of our own save our luxuries. (Pliny, *Natural History* 29, 8)

Pliny's text adumbrates Patterson's own description of human parasitism as "that raw, human sense of debasement inherent in having *no being except as an expression of another's being*" (Patterson 1982, p. 78, my emphasis.) Note the intimacy of Pliny's elisions. The body of the slave is like a cyborg, losing its autonomy piece by piece. The slave owner's most basic physical functions—walking, seeing, remembering—are carried out by the enslaved person. It is worth noting, too, that Pliny the Elder is worried about this dependence. The passage comes in a long chapter on health, remedies, and physician malpractice, and what is happening here is a parasitic transfer: the master's body fuses with that of his slave. Pliny was warning his elite readers against becoming too dependent on slaves, guiding his elite readers toward longevity, mental toughness, and the physiological capacity to exercise dominion over their *res*—their business activities and their possessions, including people.

Pliny's text also speaks to the gendered nature of slave labor in Rome. Male slaves typically performed the public work of seeing and remembering acquaintances or carrying the litter. Girls and women toiled in the private sphere, tending to the bodily and emotional needs of their owners and children; in effect, the precious things of nature [*rerum naturae pretia*] required for base existence. Every enslaved person had a

role to play in supporting the fiction of a harmonious household. For girls and women, the crucial objective was to make it look as though they doted on their young charges and cheerfully worked for their masters and mistresses. Their sexual vulnerability, which extended to bearing children they may not have wanted, further imperiled them to the parasitic needs of the *paterfamilias*. Roman society developed strategies to mask the contradictions of forced familiarity. A paradigmatic strategy was commensal parasitism—unfree domestic labor directed at the sustainment of intimate household practices.

To study this, we have at our disposal a significant yet unusual set of images commemorating women laborers and slaves in the western-most province of the Roman Empire: Celtiberia, modern north-central Spain. Celtiberia was one of the last regions of the Iberian Peninsula to be incorporated into the Roman political dominion. Colonialization was a prolonged and violent undertaking there. Celtiberians held on to their native (non-Latin) names longer than did provincials in other parts of the empire; they were slow to modify the architectural fabric of their urban centers; and they engaged in outright hostilities with the Romans, culminating in the Numantine Wars of the 140 's and 130 's BCE (Rose 2003). This was a period of horrific bloodshed in which entire village populations were massacred and the residents of the town of Numancia were starved to death under a long siege (Richardson 2000). In summary, the native people in this region were not eager recipients of Rome's civilizing gifts (Keay 1988). One implication of this history is that when we study self-commemoration for indices of servile or free identity, we must balance that with the other crucial boundary of identity making in this context: being Roman or non-Roman, or, perhaps more accurately, Celtiberian or Other (Woolf 2000). Then as now, colonized indigenes in the provinces were treated as inherently inferior to the colonizing power (Steinmetz 2008, p. 593). Parasitic dependence on human labor existed in Celtiberia prior to Romanization, but Roman law brought new, more draconian mechanisms of enslavement.

The Celtiberian funerary monuments follow a general aesthetic structure: three registers, with a geometric motif at the top, a figural image in the middle, and an inscription at the bottom (Greenland 2007). By far the most common way to commemorate women was in a chair in front of a small table, typically adorned with small pots, a mirror, and small objects that may be associated with feasting. They broadly share idealizing features common to Hellenistic art, and yet they insist on realism by placing figures on ground-lines and in everyday configurations of figural scale and accessories. The monuments have a key analytical advantage. We know their archaeological context, which means that we have a good idea of how they were actually incorporated into daily life. Specifically, they were set up along the entrances to their respective towns, outside the town walls. For a roughly three-hundred-year period, this was a widespread tradition across the empire (Stewart 2003, p. 92). The sociological implication of this arrangement is profound. When dozens or even hundreds of funerary monuments lined the streets, jostling for position, we have to imagine that markers of individuality gave way to the broader contours of genre. The imagery along the streets of tombs effected a cultural transaction that was a common, even daily, occurrence, seemingly mundane in its immediate circumstances yet significant in its overall effects. People regarded these funerary monuments as active participants in social life, as though they were animated with the spirits of the dead. This clamorous “second

population” was integrated into civic life in a way that looks very different from cemeteries in the contemporary United States. In Rome, the free and the enslaved lived together and died together.

The first example comes from the town now called Lara de los Infantes, and which ancient historians have associated with the Roman site of Nova Augusta. The tombstone of Atta Altica presents a woman at a loom (see Fig. 1). She is rendered as a flat image but with personalized features, including the hairstyle, which is in fact crucial for our interpretation of these and the other tombstones in this data set. The top of Atta’s head is marked with a pattern of striations, suggesting short braids or twists. It is noteworthy that she appears to have her hair exposed. In ritual or ceremonial scenes in the ancient Mediterranean world, women usually covered their heads. This was the preferred convention for respectable wives and daughters in Roman society. Atta, however, is not presented with that status. Instead, she has the status of a loyal daughter who works at the loom. The inscription provides straightforward information: Atta Altica, daughter of Aunia, (who made it), twenty years old. Note that it is her mother doing the honoring here, not her father, which would have been much more common in ancient Rome. Aunia is an indigenous matronymic, and we do not have masculine versions of this name (Velaza 1999, p. 668). Atta, too, has a Celtiberian name, transliterated into the Latin alphabet, and she has Celtiberian hair and dress style. She is commemorated for being proficient in an occupational activity that was prized as quintessentially feminine, but in other depictions of Roman women weaving, they are not actually working, or they have highly stylized tools that would not function in real



**Fig. 1** Funerary monument of Atta Altica, Lara de los Infantes, Burgos, Spain. Burgos Museum

life. Atta is actually working and is publicly honored for menial, gendered work in the visual grammar of respectable Roman commemorative rituals, while retaining possession of native markers of identity.

A second example, that of a woman called Pompeia Flacilla, presents a combination of servile and served figures. The *praenomen* of the commemorated woman is generic Roman, while the surname is Latinized from the Celtiberian. In other words, she has retained the name of her indigenous family. The deceased is seated at the table, which is laid with luxury objects including a mirror and cosmetics. One of the most striking aspects of this woman is her hairstyle, a schematic rendering of braided hair pulled to the back of the neck. The same styling appears on indigenous pottery, indicating that Pompeia, while sporting a Latinized name, has not adopted the metropolitan Roman styles of elite women. With her nomenclature and pictorial stylization, the woman falls in the middle social space between master and slave. Of particular interest is the female figure in the background, bringing a cloth bag containing the accessories of a ladies' maid. She has braided hair, uncovered, consistent with indigenous styling, and a work dress. The dead woman is named in formula, presenting her kinship ties and age. The overall monument follows the standards of western provincial commemorative art. The female servant, however, brings this monument a rare quality: a relational space between servile and served.

A third example is the tombstone of Optatila Festa from the Roman town of Nova Augusta in Spain (see Fig. 2). The inscription tells us that a man called Candidus Baebus dedicated the monument to her (which means he will have purchased the tombstone and seen to its being publicly set up and cared for). The word *vernaculla* indicates that she was a house-born slave. There is no “L” (for *liberta*) to suggest that



**Fig. 2** Funerary monument of Optatila Festa, a servant woman who died age 27. According to the inscription, the monument was dedicated by her owner, the Roman citizen Bebio Candido. Lara de los Infantes, Burgos, Spain. First century, BCE

she was manumitted. The implication here is that she was enslaved at the time of her death, aged twentyseven. Optatila Festa is seated at a table set with dining objects, which would have been consistent with the way the dead were honored, typically buried with drinking vessels and then their gravesites ritually “fed” with offerings of wine and food on religious holidays and death days. Commensal parasitism is more than metaphoric here, it is literal—as a house slave, Optatila was one of countless women, men, and children forced to set table. Opulent dining was a key signifier of status in Roman society (D’Arms 1991). It was the job of slaves to pull it off, from agricultural work to pouring wine at table. Commensality was serious social business, and owners and slaves were locked together in its deployment.

Historians of slavery have looked at monuments like this one and concluded that it is an expression of individual identity, of resistance to servitude and effacement. John Bodel typifies this perspective when he argues that funerary commemoration was a “natural locus for defying the forces of natal alienation and dishonor” because it was here, in stone, that ex-slaves could insist on the legitimacy and permanency of honorable kin ties (Bodel 2017, p. 83). There is limited theoretical gain in arguing for or against this interpretation. It is just that—an interpretation—and does not diminish what we know about the oppressiveness of enslavement in Rome. The material and textual evidence together demonstrate that funerary monuments were not expressions of creative individuality; rather, they were indices of the deceased’s correct conformity to the system. Think of them as one of the “incentives for cooperation” that were the lynchpin of Roman imperial control of vast swathes of land and of people (Burbank and Cooper 2010, p. 24). Or, as Mbembe puts it, slaving empires are funerary powers, and they reify the death of the colonized while also denying that their life had any kind of value. The majority of the statues present the symbols of domination and occupation. The enslaved and conquered are merely the “lugubrious dead”, raised to the status of tutelary divinities by the pagan beliefs of violence (Mbembe 2017:128).. The presence of the lugubrious dead in the public sphere ensured that both murder and cruelty saturated the social imaginary and reproduced the parasitic reliance on more.

The funerary monuments of central Spain document the circulation of a set of images presenting servile women in domestic settings, seated or working. The inscriptions use names and formulaic relationships that suggest a system of rank distinctions and rewards for docility. The ideal of domesticity for Roman society is read through the labor and loyalty of these women. Despite numerous changes in slavery law in the Roman Empire, including the introduction of limited rights for some slaves (*coloni*), the motif of domestic servitude did not disappear. The collapse of Empire entailed significant changes in power at the top of the social order, and the six hundred or so elite households that owned hundreds of thousands of slaves found their landholdings dispersed and political access diminished. Many elites retained their properties, a provision that guaranteed a tax base for the Visigoths, Carolingian kings, “Saracens” (Muslims), and other new ruling factions. Large-scale slavery continued unabated in the areas now associated with Spain, Italy, Turkey, and North Africa. The decline of the *latifunda* system of Rome, eventually replaced by serf labor on farms, has been interpreted as the decline of chattel slavery. But that perspective subsumes women’s experiences to men’s. The literary and archaeological evidence demonstrates that women were parasitically relied upon in households. Their labor was forced in the

kitchen, garden, and stables, and in the nursery and bedrooms. They were not seen as eligible marriage partners since servile status was transmitted to their children no matter the father's status (and manumission was, as far as we can tell, a privilege mostly given to men).

Proclaiming opposition to slavery became a key discursive move in late Antique Christian politics, but such proclamations should not be taken as meaningful changes in attitudes toward equality or enfranchisement for enslaved persons. The following example illustrates the point. In the middle of the eighth century CE, Venetian traders came to the city of Rome, where they participated in the slave market, buying Christians for shipment to the “pagan infidels” in Africa. Pope Zachary (741–752 CE) objected to the trade. He closed the market and freed as many slaves as he could. His biographer praised him for this virtuous deed, and Zachary was later held up as an opponent of slavery and a champion of freedom for poor laborers. But what was the Papal proclamation really about? The “pagan infidels” whom Zachary was targeting were Muslims, who were seen as a spiritual and political threat to Christians. Zachary's move was an early volley in what would become a wholesale economic war with Muslim-majority polities: four hundred years later, at the Third Lateran Council of 1179, the papacy imposed systematic embargoes on cross-Mediterranean trade. Western Christians who violated the trade ban, by purchasing from or selling to Muslims or providing navigational equipment or expertise, faced ex-communication. Zachary may or may not have been committed to the freedom, safety, and dignity of the human beings bought and sold at the Venetian slave market. We have no record of further exertions on his part to ban slavery, which continued to thrive in other parts of Christendom. On a cultural level, papal embargoes like Zachary's urged European Christians to think and act as a united force (Stantchev 2014). Enslavement per se was not the problem; enslavement of Christians, and their sale to African Muslims, was, on the other hand, a spiritual, economic, and political crisis. Slaving took on a moral rationale: people without souls (by definition, all non-Christians) were eligible for enslavement due to their inherent characteristics (“inherence” itself being a flexible term susceptible to strategic recoding). This discourse owed a debt to Roman justifications for enslavement, when the pretext for violent domination of captive labor was child-like barbarism in need of paternalistic rule. (American slave owners who justified their ownership of human beings as paternal benevolence derived that motif from Roman texts.) It was a durable cultural motif that could be strategically redeployed and grafted onto contemporary economic and legal practices. Medieval law changed several things about the slave trade, and papal law imposed ex-communication, castration, and execution for those who violated slave laws. But one thing that carried over from ancient Rome to the Carolingian kingdoms, through the slaveries of northern Europe in the early modern period, was this: slave status was transmitted by women and women were the embodiment of enslavement (McCormick 2002; but see also McKee 2004). Mass manumission came in and out of political style, but at every point it

was largely a benefit accorded to men. To understand how female domestic parasitism hardened into the backbone of zonal slavery we must turn our attention to the other side of the Adriatic, to the city on the Dalmatian coast that pioneered techniques of enslavement and human commodification that would prove influential on the Atlantic

trade. The city was Ragusa and the techniques were practiced, overwhelmingly, on women.

### Thirteenth century Ragusa: Parasitic domesticity and slave women

Ragusa (modern Dubrovnik) was a tribute-paying city-state under Venetian suzerainty in the thirteenth and early fourteenth century. Venice found in Ragusa a strategic trading center on the promising Dalmatian coast. It was also a city in which slavery was deeply embedded in social and economic life. The documentary evidence for slavery in this city is particularly rich: large numbers of female slaves were employed in Ragusan households, providing essential domestic labor including child-rearing, food preparation, textile production, and emotional work. We know from the records of slave sales that 90% of the human beings bought and sold in this city bore female names (Stuard 1983, p. 163). We know, too, that most of those captive women and girls were captured in rural areas. For elite Ragusans it was a cheap and largely successful method of commanding labor. To maintain equilibrium, however, the system required a cohesive social order in which buyers and sellers coordinated efforts to ensure that enslaved persons remained docile and loyal. Terms including *pueri* and *puellae* (boys/sons and girls/daughters), *famulae* and *famuli* (family servants) suggest on the surface that slaves were treated as kin, but any such interpretations are challenged by the evidence that slaves were systematically cut off from their natal families and home communities, and forcibly reassigned Ragusan identities. As such, “kin” terms used this way reveal the parasitic dependence of owners on their enslaved workers, who were expected to be constantly available to serve—not as family, but as a familiar presence in the household.

Ragusa became known throughout the region as the place to go for trained, domestic slaves, giving the city-state a competitive edge as a carrying power in the commercial economy. Historian Susan Mosher Stuard writes:

The tractability of Ragusa’s servile workers encouraged the Mediterranean-wide market for slaves from Ragusa, while helping to keep the idea of slavery in the forefront of people’s minds. Ragusan traders brought their slaves to a variety of Mediterranean ports and this continued after the prohibition of export of slaves in 1416. (Stuard 1983, p. 170, citing Verlinden 1977, pp. 750–759)

A walled city, Ragusa had a system of legal codes, market standards, and cultural arrangements that provided ideal conditions for specialized slave training. Runaways were severely punished, and the law made specific provisions for slave owners whose human property absconded or was damaged or killed. Girls and women captured in the mountains were brought into Ragusa and broken in as domestic slaves: taught the essential skills of running a household, given new names, and trained in a new socio-cultural system in which their docility, loyalty, and hard work were rewarded (Stuard 1995). Deracination, via names, language, dress, habits, and corporeal comportment, was essential to the success of Ragusa’s reputation as the preeminent slave training and trading center. The more these women and girls were successfully remade into docile domestics, the more they could fulfill the owners’ fantasies of control, loyalty,

household stability, and prosperity (Stuard 1995). They could also be sexually violated, physically punished, and sold away at their owners' whim.

*Sclava*, or slave woman, became the gold standard in the market for domestic servants, and the Slav slaves “were highly prized in Egypt, Syria, Cyprus, Sicily, eastern Spain, and other Mediterranean markets” (Davis 2003, p. 18). Between 1414 and 1423, some 10,000 Slavic people, most of them women and girls, were sold in Florence alone (Davis 1984). Slavic people were so frequently the targets of slave raids and trading that the cultural identity of Slav became bound up with the status of slave, leading to “the common root for the term ‘slave’ throughout the European languages, not to mention its use as one word for slave in Arabic” (Patterson 1982, p. 156). The linguistic conjunction of Slav and slavery recognizes the large numbers of women who had been forcibly removed from the Balkans and transported across the Mediterranean to the slave markets in Venice and North Africa. The earliest textual affirmation of this renaming is the *Liber statutorum civitatis Ragusii*, the legal code of the city-state of Ragusa (see Liber IV, c. 2, 3; Liber VI, c. 42–53). In the first book of the code, chapter fourteen sets forth the responsibilities of free Ragusan citizens who wish to deal in the lucrative trade in captive labor:

Let it be known to all Ragusians and those living outside the city walls, who have plans [to deal in] a slave man (*sclavum*) or slave woman (*sclavam*) and send him or her outside the city by the sea, given for every slave man or slave woman who is at least two cubits in height, one third of a hyperpera [must be paid] [...] according to ancient custom.<sup>2</sup>

This text is the first occurrence in writing of the word “slave” as derived from Slav rather than the Latin *servus*. It is significant to note the terminological shifts for men versus women. *Sclavus* was encoded as the masculine counterpart to *sclava*. The term *servus*, which descended from the time of the Roman Empire, changed considerably to denote enhanced rights and social status of servile men. The word *ancilla*, on the other hand, remained stable in meaning: it referred to a female chattel slave for over a thousand years. The *servus*'s possibilities for inclusion in the civil sphere were expanded, concomitant with new cultural motifs of free (male) workers. The stability of *ancilla* reveals the endurance of the idea and practices associated with female enslavement. It is one example of “a history of *change without transformation*, a history of the many changes in women's lives that have occurred without usually transforming in significant ways the imbalance of power between the sexes” (Bennett 1997, p. 88; emphasis in the original). It is not that there is no history to be written, but rather that a fully historicized account of slavery must not assume that legal and regime shifts resulted in tangible changes in that ways that ordinary people experienced power.

Domestic slavery as it was instituted at Ragusa intersected with the Mediterranean trade in slaves in various ways, yet remained a distinct system noted for its totalizing deracination and strong legal prohibitions on free wage laborers and enslaved workers becoming citizens of the town. Formal barriers to citizenship combined with negative

<sup>2</sup> *Liber Statutorum Civitatis Ragusii, compositus anno 1272, Monumenta Historico-Juridica Slavorum meridionalium*, Liber I, c. XIV. My translation.

stereotypes about poor mountain women to keep enslaved workers socially marginalized and forever outside the civil sphere. The ideational embeddedness of domestic docility, then, acquires a further ideational layer that sustains specific civic structures. Ragusan slaves were disenfranchised because the full rights of free people were only recognizable with reference to a disenfranchised group. The legacy of this mode of thought extends well into the modern period. Recounting nineteenth century Italians' rationalization of slavery in the nation's past, Steven A. Epstein writes, "The necessity or use of slavery for a free people was not based on their liberty, but on their equality; slaves fulfilled the base functions so that free people would be equal in their access to leisure for the higher things. [...] Roman and Greek history confirmed all this" (Epstein 2001, p. 54).

### The violence of parasitic predation in the Black Atlantic

Let us move forward in time to a more familiar chapter in the grim history of human bondage. The *Zong* set sail for Fort William, Jamaica from the Ghanaian coast in August 1781. The ship was dangerously overloaded with human beings: built to transport some two hundred men, women, and children as captives, on this trip it held 442 people. The ineptitude and cruelty of the captain, Luke Collingwood, illustrates one of the "new modes of accountability" engendered by the Black Atlantic (Gilroy 1993, ch. 1). Three months after leaving Ghana, the *Zong's* crew, in order to protect its investment and correct for clerical and navigational errors, deliberately drowned some 133 children, women, and men (Davis 2006, p. 234). Collingwood's dispatch to the Liverpool insurance company claimed thirty pounds sterling per head for the "legally enforceable quantum of value." *The quantum of value* of the enslaved African is the harshest of scales, those rough tools for making rational sense of the world. The story of the *Zong* has been told many times. Its horrific offloading became a rallying cry for abolitionists and the paradigmatic example of slavery's depravity. I want to reflect, however, on what happened before the ship left Accra.

A vast network of slave factories along Africa's West Coast siphoned millions of lives into the transatlantic trade, with far-reaching implications for the people and communities left behind (Daaku 1970, ch. 2; Holsey 2007). For many captive people—including those on the *Zong*—the process started with imprisonment in the hellish confines of a military fortress, fortified castle, or dungeon, where they were systematically dehumanized and degraded by being shorn of their clothing, hair, names, and natal relations (Jordan 2007). If the walled city of Ragusa was a laboratory in the experiment of total domination, to paraphrase Arendt, Elmina, Cape Coast Castle, and the eighty-odd slave factories like them constituted the perfection of encampment, where human lives were reduced to corporeal objects of violent discipline. The slave camp served as the paradigmatic transition into mass displacement (Miles 2005, p. 154). Over time, it was the existence of these camps, and what was happening in them, that justified new ways of thinking about Blackness. They opened a new chapter in zonal slavery by greatly expanding the scale and political structures involved in the trade, and by converging slavery with racist ideology to target Black and brown people (Epstein 2001). In doing so, the camps extended the codes of nomological life

established some four centuries earlier at Ragusa, among them liquifiable ties, forced zonal crossings, and extractive parasitism.

By extraction I mean, with Mbembe, a body “entirely exposed to the will of the master, a body from which great effort is made to extract maximum profit” (Mbembe 2017, p. 18). Extractive parasitism empties out its human subject completely. Mbembe’s own explanation is given with unsurpassed clarity, and I quote him in full:

Extraction was first and foremost the tearing or separation of human beings from their origins and birthplaces. The next step involved removal or extirpation, the condition that makes possible the act of pressing and without which extraction remains incomplete. Human beings became objects as slaves passed through the mill and were squeezed to extract maximum profit. Extraction [...] produced the Black Man [into] a *thing* that could be discarded once it was no longer useful. (Mbembe 2017, p. 40)

Disposal of enslaved African people was determined by principles of utility and profit. The same calculus of decision-making was at work in thirteenth century Ragusa, where captive women from the Balkans were forced through the mill of domestic disciplining, nursing their masters’ children and catering to the psychological, physical, and sexual needs of their owners. Domestic docility and extractive parasitism challenge us to confront our gendered coding of varieties of violence, through which we tend to understand violence done by and to women as “internal” (and therefore private, hidden, and emotional) but violence done by and to men as “outward, directed towards the oppressor” and the bare life of the male captive (Gilroy 1993, p. 66).

When scholars argue that Crete’s agricultural slaves were the “dress rehearsal” for New World plantation slavery (Verlinden 1962), or that indigenous forms of servitude in Africa provided the structural machinery for the transatlantic trade, they focus on similarities in economic structures and political projects but overlook culture. This focus has resulted in an analytical neglect of the sustained involvement of women in the development of zonal slave trading and parasitic domination (Patterson 2012). This does not mean that European slavers were consciously trying to recreate Ragusa on the Gold Coast. Nor does it mean that they were deliberately taking the example of enslaved women and reconfiguring it to suit Black African men. But the existence of enslaved women, captured and dehumanized, trained and then exported as a priced good, helped make it possible to imagine and realize enslaved Black men and women as zonal commodities. As Patterson argued in the case of slavery in Jamaica, the continuity of a social construct does not necessarily imply identical replication of institutional or individual details. What is key is the accumulation of thinking and interpreting in layers over time, each new contribution being conditioned by the already-available cultural frames.

## Conclusion

Human parasitism is an orientation to the world that regards certain kinds of people—women, Black and brown people, or the working poor—as existing primarily to support the lives of others. It persisted as slavery in different forms

throughout the Mediterranean during the medieval and early modern periods. The domestic parasitism celebrated in Celtiberia was redeployed as extractive parasitism in thirteenth century Ragusa, where the enslaved *Slav* was entwined with collective political identity and private capital. Through plantation colonization and the transatlantic trade in captive Black Africans, extractive parasitism expanded to become the dominant form of enslavement. All forms of slavery, David Brion Davis reminds us, embody the desire to “dominate another person until she or he becomes a willing extension of our own will, and instrument to serve our own needs” (Davis 2003, p. 6). Because the violence of slavery does not necessarily reveal itself in beatings and torture, the concept of parasitism reveals the insidious practices by which people are continually invaded and diminished. The measure of misery of enslavement, whether in Celtiberia, Ragusa, Kingston, or Charleston, lies not in the blows and the beatings but in “the constant degradation” (Smail 2016, p. 242).

*Longue durée* analysis of parasitic enslavement, in the tradition of *Slavery and Social Death*, shows how accumulations of ideas and practices about servile women entangled poor and disempowered people in new relations of race-based domination and money. Methodologically, the challenge for comparative and historical sociological research is to move away from contraposing change with continuity, and to ask instead what kinds of continuity are possible at different scales of time.

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