

Book Review: Not Made by Slaves: Ethical Capitalism in the Age of Abolition by Bronwen Everill

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Bronwen Everill, *Not Made by Slaves: Ethical Capitalism in the Age of Abolition*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020. 328pp. Hardcover \$39.95.

There exist two tenable readings to Bronwen Everill's *Not Made by Slaves*. One that zooms on a bookish interest, ending in an inflation of inconsequential details: seeking to confirm one material here or challenge another one there. Under this approach and in considering the seven chapters that structure Everill's study, one will be fixated in a binary logic out of which little horizon will emerge. Alternatively, the other reading accelerates the chapters' content for a milestone of consciousness that underlines capitalism's obituary, not its presupposed ethicality as the subtitle intimates. This latter reading will surpass the literal content Everill offers. For in accelerating both readings against each other, one will hopefully clarify that important juncture in human history known as the abolition of slavery, and how that formal eradication did not translate to an egalitarian world order.

As its subtitle underlines, *Not Made by Slaves* refers to British and American abolitionists' strategies to reverse demands for enslaved labor, "humanizing" the trade by raising an ethical badge while fully knowing that the effort of maintaining its profitability had never been an easy undertaking. The prospects of ever making it work looked dim and unappetizing at a time when sellers and buyers from three continents had been enmeshed in human bondage in one way or another. Starting small had been the abolitionists' wager to challenge the unethical foundations of world trade at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries. Abolitionists had to first convince buyers in Africa (mostly Liberia and Serra Leone) that slaves were no longer an acceptable commodity with which they can pay for desired goods. In exchange, they publicized the fact that their imported cargos were not made by slaves either. The availability of long-term credits from lenders in mostly London and Boston, payments by Africans made temporarily in kind (not cash), and persistent moralizing encouraged abolitionists

to slowly but surely carve a part of the world market to their liking. Everill claims that in the decades between 1770 and 1830 abolitionists did not only survive competition but even thrived and started dictating their terms on other merchants.

Consumers, those at the receiving end of production, made abolition possible and even profitable. Differently put, the individual or that atomized consumer had successfully humanized what otherwise would have remained selfish capitalism. One notes here a fascination for beginnings and founding principles. Everill calls it the *consumer* revolution (p.12). When checked closely, that presumed revolution was no revolution at all. If anything, the presumed taste for goods not made by slaves has been the antithesis of revolution, a flat compliance to the dictates of the markets' rapidly changing demands. Still, the implications from the claim in the book leads to the question: is ethical capitalism possible? Everill's project replies not only in an abstract affirmation, but precisely via a dogmatic assertion, that capitalism has been always ethical. She advances: the harder the challenge capitalism faces, the more testimonial its efficacy becomes, provided one is not deterred by disturbing fogs here and there. There exists always light at the end of the tunnel. She argues that it is much rewarding and less damaging for all parties involved to fight from within the system: the one which incorporated both radicals such as abolitionists and their dialectical opposites—hard-nosed profiteers! Under the real domination of capitalism, such a reading is not unexpected.

Still, the analogy between past challenges facing capitalism and the present one lacks precision. If the past trial was surmountable, the present crisis is governed by the law of the tendential fall in the rate of profit, a contradiction that capitalism in order to reverse has to cancel itself. But for the sake of Everill's ostensible suggestion, human beings, regardless how individually motivated or predisposed towards either evil or benevolence, do not make history.

Modes of production and circulation do. Abolitionists had been a façade, or better, the tip of the iceberg: the visible part in a too-complex dynamic. Slavery had to be replaced by wage labor. If maintained, slavery would have resulted in a contradiction between what Hegel distinguishes as quantum and measure. At the moment of transition, only wage labor ensured the restructuring of capitalism. Maintaining slavery would have strangled that desired intensification, turning capitalism into an obsolete system, as resources for cash-to-pay for commodities and carry out the circles of production and circulation would have been drained. True, slaves as commodity have been legally extinguished, but that end ushered in the commodification of life itself in the sense that yeoman farmers have to leave their communal lands and join urban centers to earn livelihoods in workshops and factories. Slaves as a category for human labor goes now horizontal, absorbing the unlimited pool of wage laborers.

Furthermore, the book superimposes the question: is ethical capitalism *still* possible? In the midst of ever-increasing crisis of capital, the last of which is *Corona Virus* where humanity witnesses for the first time the cessation of multiple chains of production, Everill deems it not only possible to reinvent the system anew, but that such a program is even desirable. All capitalism has to ensure is to ethically commit to dispense with chimeric loans, and usury; the rest is all fine. The contention goes that capitalism in itself is not only good, practical and manageable provided it cleans its house and sprays the bugs off its body, but it is humanity's only chance for survival. Such a closure of alternatives explains the amount of selective evidence in *Not Made by Slaves*. It is pertinent to note that no body owns or controls commodities. Instead, commodities own humans. With profit as *le réacteur conceptuel*, capitalism does not need vigilant, smarter or less corrupt managers. Its immanence, that is, the reality of costs and

figures, cancels human control. It has reached a stage of contradictions where it become impossible to valorize (rearrange) what is little but alienating valorization.

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