

THE IMPACT OF SLAVERY ON THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF SOUTH AFRICA

Author(s): A. L. MÜLLER

Source: *Kronos*, 1982, Vol. 5 (1982), pp. 1-24

Published by: University of Western Cape

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41056167>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



University of Western Cape is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Kronos*

JSTOR

THE IMPACT OF SLAVERY ON THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF SOUTH AFRICA*

A.L. MÜLLER

This paper is divided into three main parts. The first deals with the economics of slavery, including the introduction of slavery at the Cape, its growth, the utilisation of slaves and their participation in economic life during the period of slavery (1658 to 1834). This sets the stage for the second part where, inductively, a number of conclusions are drawn about the long-term of slavery on South African economic development. A final section considers the question whether slavery was a necessary precondition for the development of the Cape.

The institution of slavery endured at the Cape for 176 years and for most of this period the slaves outnumbered the European colonists. Despite these and other similar indications of its historical importance, the subject of slavery, and in particular its economics, has so far received little systematic treatment. This paper can do no more than explore certain aspects of the subject and draw some tentative conclusions; hopefully, this may contribute to a greater interest in the subject and lead to further research, particularly of a quantitative nature.

1. The Economics of Slavery at the Cape

1.1 The Rationale for Slavery

From the beginning slavery was justified in economic terms, in that it was seen as the cheapest labour available to the Cape. In April 1654 Commander Van Riebeeck noted:

" it would be very much cheaper to have the agricultural work, seal catching and all the other necessary work done by slaves in return for a plain fare of rice and fish or seal and penguin meat alone and without pay. They could be obtained and brought very cheaply from Madagascar, together with rice, in one voyage. If this were done then Netherlanders would be required here only for the garrison, for undertaking expeditions and for guard duty."¹

This and other similar economic arguments about the low cost of slave labour compared with all other alternative sources of labour, eventually led to the introduction of slaves to the Cape.

* Paper read at the **Economic History Conference** held in Durban in July 1980.

1. H.B. Thom (ed.), *Journal of Jan van Riebeeck* (V.R.S., Cape Town, 1952), Vol. 1, p.224.

The Company's slave-trading practices were similar to those of other slave-traders at the time. The slaves were obtained in Madagascar, Mozambique, Guinea, Malabar and elsewhere, where they were generally bartered from native chiefs in exchange for such products as copper, beads, muskets, gunpowder or gin.² They were then shipped below decks under such overcrowded and unhygienic conditions that it was not uncommon for a quarter to a third of the human cargo to perish before the end of the voyage;³ frequently an even greater proportion died within three months of reaching the Cape, from "despondency and change of climate and food".⁴

The first consignment of slaves destined for the Cape arrived on a Dutch ship, the *Amersfoort*, on March 28, 1658. The ship had taken on 250 of the best slaves out of 500 found on a Portuguese vessel captured off the coast of Angola (and destined for (Brazil)). Only 170 slaves survived the voyage to the Cape and most of them were seriously ill as a result of the treatment they had received on board.⁵

The high mortality figures illustrate the low value placed on a slave at the time, at least by the slave traders. By 1753 slaves could still be bought in Madagascar for less than £3 each⁶ and it seems that slaves generally continued to be easily available at very low cost during the entire period of the Dutch East India Company's rule.

1.2 Market Prices

The market price of slaves at the Cape depended on such factors as their origin — those born at the Cape being in greater demand than newcomers from elsewhere — their age, sex, health, character, abilities and experience. Fair-skinned slaves, good cooks, musicians, skilled artisans or experienced farmworkers were keenly demanded usually fetched the highest prices, while lower prices were generally paid for women and children, elderly and unskilled persons and for those with physical, mental or psychological disabilities.⁷

Although the slaves were sold at a considerable profit at the Cape, they remained relatively cheap during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with the price of a

2. C. Graham Botha: *Collected Work, Vol. I: General History and Social Life of the Cape of Good Hope* (Struik, Cape Town, 1962), p. 293. Slaves also entered the Cape in other ways. Some were purchased from foreign vessels calling at the Cape. Others were brought to the Cape by company officials who were on their way to Europe, or arrived as stowaways. In 1657 there were already 11 slaves at the Cape, who had arrived in such ways. See A.J. Böesecken, *Slaves and Free Blacks at the Cape, 1658-1700* (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 1977), p.5.
3. Botha, *op.cit.*, p.293.
4. G.M. Theal, *History of South Africa* ("Star" Edition, Allen & Unwin, London, 1922; Struik, Cape Town, 1964), Vol.4, p.95. This source is hereafter referred to as *History of S.A.*
5. See Böesecken, *op.cit.*, p.11 and Eric Stockenström. *Vrystelling van die Slawe* (S.A. Bybelvereniging, Cape Town, 1934), p.17. The first Dutch slave trading vessel sent from the Cape to the Guinea coast, obtained 271 slaves, of whom 43 died during the voyage of six weeks to the Cape. Cf. A.F. Hattersley, *An Illustrated Social History of South Africa* (Balkema, Cape Town, 1969), p.27.
6. Theal, *History of S.A.*, Vol.4, p.95.
7. Cf. Botha, *op.cit.*, p.296; Böesecken, *op.cit.*, pp.75-76.

slave ranging roughly between 50 and 300 rixdollars (about £10 - £60). In Van Riebeeck's time burghers commonly paid 50 to 75 rixdollars for Angolan slaves and 100 for Guinean slaves.⁸ (Children usually sold for less.) By 1717 ordinary labourers fetched 80 to 150 rixdollars and herdsmen, masons, wagon-drivers and workmen's apprentices 150 to 300 rixdollars.⁹ prices fluctuated considerably over the course of time, according to demand and supply. In the first few years demand exceeded supply at the price at which slaves were made available to the free burghers. During times of slow economic growth, on the other hand, relatively few slaves were imported and prices declined.

Dramatic fluctuations in prices occurred after 1795. By this year the average value of slaves was still quite low — 250 and 200 rixdollars (£42 and £43, if the rixdollars is valued at 3s. 6d.) for male and female slaves, respectively.¹⁰ During the First British Occupation the higher level of economic activity stimulated the demand for slaves while imports declined, and prices increased sharply.¹¹ The average value of a slave rose to between 350 and 500 rixdollars during this period.¹² With the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 imports of slaves ceased altogether¹³ while the quickening of economic activity led to a strengthening of the demand for labour. In the decade that followed, prices of slaves probably peaked, with slaves being sold for 1200 to 3000 rixdollars during this period.¹⁴ However, part of the rise was due to the depreciation of the rixdollar. During the 'twenties, poorer economic conditions, including a decline in wine exports after 1825, caused prices to decrease.¹⁵ In 1834 the Commissioners of Compensation established that the average price of a slave in the period 1823 to 1830 had been about £73, or 973 rixdollars.¹⁶ It should be noted, however, that the latter figure was based on market prices; as most slaves had actually been acquired by their owners at earlier dates — in fact, by this time most slaves had been born at the Cape — the original cost prices were often far lower. Thus the average cost price of slaves in the government service in 1831 was 100 rixdollars.¹⁷

8. Hattersley, *op.cit.*, p.27. See also Böeseken, *op.cit.*, pp. 28, 70-72.

9. **The Reports of Chavonnes and his Council, and of Van Imhoff, on the Cape** (Van Riebeeck Society, Cape Town, 1918), p.104.

10. G.E. Cory, **The Rise of South Africa** (Longmans, Green, London, 1919), Vol. 3, p.13.

11. The act forbidding the slave trade in the colonies was passed in 1792 but only came into operation in 1807. In the intervening period the British authorities at the Cape were loathe to import slaves without the prior approval of the British government. This discontinuation of regular imports between 1795 and 1807 caused a considerable reduction in the volume of imports.

12. D.J. van Zyl, "Die Slaaf in die Ekonomiese Lewe van die Westelike Distrikte van die Kaapkolonie, 1795-1834" (mimeographed, Stellenbosch, 1977), p.22. By 1798 the average price of males was £75 and of females £64. Cory, *op.cit.*, Vol.3, p.13.

13. See footnote 11. Imports actually ceased altogether after March 1808.

14. Van Zyl, *op.cit.*, p.22.

15. Van Zyl, *loc.cit.*

16. Cf. Cory, *op.cit.*, Vol.3, p.14. Also B.J. Liebenberg, **Die Vrystelling van die Slawe in die Kaapkolonie en die Implikasies Daarvan** (Unpublished M.A. thesis, U.O.F.S., 1959), p.124.

17. W. Wright, **Slavery at the Cape of Good Hope** (1831) (Negro Universities Press, New York, 1969), p.62.

The purchase of slaves was facilitated by the fact that the slave could often be bought on credit. The slave would then, through his labour, help to redeem his purchase price, directly or indirectly.¹⁸ In any event, it seems as if despite the relatively low life expectancy at the time,¹⁹ the purchase price of a slave, when amortised over the slave's lifetime, was normally (up to about 1795) a minor consideration. The major cost of slave ownership was not of a capital nature but "maintenance costs": to provide him with food, clothing and shelter during his lifetime. But as slaves could produce or help to produce these items themselves — particularly in rural areas — these costs, too, were often negligible, at least from the owner's point of view.²⁰

1.3 The Natural Increase of Slaves

The capital costs of slaves could be further decreased by encouraging the slave population's natural increase, since the children of female slaves were themselves born into slavery. Mentzel pointed out that "it pays farmers to keep equal numbers of male and female slaves and by their natural increase to cope with the growing needs of the farm and avoid the necessity of buying additional slaves."²¹

It appears that slave women were encouraged, if not pressured, to produce offspring. This encouragement took three main forms.

In the first place, male and female slaves were allowed to co-habit freely, although marriage was not legally permitted until 1823. Secondly, soldiers and sailors were left free to enter the Company's slave lodge, which Theal described as "a sink of vice",²² to seek the company of female slaves. Mentzel stated in this regard:

"Female slaves are always ready to offer their bodies for a trifle; and towards evening, one can see a string of soldiers entering their lodge where they misspend their time until the clock strikes 9. After that hour no stranger are allowed to remain in the lodge. The Company does nothing to prevent this promiscuous intercourse, since, for one thing, it tends to multiply the slave population and it

-
18. Mortgaging of slaves played an important role in providing funds for the expansion of wine farming after 1813. 4089 slaves were mortgaged for an average amount of about 1000 rixdollars in 1823. **Records of the Cape**, XXXV, pp.375-6. Also Van Zyl, *op.cit.*, p.22.
 19. Mozambican slaves were often too old for hard work at 40 and others at 50. E.A. Walker (ed.), **The Cambridge History of the British Empire, Vol. 8: South Africa** (2nd ed., Cambridge University Press, 1963), p.276. However, this probably compared quite favourably with the life expectancy of Europeans at the time. (In the remainder of this paper this source is referred to as **C.H.B.E.**.)
 20. Slaves were generally allowed to cultivate vegetables on patches of land and to dispose of the produce for their own account — both in Cape Town and in the agricultural districts. In the pastoral districts some slaves also owned livestock — even before they became legally entitled to own property in 1823. See J.S. Marais, **The Cape Coloured People, 1652-1937** (London, 1939; Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg, 1968), p.167.
 21. O.F. Mentzel, **Description of the Cape**, Part 2 (Van Riebeeck Society, Cape Town, 1925), p.90.
 22. Theal, **History of S.A.**, Vol.4, p.99.

does away with the necessity of importing fresh slaves. Three or four generations of this admixture have produced a half-caste population — a mestizco class — but a shade darker than some Europeans.”²³

Certain privately-owned female slaves engaged in the same activity, sharing their income from this source with their “reputed” husbands. A contemporary observer noted: “These ‘birds’ are easily recognised by their ‘fine feathers’”²⁴

Thirdly, female slaves sometimes cohabited with Europeans with the permission of their owners. This arrangement had definite economic benefits for the owners, as it reduced the cost of maintaining the slave who, being female, was in any case economically less valuable than a man; furthermore, all offspring from such a union belonged to the slave owner. As Mentzel puts it:

“Female slaves sometimes live with Europeans as husband and wife with the permission of their masters who benefit in two ways: the cost of upkeep of the slave is reduced through the presents she receives from the man, and her children are the property of her master since children of female slaves are themselves slaves. These slave children are found useful at a very tender age and cost little to bring up. They are likewise better mannered and better educated than imported slaves. Some of them are taught certain trades and become skilled artisans. In this way, the slave population is constantly increasing and it is to be hoped that in a short time there will be no necessity to import any slaves . . . ”²⁵

There were also other types of liaison between European men and slave women through which the slave population was increased. Thus, referring to the farming population of the western Cape, Mentzel writes about young men’s “doing with slave and Hottentot women. Their own flesh and blood, begotten of slave women, then bear the chain of slavery in their parents’ house, and sometimes even in their own house, if the father takes over the child as a slave on the death of his parents”.²⁶

Despite such evidence about the existence of “slave breeding”, female slaves continued to be heavily outnumbered by males up to 1807.²⁷ This suggests that persons who were in a position to purchase slaves must have generally found it cheaper to buy adult male

23. O.F. Mentzel, *Description of the Cape*, Part 2, p.125. (Italics added).

24. Mentzel, *op.cit.*, Part 2, p.124. This type of behaviour was in many cases due to the very nature of slavery. Bird point out that the “powers of seduction” of slave girls and “fondness for Europeans” should be seen in the light of the fact that slaves were not allowed to get legally married; that the gifts received from Europeans supplemented their meager income; and that Englishmen, due to their dislike of slavery, might buy freedom for their offspring and even for the mother herself. W. Bird, *State of the Cape of Good Hope in 1822*. (C. Struik, Cape Town, 1966), pp.74-75.

25. Mentzel, *op.cit.*, Part 2, p.130.

26. O.F. Mentzel, *Description of the Cape of Good Hope*, Part 3 (V.R.S. Cape Town, 1944), p.119.

27. In 1806, 65 per cent of the slaves were males and only 35 per cent were females. Van Zyl, *op.cit.*, p.5. See also section 1.5 below.

slaves than to obtain more females expressly for the purpose of producing and rearing offspring at the Cape. In the interior, where the food was more readily available than cash, "slave breeding" may have been more common. In any event, this practice probably assumed greater dimensions after 1807 than before.²⁸

1.4 The Economics of Manumission

The corruption of moral sentiments (in Smith's terminology) which occurred as a result of slavery, is also revealed by the economics of the manumission of slaves.

A system of forced labour is invariably inefficient due to the lack of incentives for the workers. At the Cape the problem was to some extent overcome by the fact that the possibility of being manumitted helped to encourage a higher level of productivity and a greater degree of obedience on the part of the slave.²⁹

From the point of view of the owners, however, slaves were such valuable assets that relatively few were manumitted. During the period 1715 to 1791 only 1075 slaves were manumitted.³⁰ Of these only about 10 per cent appear to have been freed by their owners on the grounds of their faithful service; the majority were manumitted because of adventitious factors (the owner's death or departure from the Cape), and in at least 10 per cent of the cases the slaves bought their own (or others') freedom.³¹

The fact that (as from 1708) an owner could be held liable for the upkeep of his manumitted slave if the latter was unable to maintain himself,³² helped to discourage manumission; however, the greatest impediment to manumission was undoubtedly economic, in the form of the loss of a valuable productive asset. In the early 19th century the sharply rising price of slaves discouraged manumission even more.

Slavery and manumission were issues which brought virtually irreconcilable clashes between economic interests and religious beliefs. It was the doctrine of the Church (dating from 1618) that slaves who had been baptized into the Christian faith should be set free.³³ As a direct consequence of this doctrine, slave owners tended to withhold opportunities for religious instruction and baptism from their slaves. Furthermore, even when a slave was baptized he was often not set free, as the authorities did little to implement the Church's doctrine (which, in any case, had no legal power). The result

-
28. In 1828 an anonymous writer reported that a certain slave-owner employed an Irishman for no other purpose than to improve his stock of slaves! Marais, *op.cit.*, p.10.
29. Richard Elphick and Robert Shell, "White Settler Attitudes towards the Free Black Community and the Khoikhoi at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652-1795" (mimeographed, Cape Town, 1977), p.28.
30. Elphick and Shell, *op.cit.*, p.29. H. Giliomee, *Die Kaap tydens die Eerste Britse Bewind, 1795-1803* (H.A.U.M., Kaapstad, 1975), p.17, gives a figure of 893 manumissions for the same period.
31. Cf. Elphick and Shell, *loc.cit.*
32. Theal, *History of S.A.*, vol. 5, p.268.
33. Theal, *op.cit.*, vol.5, p.268.

of these developments was that by the middle of the eighteenth century only the children of the Company's slaves were still regularly baptized³⁴ and even they were apparently not manumitted.³⁵

In what appears to be an attempt to effect a compromise between economic and religious interests, the government in Batavia passed a law in 1770 which provided that slaves who professed Christianity could thereafter not be sold.³⁶ However, as this law lowered the value of Christian slaves, it encouraged owners to prevent their slaves from becoming Christians. In view of this perverse result, the law of 1770 was annulled in 1812, thus again placing baptized slaves in the same legal position as others.³⁷

These developments strongly stimulated the growth of Islam among the slave population,³⁸ at the expense of Christianity.

1.3 Demographic Tendencies

As slavery was a substitute for European immigration, one of its long-term effects was to lead to the creation of a substantial "Coloured" population³⁹ and to retard the growth of the white population. The slave population increased rapidly, mainly due to a high level of imports, and after about fifty years they began to outnumber the Europeans. By 1713 there were 1794 slaves, as against 1699 Europeans, and by the end of the century, in 1795 the slaves numbered 16 839 and the Europeans 14 952.⁴⁰ At this time about 600 slaves were being imported every year.⁴¹

Slaves continued to outnumber the Europeans for about a century. In 1806 there were 29 861 slaves as against 26 268 Europeans.⁴² After 1807, however, when imports of slaves ceased, the situation changed rapidly and by 1810 there were already more

34. Theal, *op.cit.*, vol. 4, p.99.

35. Elphick and Shell, *op.cit.*, p.9.

36. Theal, *op.cit.*, vol.5, p.268.

37. Theal, *op.cit.*, vol.5, p.268.

38. Elphick and Shell, *op.cit.*, p.12.

39. A free black group, forerunners of the "Coloured" population came into existence very soon after the arrival of the first slaves, when some slaves were set free. Apart from manumitted slaves, other members of this group were "Prize Negroes", "Bastard Hottentots" and Asian convicts and settlers. However, before the abolition of slavery this group continued to remain relatively small as they numbered only 1578 in the year 1798 (or less than 5 per cent of the total population of Europeans, slaves and free blacks), Cf. Giliomee, *op.cit.*, p.15, and Elphick and Shell, *op.cit.*, p.55. For a fairly extensive discussion of the origin of this group see A.J. Böeseken, *op.cit.*

40. Cf. D.J. van Zyl, *op.cit.*, p.3. The *Cambridge History of the British Empire* contains a serious error in that it states that the slaves were more than 25 000 and the Europeans less than 20 000 in 1795. C.H.B.E., vol.8, pp. 164-5.

41. Van Zyl, *op.cit.*, p.2.

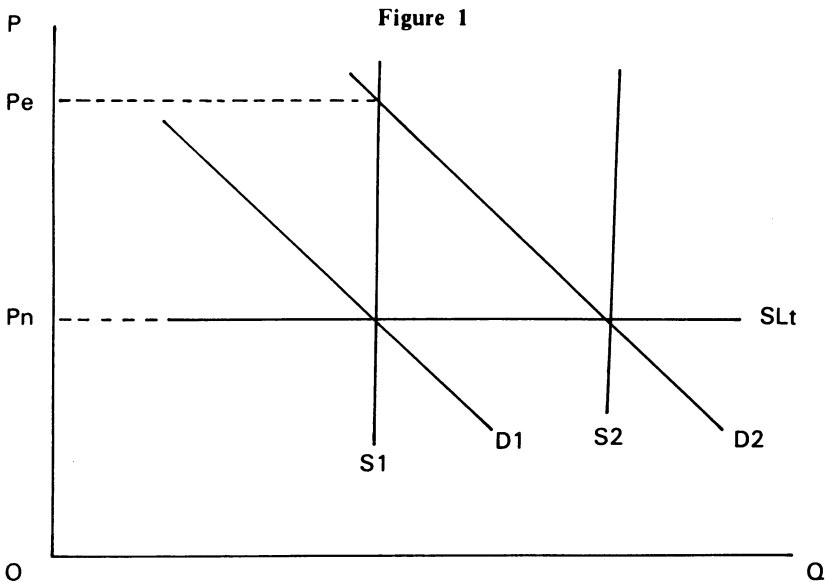
42. G.M. Theal, *Records of the Cape Colony* (London, 1900), Vol.6, p.75. This group included 15513 adult men (over 16) and only 7118 adult women (over 14) and as a result of this disparity the group had a relatively low rate of natural increase. In 1825 women accounted for just over two-fifths of the slave population (14299 as against 21210 men, out of a total population of 35 509). Wright, *op.cit.*, p.73.

Europeans than slaves — 31 194 compared with 29 394.⁴³ The rapid growth of the European population in the next few decades caused them to be about twice as numerous as the slaves by the time slavery was abolished.⁴⁴

1.6 The Economic Theory of Slave Labour

Before 1795 it was a characteristic of the supply of slaves that it was extremely flexible or elastic. Whenever "shortages" of labour occurred, the colonists exerted pressure on the authorities to import more slaves. Up to the end of the eighteenth century, this ability of supply to adjust to increases in demand, resulted in the average prices being maintained at a relatively low level.

As indicated in the diagram (fig.1), although there were times when changes in demand (e.g. from D1 to D2) caused fluctuations in price (from Pn to Pe), subsequent adjustments in supply (from S1 to S2) tended to bring the price back to its original level (Pn). The long-term supply curve tended to be completely elastic (SLt).



43. Cory, *the Rise of South Africa*, Vol.3, p.12. These figures indicate that the slave population actually decreased between 1806 and 1810. While it is possible that deaths (and manumissions) outnumbered births, the figures should be interpreted with caution as population estimates and even the censuses were often not very accurate.

44. In December 1834 there were 39021 slaves at the Cape.

Slaves were not merely cheap. In a sense they had a negative price. This could be seen most clearly in the cases where a slave produced marketable commodities which provided a net income to the owner, over and above all costs of production, including the slave's maintenance as well as amortisation of the slave's original cost. Indeed, one can reasonably assume that any rational decision to acquire a slave would have resulted from a calculation of this nature, which showed that the expected (discounted) lifetime income generated by the slave exceeded all the expected (similarly discounted) costs involved in his acquisition and maintenance.⁴⁵

In this sense slaves differed from ordinary, voluntary labour: they could be regarded as objects of profit, similar to capital goods.

It is therefore quite appropriate to analyse slavery in terms of capital theory. In figure 2(a) the individual slave owner's marginal efficiency of capital schedule is shown. It moves downwards in steps as the yield of each additional unit of capital (slave) tends to be lower than that of the previous one.

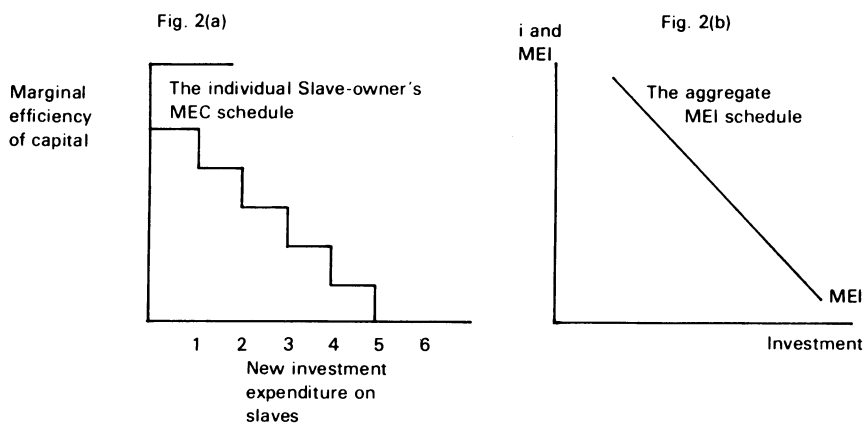


Figure 2(b) shows the aggregate marginal efficiency of investment schedule, where the aggregation process has resulted in a continuous curve.

This analysis suggests that, as in the case of other types of capital, investment in slaves rose when there was a decrease in the long-term rate of interest on borrowed funds (or in the implicit rate, i.e. opportunity cost). On the other hand an increase in the rate brought about a decrease in demand and an increase in supply, as it encouraged existing owners to sell off those slaves who had now become unprofitable.

In their examination of slavery in the southern states of America, Conrad and Meyer concluded that although some American slave owners made large profits and others failed to cover their costs, the average owner was able to secure a return on his slaves

45. In the case where the slave produced personal services which were not marketed, the prospective owner would have had to estimate the slave's utility over his lifetime and impute his monetary value from this.

equal to the average rate of interest ruling at the time, which was around 6 per cent in the ante-bellum decades.⁴⁶

The above analysis suggests that a similar relationship existed at the Cape between the relative yields of slaves and alternative investments. Unfortunately, little is known about the actual yield of an investment in slaves.⁴⁷

1.7 The Economy's Dependence on Slaves

From the beginning the profitability and low cost of slaves encouraged their widespread utilisation throughout the economy.

Most of the Cape's slaves were unskilled workers in agriculture, where they eventually performed virtually all the regular farm work: clearing land, ploughing and cultivating the soil, planting, sowing, weeding, pruning, harvesting, threshing, pressing of grapes, packaging, loading and transporting of the produce to store rooms and markets, tending the cattle, etc. All these activities were highly labour intensive as almost everything was done by hand, aided only by a relatively limited number of primitive implements. Similarly, the assistance of non-human sources of power was restricted to a few operations where oxen and horses could be used, such as ploughing and threshing. In the grain and wine producing areas most farmers owned between 15 and 30 slaves, although some wine farmers owned more than 80.⁴⁸

The socio-economic position of slaves at the Cape was superior to that of slaves on plantations in the West Indies and North America.⁴⁹ In spite of restrictions on their freedom⁵⁰ the slaves at the Cape were not condemned to a lifetime of forced labour, day in and day out, and the systems of punishment which enforced this pattern, which often characterised plantation labour elsewhere in the world. At the Cape the duties of domestic servants were light and agricultural labour was generally of a seasonal nature, characterised by slack periods during which little work was done.⁵¹ However, during slack periods some farm slaves were used in and around the house as domestic workers or for other duties such as constructing or repairing buildings, furniture, wagons and farm implements.

In the towns, slaves were extensively used by private households, business enterprises and the government as domestic servants, gardeners, street sweepers, coachmen, nurses and manual labourers, and they generally performed all the mundane, repeti-

46. Alfred H. Conrad and John R. Meyer, "The Economics of Slavery in the Ante Bellum South", *Journal of Political Economy*, April 1958, pp.106-7.

47. In 1826 it was estimated that the "average income from capital invested in slaves" was 18 per cent for Cape Town, but less for country districts. *Records of the Cape Colony*, XXIX, pp. 494-6, quoted in *C.H.B.E.*, p. 276. See also Hattersley, *op.cit.*, p.95.

48. Van Zyl, *op.cit.*, p.19. This was the situation in the period 1795 to 1834.

49. Cf. Theal, *History of S.A.*, Vol. 4, p.99, Hattersley, *op.cit.*, p.95.

50. For an account, see Victor de Kock, *Those in Bondage* (Van Schaik, Pretoria, 1963).

51. It was in the country districts, particularly during the busy seasons, that the relations between master and slave sometimes deteriorated to the extent that it "approached the state of resentment and ill-will found in the West Indies and the southern States of America". Hattersley, *op.cit.*, p.96.

tive, dirty and heavy jobs. Two important activities were to collect firewood and to bring the household's water from the fountain on the Parade.⁵² Some slaves acted as hawkers on behalf of their owners. It was also common for urban slaves to be hired out to builders or other urban employers as well as to grain and wine farmers who needed unskilled seasonal labour.

Skilled slaves, although in a minority, eventually did almost all skilled work in the urban areas, where they were, *inter alia*, builders, masons, painters, carpenters, smiths, tanners, saddle-makers, cobblers, tailors, boat and wagon builders and fishermen. They were sometimes allowed to ply their trades for their own account, in return for a fixed weekly or monthly fee or on a profit-sharing basis with their owners. By 1824 there were 2000 skilled slaves who were carrying on their own trade in this way.⁵³ Skilled slaves were also often hired out to farmers or other employers on a temporary basis. In these cases the slaves were usually given a small percentage of the rental fee. The hiring out of their slaves was an important source of revenue for some owners, and widows were sometimes entirely dependent upon this income.⁵⁴

By the early eighteenth century the Cape's economy was already highly dependent on slave labour. The degree of dependence can be visualised if it is recalled that slaves outnumbered the white colonists for about a century, up till about 1810. Furthermore, perhaps only one out of every three or four Europeans was economically active,⁵⁵ whereas all the slaves (with the exception only of the sick, the very old and very young) performed some kind of productive work.⁵⁶ An estimate made on this basis suggests that Europeans may have constituted less than one-fifth of the total economically active population during this period of a century; certainly they were no more than a quarter. Yet the use of slaves permitted the owners to appropriate the bulk of the income generated in the economy.

If labour input in the economy is measured in terms of the total number of hours worked by the two groups and the intensity of the effort expended, the contribution of slaves to the creation of the total output of the economy becomes even greater. The

-
52. According to Theal, most "respectable" families in Cape Town kept a slave for no other purpose than to carry water and another to collect firewood from the mountain. Theal, *History of S.A.*, Vol. 5, p.246.
 53. Cory, *The Rise of South Africa*, Vol. 3, p.16. One of these skilled slaves (a saddler and harness maker) even employed two European (Irish) labourers. Cory, *op.cit.*, Vol.2, p.462.
 54. Around the 1820's an owner could hire out an ordinary labourer for about 18 to 25 rixdollars per month and a skilled slave for around double this amount. Slave women doing domestic work were hired for 12 to 14 rixdollars and children for 10 rixdollars. Van Zyl, *op.cit.*, p.18.
 55. The ration of one out of four is derived from the assumption (1) that about half of the population consisted of men, of whom only half were in the economically active age group, and (2) that women were not economically active. While some women were economically active, particularly in the interior, they were a small minority. They were probably more than balanced by the Company's soldiers who might perhaps be excluded from the economically active population.
 56. In addition it should be remembered that most slaves were males and that there were relatively few children. Slave children were put to work from the ages of ten or twelve. Mentzel, *op.cit.*, Part 2, p.90.

working hours of slaves were completely unrestricted during virtually the whole period of slavery. Legal regulations governing working hours were only introduced in 1823, when a 66-hour week was imposed. At the time provision was made for a six-day working week with only essential work being permitted on Sundays, while the working day was limited to ten hours in winter and twelve in summer (except in emergencies and during the ploughing and harvesting seasons).⁵⁷ In contrast, the Europeans tended to spend their "working" lives in relative idleness — an aspect about which more will be said later.⁵⁸

The economic impact of slavery was greatest in the western districts of the Cape, particularly in the two districts of Cape Town and Stellenbosch, where about 89 per cent of all the Cape's slaves lived in 1787.⁵⁹ In the interior relatively fewer colonists could afford to keep slaves, owing to restricted opportunities to participate in the market economy which made it harder to accumulate the required cash and which limited the profitability of slaves.

Nevertheless, even in the Graaff-Reinet district the economy may have been heavily dependent on slave labour.⁶⁰ As this region became more attractive for European settlement, the number of slaves increased rapidly; thus it doubled between 1787 and 1798, from 470 to 984.⁶¹ In this latter year the slaves were still just less than a quarter of the white population of 4262, but if it is again assumed that virtually all the slaves were economically active, against perhaps one out of every four whites, it appears that slaves may have constituted about half of the economically active population. Moreover, most of the white colonists were graziers who were grossly under-employed during most of the year whereas it was in every slave-owner's interest to keep his slaves economically active for long hours every day and for as much of the year as possible. These considerations suggest that slavery may have been of greater economic significance in the interior districts than has commonly been believed. In fact, it seems likely that the production of marketed produce in the interior districts was heavily dependent upon the use of slaves. Case studies of market-oriented enterprises in the Graaff-Reinet district appear to support this view.⁶²

During the early nineteenth century the rapid economic development of the eastern Cape went hand in hand with an expansion of the slave population; the number of slaves in the eastern districts rose from less than 1000 in 1798 to about 5000 in 1820 and more than 8000 in 1834.⁶³

57. Regulations for the first time also governed the amount of food and clothing supplied to slaves.

58. See sections 2.2 and 2.3. below.

59. Van Zyl, *op.cit.*, p.3.

60. Cf. Van Zyl, *op.cit.*, p.3.

61. Cf. Van Zyl, *op.cit.*, p.8.

62. See, e.g., H.B. Thom, *Die Lewe van Gert Maritz* (Nasou, Cape Town, 1965) for a description of Maritz's dependence on slave labour in his carriage and wagon building enterprise at Graaff-Reinet.

63. Cf. Van Zyl, *op.cit.*, p.8. The term eastern districts refers to districts embraced by the original district of Graaff-Reinet.

2. CONSEQUENCES OF SLAVERY

2.0 Introduction

A deduction that seems to be warranted on the basis of the foregoing is that, because of the profitability and low cost of slaves, the Cape probably tended to import far more slaves than was originally intended; certainly the Cape's economy became much more labour-intensive than would have been the case if non-servile labour were used. Indeed, the Cape's economy, before about 1807, appears to represent a case of Lewis's "economic development with unlimited supplies of labour" — unlimited in the sense that the long-term supply curve of slaves was virtually completely elastic at a low price.⁶⁴

But whereas in Lewis's original model development occurred as the capitalist surplus was reinvested in additional productive assets, the existence of slavery at the Cape, while it permitted a certain amount of development, was in the long run in many ways inimical to development. The diverse ways in which this occurred are explained in the remainder of this paper.

2.1 Retardation of Technological Improvement

During the period under consideration the availability of abundant land encouraged extensive farming practices. At the same time the cheap labour provided through slavery encouraged the use of labour-intensive methods of production throughout the economy. It is true that at the time of the introduction of slavery relatively little capital was used in agriculture, even in Western Europe. However, over the next 150 years the availability of cheap slave labour at the Cape continued to discourage the adoption of more efficient, more capital intensive methods which were being developed in the leading countries of Europe. Not only in farming but also in most other economic activities the Cape therefore became technologically backward.

Except perhaps where slaves were working for their own account, slave labour was relatively inefficient.⁶⁵ Slave labour could hardly be expected to be as productive as free labour whose reward was related to its effort and whose geographic and social mobility permitted it to move freely from less productive to more productive and more remunerative work. However, because slaves were so inexpensive, they could be used on a large scale — more precisely, because of their low cost, an employer could increase the number of slaves he used until their marginal product was very low.⁶⁶ In

64. W.A. Lewis, "Economic Development with Unlimited Supplies of Labour", *The Manchester School*, May 1954. Of course, instead of labour being drawn into a capitalist sector from a subsistence sector, as in the original model, the Cape's labour was obtained through the importation of slaves.

65. This point is also made by Van Zyl *op.cit.*, p.3.

66. The relative inefficiency of slaves seems to be confirmed by the fact that when imports ceased after 1807, there was no immediate shortage because the existing labour potential was simply better utilized than before. Van Zyl, *op.cit.*, p.11.

this way a tradition of dependence on cheap but inefficient labour came to be established.⁶⁷

The heritage of these conditions continued to be felt after the abolition of slavery, in the form of a general backwardness of farming and inefficient utilisation of labour.⁶⁸ Thus, almost a century after the abolition of slavery, M. H. de Kock argued that the effect of slavery was still to be felt in South African agriculture "in view of the fact that coloured labour, though free since the abolition of slavery in 1834, has remained the most important type of farm labour, and that the economics of free coloured labour closely resembles that of slave labour".⁶⁹ For "agriculture is still conducted on a comparatively extensive and large-scale basis in order to render such labour economical and profitable under the prevailing conditions".⁷⁰ Even today these statements still seem to apply to some parts of South Africa.

2.2 Slavery and the European's Attitude to Manual Labour

Van Riebeeck's first request for slaves (or Chinese workers), made within weeks of his arrival at the Cape, was based on the desire to have the Europeans relieved of "the dirtiest and heaviest work".⁷¹

This should be enough proof, if any is needed, that the European settlers' aversion to hard and unpleasant types of labour was a reflection of an universal human trait and that it did not originate in South Africa. However, slavery permitted this natural aversion to be realized and to be carried to such extremes that the economic development of the country came to be adversely affected.

Europeans were at first still willing to enter manual trades but within a hundred years the young white townsman was becoming ashamed of using his own hands,⁷² and so was the farmer.

When Van Imhoff, governor-general of the Dutch possessions in East India, visited the Cape in 1743, he remarked: "I believe it would have been far better had we, when this colony was founded, commenced with Europeans and brought them hither in such

-
67. De Kiewiet speaks of the creation of a "privileged white caste, depending upon an excessive number of slaves, whose labour was wastefully and inefficiently used". C.W. de Kiewiet, **A History of South Africa: Social and Economic** (Oxford University Press, London, 1957), p.22.
68. Criticisms of established farming practices at the Cape by new British immigrants provide illustrations of the backwardness of the Cape in this respect. It is granted that other factors than slavery, such as limited markets, helped to discourage agricultural improvement.
69. M. H. de Kock, **Selected Subjects in the Economic History of South Africa**, (Juta, Cape Town, 1924), p.37.
70. **Op.cit.**, p.435.
71. W. Blommeart, "Het Invoeren van de Slavernij aan de Kaap", **Archives Year Book of South African History**, vol. 1 (1938), p.19. See also Stockenström, **op.cit.**, p.17.
72. Hattersley, **op.cit.**, p.27. See also C.W. de Kiewiet, **op.cit.**, p.21.

numbers that hunger and want would have forced them to work . . . But having imported slaves, every common or ordinary European becomes a gentleman, and prefers to be served rather than to serve. We have in addition the fact that the majority of the farmers in this Colony are not farmers in the real sense of the word, but owners of plantations, and that many of them consider it a shame to work with their own hands. Such a bad example makes the farmhands worse.”⁷³

This view was shared by Commissioner De Mist. When he tried (in 1804) to extend the educational system, he wanted girls to be taught manual skills and housekeeping, “and above all, to unlearn the unnecessary and bad habit of being served by slave girls from the earliest childhood”, so that they could become accustomed “to dress themselves and to try to provide in their own needs”.⁷⁴

Similarly, in 1825 Teenstra described farms where “everything in fact was left to the care of slaves . . . The farmer’s beautifully dressed daughters attended to nothing, even having their children suckled by female slaves”.⁷⁵

The traveller De Jong also noted: “Weinige blanken zullen een hand aan den landbouw slaan; of den arm in het pakhuis gebruiken; ’t is slavenwerk! waar zijn de slaven voor! is het andere woord”.⁷⁶

2.3 Effect on Economic Activities

The widespread use of slave labour had long-lasting effects on the occupational distribution of whites. Leaving labour largely in the hands of their slaves, Europeans tended to become specialist overseers, who limited their participation in economic life to organising and directing their employees (slaves) in their enterprises (mainly farms).

Among farmers there was an industrious class who worked on the farms themselves, assisted by their families and perhaps a few slaves. But there were also two other classes of farmers who did no work themselves. The first class was represented by the absentee landlord “who cut a figure like a European nobleman”.⁷⁷ Mentzel describes them as follows: “Among the capitalists may be included such people who live in town but own estates in the country, which are worked by slaves and managed by an overseer or steward . . . These landed gentlemen visit their farms from time to time, especially in spring, see that everything is in order, give the necessary instructions to their managers, and then return to their comfortable town-houses to live in peace and plenty.”⁷⁸

73. **The Reports of Chavonnes** . . . , *op.cit.*, p.137. See also Carnegie-Kommissie, **Die Armblanke-Vraagstuk in Suid-Afrika** (Stellenbosch 1932), Vol. 3, pp. 25-26.

74. Quoted by Carnegie Commission, *op.cit.*, p. 26 (Translated by the author).

75. Quoted by Hattersley, *op.cit.*, p.104.

76. C. de Jong, **Reizen**, Vol. 1, pp. 134-5, quoted by Giliomee, *op.cit.*, p.18.

77. Mentzel, **Description of the Cape**, Part 3, p.98.

78. Mentzel, **Description of the Cape**, Part 2, p.85. It may be mentioned that the overseer or knecht (whether European or free black) was literally no more than supervisor and he, too, seldom did any physical labour himself.

The second group of non-labouring farmers consisted of grain and wine farmers who, although they also did not "put a shoulder to the wheel themselves, they are nevertheless good overseers and give daily orders as to what work must be done and cared for by the knecht".⁷⁹ They "lived like gentry and many of them even better".⁸⁰

Although it is not known how many farmers fell into each group, the point is that slavery permitted the rise of a group of specialist overseers and gentlemen farmers who did not "put a shoulder to the wheel themselves".

This tendency was found in urban activities as well, and even new European immigrants were quick to adopt the role of specialist overseer.

"The yeoman farmer, or even the tenant farmer of Europe, played the squire at the Cape. If the immigrant European labourer had industry and intelligence he speedily extricated himself from that position. The mechanic taught his trade to the slave, or bought one already trained, and lived upon the slave's earnings . . ."⁸¹

In this slave-owning society a person's wealth and social status came to be measured by the number of slaves he owned so that Europeans turned away from manual work not only because of its unattractive or unpleasant features, or its low monetary reward, or the availability of slaves to do the work but also because of the social stigma attached to doing the same kind of work as slaves. Even being employed by someone else — becoming a hireling or knecht — began to denote social inferiority.⁸²

The way to attain respectability and social standing in this society was by entering a profession — of which there were relatively few — or becoming a large landowner (and, therefore, slave-owner).⁸³ These preferences were to have far-reaching influences on the occupational distribution of the European population and on the country's development.

2.4 Discouragement of Saving and Fixed Capital Formation

One of the major attractions of slave-ownership was that slaves and their descendants could provide the owners with a high degree of social security — so much so, that there

79. Mentzel, *op.cit.*, Part 3, p. 102.

80. Mentzel, *op.cit.*, p. 100.

81. M. W. Spilhaus, *South Africa in the Making 1652-1806* (Juta, Cape Town, 1966), p. 282.

82. Van der Merwe holds that there was probably not a prejudice against manual labour as such but that it was "probably" because being employed by someone else denoted a loss of economic independence, that there was a prejudice against manual labour. In view of what has been said above (in section 2.2) this explanation seems to be too simplistic. P. J. van der Merwe, *Die Trekboer in die Geskiedenis van die Kaapkolonie (1675-1842)* (Nasionale Pers, Cape Town, 1938), p. 186.

83. In the American South slavery had a similar effect as the southern landowners were "brought up to esteem a set of values that scorned work other than in the professions". Ross Robertson, *History of the American Economy* (3rd. ed., Harcourt Brace, New York, 1973), p. 134.

was little need to save. High levels of consumption and indulgence in luxuries, which would normally have been unattainable in a pioneering society, now became possible.

The possession of slaves permitted a lifetime of ease spent in relative idleness and it made a mockery of the very attributes that are appropriate in a pioneering society: hard work, improvement of skills, development of technology, thrift and capital formation.

Slave labour therefore provided the owner with an opportunity to become part of a leisure class, at a time when the Cape's development could not justify it. The result was that fixed capital formation was discouraged in two ways: through a discouragement of thrift; and as a result of "investment" in slaves being a highly attractive substitute for fixed investment.⁸⁴ Many people owned no property of any significance other than slaves.⁸⁵

By the same token slavery tended to have a dual adverse effect on the Cape's balance of payments: it caused an initial outflow of funds in payment for the slave, and subsequently stimulated the importation of luxuries from abroad.⁸⁶ In this way slavery must have helped to precipitate the financial conditions which caused the depreciation of the rixdollar.

The abolition of slavery resulted in the liquidation of at least a substantial part of the capital that had been sunk in slaves.⁸⁷ The inflow of compensation money stimulated economic activity throughout the Cape and also financed major long-term investments — such as the establishment of the first private banks in the Colony and the large-scale expansion of wool farming.⁸⁸ These are indicative of the types of developments that could possibly have occurred much earlier in the Cape's history if slavery had not been practised.

2.5 Rural Impoverishment

It was a paradoxical consequence of slavery that whereas it permitted the existence of a privileged leisure class, it also helped to create a class of impoverished European settlers. Even though official immigration schemes were terminated at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the European population continued to grow rapidly owing to an exceptionally high rate of natural increase. As already indicated, social as well as

84. The American experience was similar: slavery also retarded fix capital formation. See, e.g. Ross Robertson, *op.cit.*, pp.130-132.

85. There are numerous references to this fact. For example, in 1826 Lord Charles Somerset noted that "the slaves are virtually the only valuable possession of the colonists". *Records of C.C.*, XXX, p.109, quoted by Stockenström, *op.cit.*, p.70; Theal, *History of S.A.*, Vol. 6, p.72.

86. The value of imports of slaves often exceeded the total value of exports. Thus in the period 1798 to 1802 the annual average value of slaves imported amounted to £45 000. The corresponding figure for exports was only £15 000 per year. Theal, *History of S.A.*, Vol. 5, p.40.

87. It is beyond the scope of this paper to determine whether the compensation for slaves was "fair".

88. Cf. Theal, *History of S.A.*, *op.cit.*, Vol. 6, p.78. and Hattersley, *op.cit.*, p.97.

economic imperatives caused this increment in the labour force to be channelled largely into farming. As from the beginning of the eighteenth century there was a marked expansion of sheep farming in the interior of the country. This was partly due to the lack of markets for the products of arable farming, but in the final analysis it was also a direct consequence of the limited opportunities for European labour in a slave-based economy.⁸⁹ Social and economic stagnation and even retrogression characterised the life of the grazier in the interior — conditions which eventually contributed to the creation of the Poor White Problem. This is one way in which the impact of slavery continued to be felt long after the institution itself had disappeared.

Looking beyond the Cape, the influence of slavery on the geographical movement of the White population extended to the Great Trek, which was at least partly inspired by the circumstances surrounding the abolition of slavery and which was, to some extent, a continuation of the earlier migration. In this case, too, the immediate consequence was the impoverishment of many,⁹⁰ while in the longer term it had various negative influences on the ability of the people concerned to participate fully in a market economy, which helped to exacerbate the Poor White Problem.

In this sense slavery exacted a heavy toll in the long run. It prevented Europeans from becoming acquainted with the demands of market-oriented economic activities, from acquiring skills and from developing their latent attributes to the fullest extent possible. The beneficiaries of this situation were the slaves themselves. For most of them remained part and parcel of the modern sector of the economy at a time when large numbers of the European colonists reverted to a type of near-subsistence farming which virtually created a new "traditional sector" in the economy. In times to come this meant that former slaves and their descendants were often better equipped to compete on a free labour market than some Europeans.

2.6 Effects on Labour Relations and Employment Practices

It would appear that slavery had a direct impact on the entire system of labour relations in the country. In the interior districts where the nature of economic life often did not permit the accumulation of enough money to purchase slaves, a system of labour utilization developed which seems to have been modeled on slavery. Thus attempts were made to obtain farm labour by indenturing Khoikhoi (Hottentot) and San (Bushmen) children whose parents lived on the farm.

Likewise, from 1721 slave owners in these districts demanded the unpaid labour of children of slave fathers and Khoikhoi mothers ("Bastard Hottentots") who were

89. As De Kiewiet put it, it was easier for white men to carve out a farm than a career in this society. *Op.cit.*, p.23.

90. See, e.g., F.J. Potgieter, "Die Vestiging van die Blanke in die Transvaal (1837-1886)", *Archives Year Book*, 1958, Part 2, pp. 60-61.

brought up on the farms, as a compensation to the farmer for maintaining them.⁹¹ In 1775 the government allowed such children to be indentured, if the mother consented, from the age of 18 months until they were 25 years old. Such "apprentices" received food and clothing but no wages and were therefore for all practical purposes treated similarly to slaves.

It is doubtful if such a system would have developed in the country if it had not been inspired by the existence of the system of slavery. Furthermore, the justification given for the measure of 1775 was that it would prevent escaped slaves from pretending to be "bastard Hottentots" i.e. free blacks fathered by slaves.⁹² This seems to illustrate how the institution of slavery eventually began to determine the whole system of labour relations in the Cape.

During skirmishes with the San in the eighteenth century, colonists frequently captured San children and indentured them on their farms as domestic servants and farm workers. This tradition was further extended in the nineteenth century when Voortrekkers in Natal made a point of capturing young Blacks who could be used as servants. They were similarly "apprenticed" until they were twenty-five years old (twenty-one in the case of girls).⁹³

In the Cape governor Cradock in 1812 extended the apprenticeship system to Hottentot children who had been brought up by their parents' employer. They could be indentured by the employer while they were between the age of eight and eighteen.⁹⁴ This legislation was revoked in 1828 but it nevertheless shows, once more, how attempts were made to obtain black labour on terms which were as favourable, if not more so, than those ruling in the case of slaves.

2.7 Racial Discrimination

Through slavery a colour bar was for the first time introduced into economic and social life. The rapid increase in the number of slaves necessitated stringent laws to regulate their behaviour and protect the European population.⁹⁵ The slave's economic

91. The farmers could not prevent the slaves' liaisons with Hottentots, for if they tried, the slaves were certain to run away. And if they permitted the Hottentot women to remain on the farm, they were obliged to maintain them and their offspring, without any return in labour. Theal, *History of S.A.*, Vol. 4, p.168.

92. M. Wilson and L. Thompson (eds.). *The Oxford History of South Africa*, Vol. 1 (Oxford, 1969), p.207. (This work is cited below as *O.H.S.A.*).

93. Cf. *O.H.S.A.*, Vol. 1, p.367. See also H.M. Robertson, "150 years of Economic Contact between Black and White", *South African Journal of Economics*, Vol. 2 (1934), p.408.

94. Cf. S.P. du Toit Viljoen, "Die Britse Kolonies tot 1870", reprinted in A.L. Müller (ed.), *Die Ekonomiese Ontwikkeling van Suid-Afrika* (Academica, Pretoria, 1979), p.56.

95. Thus a slave had to carry a lantern and a pass from his owner if he walked in the streets at night. For other examples of restrictions, see Botha, *op.cit.*, p.297, Victor de Kock, *op.cit.*, and E. Hengherr, *Emancipation and After: A Study of Cape Slavery and the Issues arising from It* (M.A.-thesis, Cape Town, 1953).

freedom was circumscribed by his master as well as legislation, which totally prohibited certain activities such as the acquisition of property (before 1823). The courts, too, generally served the masters' interests and did little more for the slaves than to prevent or deal with cases of gross ill-treatment of slaves.⁹⁶ Courts also discriminated between master and slave in meting out punishment for a given crime in that a slave was generally far more severely punished than a freeman.⁹⁷

The fact that a system of discrimination was subsequently introduced against free blacks, appear to have been partially caused by slavery. The reason seems to be provided by the way that slavery affected the personality development of the slave-owning population. An illustration of how this occurred is given by Botha:

"In the homes of the wealthy citizens each child had a nurse to dance attendance upon him and in course of years learnt to order the servant about and exhibit a domineering spirit to the domestics of the home. The close companionship with the slave nurse did not always improve the child's morals. He became inclined with habits none too good, learnt language none too sweet. The young boy, as he grew into manhood, considered himself superior to everyone, and having learnt from his cradle the power to command and expect obedience could with difficulty cultivate the spirit of obedience himself."⁹⁸

The personality traits thus created and nurtured may well have influenced the nature of the country's subsequent development indirectly, through reinforcing the Afrikaner's spirit of personal independence and aversion to being employed by others. Whatever the case may be, slavery seems to have played a role in creating feelings of superiority and domineering attitudes towards black employees and blacks in general — which were to have pervasive effects on the economic development of black and white and the utilisation of the country's labour potential.

Legal discrimination against free blacks was initiated in the Boer republics — not surprisingly, as the very existence of these states was partly the result of a negative reaction to the ideas of the philanthropists, as expressed in the legislation of 1828 and the abolition of slavery.⁹⁹ In the Free State and Transvaal the old Boer attitude towards people of colour took deeper root and discriminatory legislation against non-whites and "bastards" was soon enacted. After 1910 it was in no small measure because of pressure from these areas that legal discrimination was intensified and expanded throughout the Union.

96. O.H.S.A., Vol. 1, p.224. For an exposition of the slave laws, see Marais, *op.cit.*, pp.173 et seq.

97. Torture seemed "to be reserved for slaves only, as in my time no European was ever put to torture with the object of extracting a confession". Mentzel, *op.cit.*, Part 2, p.133. See also Theal, *History of S.A.*, Vol. 4, p.99; Botha, *op.cit.*, p.290.

98. C. Graham Botha, *op.cit.*, p.178.

99. Marais regards "the rebellion of the Boers against the ideas of the philanthropists" as "the most distinctive aspect" of the Great Trek. J.S. Marais, *op.cit.*, p.160.

Which is why Macmillan was quite justified to say:

“. . . although slavery as an institution died in 1834 its legacy is the element of hubris in the conventional South African attitude to coloured races, to this day.”¹⁰⁰

2.8 A Defence of Slavery

Although an authoritative source has made the categorical statement that “slaves did not contribute to the welfare of the settlement”,¹⁰¹ and the preceding exposition may seem to confirm this, it is not true that nothing can be said in favour of slavery. Some slaves created monuments for themselves in the form of buildings, improvements to farms, furniture and other objects, examples of which have been preserved and which are clearly the products of highly talented, skilled and devoted workers. Their labour helped to make the refreshment station viable, and capable of producing all the food needed by the local population and passing ships. They generally served their masters well and enabled them to enjoy a much higher standard of living than would otherwise have been possible.

As the Cape’s markets were generally stagnant and over-supplied, the acquisition of slaves for the purpose of obtaining more leisure was quite a logical development. Such discretionary income as was available would often have been unproductively invested if it had been used to produce more foodstuffs or to acquire more fixed capital. If, therefore, by procuring slaves, the slave-owner showed a preference for more personal services and leisure time, this behaviour cannot be condemned outright, for this must often have appeared as the only way in which the colonist could improve his personal standard of living to some extent.

3. WAS SLAVERY ESSENTIAL?

In retrospect it is clear that the introduction of slaves was a short-sighted policy, resulting from the Company’s preoccupation with the short-term maximisation of its profits. In the long run the adverse economic, social and other consequences seem to outweigh the short-term benefits by a large margin.

However, would the introduction of European labour have been a feasible alternative? There are reasons for thinking that this might have been so. In the first place, free labour would have been more productive than servile labour, and therefore able to earn more than a mere subsistence, as the slaves did. Secondly, the Company and private citizens could have paid the passages of free immigrants with the funds used to import and purchase slaves. Thirdly, free labour would have helped to create new employment opportunities as their remuneration would have expanded the size of the

100. W.M. Macmillan, *The Cape Colour Question* (Faber and Gwyer, London, 1927), p.82.

101. *C.H.B.E.*, Vol. 8, p.268.

money economy, to the benefit of the development of agriculture as well as urban economic activities.

Officers of the Company and private citizens tried to justify slavery by means of various arguments. In 1717 Governor De Chavonnes argued that free labour would be "more troublesome" and more expensive than slave labour and that the type of work done by slaves "could not be demanded of a European in this climate".¹⁰² The independent fiscal, Van Beaumont, stated that slaves were more useful than Europeans "in the daily menial tasks; besides it is more fitting that slaves rather than Europeans should be used."¹⁰³

These evidently spurious arguments were bolstered with one which carried more weight, namely that free labour would raise costs of production. At the time proponents of slavery argued that the average cost of maintaining a slave was about 40 gulden per year, whereas free European labourers, it was argued, would have had to be paid at least as much as the Company's soldiers, who earned about 175 gulden per year (in cash and kind).¹⁰⁴

But this argument is not conclusive either. The Cape could conceivably have obtained its labour like America by importing European indentured servants,¹⁰⁵ or by obtaining immigrants who were destitute and willing to come in return for nothing more than a promise of their own land — as in the case of the French Huguenots. Furthermore, the comparison of the maintenance costs of slaves with the earnings of an European was misleading in that it did not take into account the full costs of slave labour, which included the capital outlay, the cost of maintaining economically inactive slaves and various other elements. Captain D.M. Pasques De Chavonnes, who formulated the most comprehensive indictment of the economic inefficiency of slavery at the Cape, detailed these costs as follows in 1716:

"The old slaves, the pregnant and the nursing slaves, and also the children, can do practically no work, and yet, year after year they cost the Company 23,000-27,000 guildens, exclusive of the expense occasioned by death, runaway slaves, the long sea-voyage necessary to obtain slaves, the interest on the capital, the clerk of the slaves, the overseer, the schoolmaster, school-mistress and the mid-wife, for all of these involve additional expense."¹⁰⁶

102. **The Report of Chavonnes op.cit.**, p.87.

103. **The Reports of Chavonnes op.cit.**, p.101.

104. **The Reports of Chavonnes** pp.97-98. The figures are for the year 1717. A century later the cost of maintaining a slave was as high as 150 to 200 rixdollars (450 to 600 gulden) per slave per year. **C.H.B.E.**, Vol. 8, p. 276; also Hattersley, **op.cit.**, p.95.

105. See, e.g., Ross Robertson, **op.cit.**, pp.45-46, and H.M. Robertson, **op.cit.**, p.408.

106. **Reports of Chavonnes** p.105.

Captain De Chavonnes concluded that it was still not too late to bring European workers to the Cape as a substitute for further imports of slaves. His main arguments¹⁰⁷ were that:

- a) white labour would be more productive and therefore a "better investment for the farmer" than slaves, as two Europeans could do as much work as three slaves;
- b) the money invested in slaves was "dead money" which did not circulate or earn interest. Instead it left the country while burdening the slave owners with debt;
- c) European workers would help to increase the Colony's welfare by creating a bigger market for consumer goods and thus raising the Cape's revenue and the demand for labour;
- d) Europeans would stimulate a greater sub-division and better utilisation of land and provoke an inducement to colonists to seek new means of subsistence;
- e) employers would have greater control over their workers and more "tranquility" whereas slaves often ran away during harvest time or created other types of problems.¹⁰⁸

But at this time it was already too late to reverse the Company's labour policy. Virtually all the officials and colonists had a vested interest in slavery which they did not want to give up and which they tried to justify in various ways. In any case, economic conditions at the Cape were unfavourable. Poverty was already widespread and it was felt that there was no room for new European immigrants under these circumstances. Nothing therefore came of De Chavonne's efforts.

But Captain De Chavonnes did make his point and it could have been made in an even blunter fashion, as governor-general Van Imhoff did in 1743. When he saw the results of slavery at the Cape, he expressed his regret that Europeans had not been brought to the Cape instead of slaves, in such numbers that hunger and want would have forced them to work.¹⁰⁹

It would obviously not have been possible to use European labour on the same lavish scale as slave labour. In most cases farms would have had to be more compact; the typical farmer and his family would have had to work side by side with any employees; and all enterprises would probably have had to give much more attention to the introduction of labour-saving technology. But there is no reason why these practices, which were typical in the northern states of America, in Europe and elsewhere, could not

107. Cf. **Reports of Chavonnes** . . . pp.103-8; see also **O.H.S.A.**, Vol. 1, p.200.

108. In this regard it is relevant to note that Van Riebeeck, the man who was instrumental in introducing slavery to the Cape, soon became so "heartily sick" of the trouble caused by runaway slaves that he became of the opinion that the settlement could do without slave labour and should be maintained by Europeans. See Böseken, *op.cit.*, p.20.

109. **The Reports of Chavonnes** . . . , p.137.

have been introduced at the Cape. In fact, in many ways the climate, fertility of the soil and other natural resources made the Cape a most congenial centre for European settlement. For these reasons one is led to agree with Barrow's statement that "there is perhaps no part of the world where the introduction of slavery was less necessary than at the Cape of Good Hope".¹¹⁰

110. John Barlow, **Travels into the Interior of Southern Africa** (London, 1806), Vol. 2 p.91. In a similar vein Theal subsequently described slavery as a "moral and political blunder" and pointed out that there was no reason why the Europeans could not have adapted themselves as workers in every type of economic activity. Theal, **History of S.A.**, Vol. 6, pp.60-61.