

Natural Obstacles and Institutional Solutions to Agrarian Capitalism from Slavery to (un)Free Labour on Settler Farms in the Cape Colony, c. 1808 – 1870

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The aim of this paper is to propose a new analytical framework to analyse continuity and change of labour relations on wine and wheat farms in the Cape Colony during its transition from slavery to a capitalist oriented economy, i.e. 1808-1870. Wine and wheat farming dominated the activities in the Cape when it became part of the British Empire in 1806. The organisation of production was centred on the use of slaves. It is generally agreed that wheat and wine farmers faced increased difficulties surviving in the post-emancipation period because of shortages of labour (i.e. after 1834). At the same time, it is also proposed that freed-slaves were left with few opportunities that to continue working for their formers masters. This contradictory proposition constitutes the empirical point of departure of the paper. The paper tentatively proposes an alternative approach to analyse the transition, which focus on production cycles and how these affected the relative efficiency of different forms of labour. The suggested theoretical framework consist of an attempt to combine the so-called Mann-Dickinson thesis of gaps between work and production time that determine the feasibility of employing wage labour with the neo-institutional notion of interlocked transactions. The latter implies that a contract in one market (labour) is simultaneously a contract in another (for this study, capital markets is of significance). The paper argues that the proposed framework is better suited for the construction of typologies of change of production systems on large-scale farms in the Cape Colony, which also would increase our understanding of the relative (in)efficiency of large-scale farming in 19th and 20th century Africa in general.