INTRODUCTION

This pamphlet is part of a series, the Black Liberation Series, published by the Black Liberation Front. They have developed out a number of BLF discussion documents. These discussion documents were first intended to serve as starting points in the discussions which began to take place within the Black Liberation Front from around 1978. They came about because many members of the organisation, which was formed in 1971, became convinced that the old narrow nationalist political line, which the organisation had followed up till then, had done great harm to it and left it completely unprepared to play an active and leading role in the rising struggles of the Black community.

As a result the papers dealt with many questions which were seen as important to the development of a better understanding of the struggle of Black people for freedom. These ranged from general questions, such as understanding how societies work, to more specific ones such as the structure of the Black community in Britain. These discussions were a clear example of the development of the organisation’s political understanding since it had published the document “Revolutionary Black Nationalism”. This development continues today. During the discussions many changes were made in the original papers, some were rewritten altogether and some were scrapped completely. Nevertheless, this process was an important first step in helping the organisation to break away from its narrow nationalist past and to build a more revolutionary understanding of the nature of Black people’s struggle.

The Black Liberation Front has decided to publish these documents for a number of reasons. In the first place they are intended to provide people interested in joining the organisation with an understanding of the organisation’s general political position. Secondly, it is hoped that they will make a contribution to the ongoing discussion within the Black Liberation Movement.
UNDERSTANDING SOCIETY

A clear understanding of the situation in which we live is the necessary first step in our struggle for liberation. When we understand the problems facing us then we can know how to deal with them.

We therefore need a tool or ideology by which we can understand the society in which we live. This ideology will help guide us toward the correct path. We need to know firstly what are these problems, how did they come about, what factors encourage their existence, and what needs to be done to solve them. We are not trying to understand our situation just for the sake of understanding, but because we want to change it. We will only be able to achieve this through our own efforts, and cannot expect that some supernatural being or mystical force is going to solve our problems for us. Our ideology must not be based in mystical realms, but rather in the real world in which we live, where we can take actions to secure and continue our physical existence.

SURVIVAL

We start from the obvious and basic idea that the most basic and crucial task which people must deal with is securing their actual physical survival through providing themselves with the food, clothes and shelter necessary to keep them alive. In other words, the fundamental task facing people is survival. In order to survive people must be able to produce — that is they must be able to get from nature the good, clothes and shelter which they need to maintain their existence. In order to do this, people must combine two elements: their mental and physical abilities and their natural surroundings.

PRODUCTION RELATIONS

To produce the food, clothes and shelter that are needed, people form relationships with each other. They come together in groups, numbers rather than each individual going off and isolating himself from all the others. The relationships that are formed by people coming together to produce are called "production relations". We can break down "production relations" into three parts so as to get a fuller understanding of what we mean by this term. These three elements are:

1) Pattern of ownership of means of production i.e. who owns and controls the land, the resources, tools, machines etc. used in production.
2) People's roles in production and how they are related to each other — i.e. who does what, and what is the relationship between them for example between the slave and the overseer or the worker and the factory owner.
3) Pattern of distribution — i.e. who controls the goods that are produced and how are they distributed. For example how is sugar produced by slaves distributed and who benefits from it.

How people combine their labour power, tools, land and raw materials together with the way in which they are organised for producing is the key to understanding how human society is organised. This is the economic base (or substructure) of society and is the basic aspect of society. But human society is not composed of an economic base only. When we look at any society we notice that people have particular ideas about what is right and what is wrong; they have particular ideas about their relationship with each other and with nature, which are expressed in their philosophy, they have a specific way of organising and using power, the use of physical force — army, police etc. — in the society; they have particular forms of organisation for the making of decisions affecting society, etc. In short, each society has its own particular legal and moral system, its own ideological system to explain and define what is wrong and suggest suitable punishment and to justify why the society is as it is; its own specific forms of organising and using force to compel obedience; its own particular political system which determines how decisions affecting the whole society are taken and by whom. All these elements together — legal and moral system, ideological system, political system etc. are referred to as the "superstructure" of the society.

The superstructure of the society does not exist in isolation. It arises from the economic substructure of the society and reflects and justifies it. Thus, for example, under slavery we find that the people making the laws were the ones owning the slave; that the army, local militia etc. had as their primary task the putting down of slave rebellions and recapturing of runaway slaves; that the most important laws passed were designed to keep the slaves in slavery by laying down very severe penalties for running away, disobeying master etc. Further to this religion (the church), philosophy and science came together in attempting to justify the enslavement of the African people. The dominant ideas spread throughout society were about the inferiority of the slaves and the civilising mission of the slave owners etc.

However, societies are not static, and are continually changing. The most important changes are those which take place in the economic substructure and these usually lead further changes in the superstructure of society. Sometimes these changes are very slow and hard to notice, possibly taking hundreds of years, or sometimes they are very sudden, taking place over a period of weeks, as in the case of revolutions. Nevertheless it is these changes in the substructure and superstructure of a society which changes it into a different type, for example a capitalist society into a socialist society. It is also on the basis of the differences between their economic substructure and superstructure that we can divide societies into different types, for example slave society, feudal society, capitalist society and socialist society.
SUMMARY

1) To exist people must feed, clothe and shelter themselves — i.e. they must produce the means of their subsistence.
2) People produce the means of their subsistence — food etc. from nature, from their physical environment (the land, plants etc.)
3) To produce, people must use their productive forces — i.e. they must use their own physical ability to work (labour power) combined with the tools, technology, land, raw materials etc. (means of production).
4) People provide for their basic needs not through individual isolation but in relationship with others — in short, human production is social production.
5) The relationships formed by people in the process of production are called production relations. Production relations consist of 3 elements:
   a) ownership of the means of production — i.e. who owns the land, tools, raw materials etc. used in production.
   b) people’s roles in the process of production, and their relation with each other.
   c) pattern of distribution of products — i.e. how are the things produced distributed, and who controls and benefits from the distribution.
6) Productive forces and production relations form the economic substructure of the society.
7) Each economic substructure has a corresponding superstructure (i.e. political system, legal system, philosophy and ideology) which arises from it and serves to support and justify it.
8) In the relationship between substructure and superstructure, the substructure is the dominant and determining factor.
9) Society is not static, and is continually changing. The most important changes are those which take place in the economic substructure, and these usually lead to a change of the whole social system. Such changes sometimes take place over a very long period of time, or sometimes they are very sudden as in the case of a revolution.

Having gained a general idea of how human society works, let us now look at a particular type of society, using our general outlook to gain a better picture of it. This example is drawn from the Caribbean during the period of slavery, and can be taken as quite typical of the situation at the time.

First of all let us look at the economic base of slave society. As we saw above the economic base of any society is made up of the productive forces and production relations.

SLAVE SOCIETY

Productive Forces
Production in slave society was labour-intensive i.e. the use of direct human labour was of principal importance in producing the sugar, tobacco etc. on the slave plantation. The level of technology i.e. tools and machinery was very basic and was not as important as the use of labour. The main tools in use were simple agricultural ones such as the hoe and the cutlass; simple machines for squeezing cane juice from the sugar cane and converting it into unrefined sugar. Farm animals like the horse and donkey were also used in the production process, mainly for transporting cane to the mill. The productive forces of the society were therefore:

1) the labour power of the slaves which was required and used in large amounts, and
2) the means of production which were composed of the plantation land on which the sugar and other crops were grown, simple agricultural tools and machinery like the hoe and cutlass, and farm animals used in transporting the crops.

Production Relations
Production relations, as we remember, can be broken down into three elements, namely 1) pattern of ownership of means of production, 2) people’s roles in production and how they are related to each other, 3) pattern of distribution of the produce.

1) OWNERSHIP OF MEANS OF PRODUCTION
In slave society the planter class owned totally the land, tools, machinery and animals used in production. All the means of production were in their hands; in fact even the slaves whose labour produced the sugar and other products were the property of the planter class. To sum up the situation, ownership of the means of production was concentrated in the hands of the slave owning planter class, and the overseers had to sell their labour to the plantation owners while the slaves were violently forced to give their labour on the plantation of the planter who bought them.

2) PEOPLE’S ROLES IN PRODUCTION AND HOW THEY ARE RELATED
The owners of the slaves and plantations were settlers from Europe who made claims to large areas of land in the Caribbean islands and the Americas, and who set out to cultivate and exploit them with the use of slave labour. To sum up the situation, ownership of the means of production was concentrated in the hands of the slave owning planter class, and the overseers had to sell their labour to the plantation owners while the slaves were violently forced to give their labour on the plantation of the planter who bought them.

The planter also tried to divide his slaves along various lines, so as to maintain his control over them. The slaves were set to work on large plantations of sugar cane, tobacco and other crops, but everything produced by their labour was the property of the planter.
OVERSEERS
The overseers were responsible for ensuring that the slaves did their work, and also for overseeing the plantation. They were usually indentured servants, bondmen and criminals, who were forced to work for a number of years to pay off their debt. Once their bondsmanship was over, they were either sent back to Europe or continued working for a wage on the plantation.

HOUSE SLAVES
Those slaves who were most trusted were given the favourable jobs, such as butlers, cooks, and coachmen. It was widely believed that slaves of mixed blood should not be employed in field labour and that they should be given preference over the blacker slaves. The slave’s colour was one of the things used to decide his job and status.

FIELD SLAVES
These slaves carried out most of the work necessary for the production of the crops such as planting, hoeing etc. They were at the bottom of the social system and were the most oppressed within the slave system. As a result, they were the most hostile group to the system of slavery, and the most militant slaves were usually field slaves.

3) PATTERN OF DISTRIBUTION
The planter class alone decided what crops would be produced, whether sugar, cotton or tobacco. The goods produced were their property, even though they were produced by the labour of the slaves, and they were sold in Europe to enrich this class. They also decided how the other groups in the society fulfilled their needs for food, clothes and shelter. For example the plantation owners imported basic foodstuffs like saltfish which they distributed to the slaves on the basis of a certain amount of saltfish per slave per year. They also imported the timber from which the slaves had to build their own houses as well as the plantation house. They also provided a minimum amount of clothing for the slaves and put aside the plot of land on which the slaves had to grow their own food, which was mainly yams, potatoes and other such food. They also provided as much medical attention as they felt necessary to keep the slaves healthy and fit for work on the plantation.

The economic substructure of slave society consisted therefore of the productive forces of the society (labour, land, tools etc) and the social relations of production (ownership of land etc; who did what in the society and how they were related to each other and the pattern of distribution of the product). Arising out of this economic base was a particular set of political, legal and ideological arrangements which served to justify and maintain the economic base. In short, there was a particular superstructure which corresponded to the economic substructure of slave society.

SUPERSTRUCTURE — 1) Legal system; 2) Ideology; 3) Political system.

1) THE LEGAL SYSTEM
The main aim of the laws in slave society was to protect the interests of the planter class. In fact, it was the planters themselves who made the laws. For example it was accepted within the legal system that one person could own another, and the slaves were seen as the property of their masters. Therefore if a slave was killed by another plantation owner other than his master, the killer could not be tried for murder, but instead the court paid the owner a fixed sum of money as compensation for loss of property. There was, however, no compensation for the slave’s family, in fact they were not even taken into account. Similarly, slaves could not bring a court case, nor even testify in court against any whites, since they were considered to be only property.

2) IDEOLOGY
The system of slavery created and shaped its own ideology to try and justify the continued existence of this system. Religion and the church played their part in spreading false ideas about the superiority of the European slave masters, to try and justify their position of absolute power within the slave system. Christianity saw slavery then as a natural part of Europe’s material development and a chance for them “the christians” to “spread the gospel and christianise the world”. They and the planters paid particular attention to the passage in the Bible “... slaves of slaves shall your descendants be...” This line was interpreted as a religious justification for the enslavement of the African people.

The slave owners and their supporters used religious ideas as well as backward philosophical ideas about the so-called racial superiority of Europeans to try and justify the system of slavery. As well as this they launched an all out attack against the history and cultures of the African people. They spread lies and propaganda against Africa, and painted a picture of it as a wretched uncivilised place, full of savages and cannibals. These ideas were then used against the enslaved Africans to destroy their identity and separate them from Africa. It aimed to change them from Africans — a people with a name, culture and history into negroes and niggers — nobodies with no past and no future, except the oppression of slavery.

These were some of the main features of the ideology of slavery, and it affected not only the slaves but also the slave owners, until these ideas became widely accepted throughout slave society.
3) THE POLITICAL SYSTEM

At the head of the political system was a governor, who was usually sent out from Europe. He was the representative of the European government in the particular island, which would be a colony of the European country. More than likely this governor was a member of the ruling class in his country.

The governor appointed the leading planters of the island as members of a governing council which governed the island. There was also a House of Assembly, which made the laws for the islands. However, only white people, who owned a certain amount of property, which meant only planters, could sit in the House or even vote in elections for Assembly members.

All the important jobs in the state were held by the planters, for example such jobs as judges, magistrates, members of the House of Assembly and officers of the militia. Therefore the state in the colonies, was under the control of the ruling class in Europe and their offspring in the colonies — the planters.

STRUGGLE IN SLAVE SOCIETY

Having seen a very brief outline of slave society, it is very important to bear a number of things in mind. Despite the fact that the planter class controlled the society, they did not have things all their way. In fact there was a continuous struggle, class struggle, between the planter class on one hand and the slaves on the other. This struggle was carried on in all areas of the superstructure, ideology, legal system and political system.

The slaves fought against the ideas put out by the planters. They maintained various traditions from Africa and upheld a positive image of Africa. They also made up various jokes to mock the slavemasters and their so-called superiority. They even reinterpreted Bible stories placing the slave masters as the evil doers.

On the other fronts the slaves took various actions against slavery. These included breaking tools, running away from the plantation and organising violent rebellions. In the late eighteenth century on the island of Haiti, the slaves carried out a glorious anti-slavery revolution, under the leadership of first Toussaint L’ouverture and then Dessalines which smashed the slave system in that island to pieces and established the first independent Black country in the Western Hemisphere. This also marked the beginning of the end of the system of slavery.

For their part the slave owners tried their best to keep slavery going. In order to do this they used all means possible, including torture and maiming of slaves, especially those who were militant and had run away or taken part in rebellions.

Apart from these two main classes in slave society, namely planters and slaves, there were also other classes, who although less important, also played some part in the life of slave society. First there were the freed Blacks and mulattoes. These were either ex-slaves who had bought their freedom or been given it in return for services to their slave masters and the children of slave masters and women slaves. They were usually employed as craftsmen, small tradesmen and owners of taverns and boarding-houses.

There were also poor whites, who were mainly tradesmen and artisans. These poor whites had often been sentenced to work in the colonies to pay off debts which they owed, and who had stayed behind in the colonies after having finished their sentence.

This completes a brief outline of slave society.
ALSO IN THIS SERIES
No. 2: Capitalism and Socialism
No. 3: Racism
No. 4: Pan-Africanism
No. 5: The Black Community in Britain
No. 6: Who Controls Africa?

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