Shifting Boundaries between Free and Unfree Labor: Introduction

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In 1905, Henry Nevinson, at the time a well-known British journalist, visited Angola. He discovered that the slave trade was still going on in secret in that region, many years after it had officially been abolished. Deep inside Southern Africa slaves were caught; they were forced to walk hundreds of miles to the coast until they arrived at Katumbella, where "the slaves were rested, sorted out, dressed, and then taken on over the fifteen miles to Benguela, usually disguised as ordinary carriers." In Benguela's main street,

> there is a government office where the official representative of the "Central Committee of Labor and Emigration for the Islands" (having its headquarters in Lisbon) sits in state, and under due forms of law receives the natives, who enter one door as slaves and go out of another as *serviçaes*. Everything is correct. The native, who has usually been torn from his home far in the interior, perhaps as much as eight hundred miles away, and already sold twice, is asked by an interpreter if it is his wish to go to [the island of] San Thomé, or to undertake some other form of service to a new master. Of course he answers, "Yes." It is quite unnecessary to suppose, as most people suppose, that the interpreter always asks such questions as, "Do you like to fish?" or "Will you have a drink?" though one of the best scholars in the languages of the interior has himself heard those questions asked at an official inspection of *serviçaes* on board ship. It would be unnecessary for the interpreter to invent such questions. If he asked, "Is it your wish to go to hell? " the *serviçal* would say "yes" just the same. In fact, throughout this part of Africa the name of San Thomé is becoming identical with hell, and when a man has been brought hundreds of miles from his home by an unknown road and through long tracts of "hungry country"—when he also knows that if he did get back he would probably be sold again or killed —what else can he answer but "yes"? Under similar circumstances the Archbishop of Canterbury would answer the same. The *serviçal* says "yes," and so sanctions the contract for his labor. The decencies of law and order are respected.[1]

In another part of Africa a similar drama was played out later, during the First World War. A young man was similarly caught up in a coercive process of labor mobilization that further emphasized the ambiguities of "free" and "unfree"

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labor. Anyionovo Nwodo, a slave (or *Ohu*), was seized by his chief and deployed to work for the new Nigerian colonial government in constructing the Eastern Branch of the Nigeria Railway and later in the Nigerian Government Colliery, near the city of Enugu, in southeastern Nigeria. His family was held in perpetuity by a freeborn (*Amadi*) lineage of his village, and as such he was particularly vulnerable to deployment by a chief or an individual owner to any project being demanded by the new state. But forced labor became a route to freedom for him, introducing him to the labor market, which he associated with the city of Enugu:

> I and Edenwede Ogbu of Isigwe were pace setters sort of, to the *Ihus* or *Obias.* We were the first set of people to enlist personally to the Europeans without the consent of the chief for their personal betterment … I was among those sent by the chief to work in the construction of the railway line from Otakpa, now in Imo State. … All payment … was directed to the chief. We were left with nothing but at a later date the chief started giving us a small amount of what each of us realized. This was after we had realized from the Europeans that we were paid for the job we had been doing for long. Because of the chief's action we deemed it unnecessary not to be obligatory to the chief. In the circumstance, we started looking for our own greener pastures for personally paid jobs and the most possible area to look for jobs was in Enugu.[2]

While in this case he escaped into the city, for many *Ohu* men becoming a wage laborer was not as simple. The government found, to its chagrin, that much of the production of key agro-exports was dependent on slave and peasant labor that was often secured through complicated and relatively subtle systems of familial obligations, conditional access to land, and cultural practices rooted in local notions of power, honor, and gender.[3] Landholders recognized the importance of their support for the fledgling colonial state and challenged the *Ohu*'s rights to be free. Thus many slave men who entered the "free labor market" by coercion or choice found that their owners, now deprived of the use of their labor power, raised a claim on their wages *in compensation for* the loss of their labor.[4]

The state's policy of using forced labor to introduce "free labor" was a contradiction that was not particularly salient for government officials, like Governor General Frederick Lugard, whose ideas about the moral superiority of "free labor" confronted the complex reality of African labor systems on the ground. As Frederick Cooper has noted, it was not clear if Europeans could assume that they could create a sufficiently authoritarian state to push Africans, whom they had defined as backward, slave-ridden, and lacking in self-control, "on the 'natural course' of market rationality."[5] In effect, could assumptions about the best systems of creating a labor market be applied in Africa? It was not clear if Africa's difference was something that could be overcome or whether it was, in fact, the essential character of that continent. Lord Lugard and other colonial administrators were confronted with the difficult task of

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prying away labor from control of patrilineal families and village elders. In 1915 Lugard waxed poetic about how government policies for mobilizing labor were creating a wage labor force and completely ignored the fact that most of the men had actually been coerced by their chiefs. In December 1915 he boasted that "free" labor had already convinced the "savages" of the value of wage labor, a claim that fell quite wide of the truth:

> Prompt and fair payment, combined with kindly treatment have resulted, I am told, in an actual competition for employment, and those wild tribes who year by year, and indeed only a few months ago, had to be coerced by armed forces, with loss of life, are already learning confidence and acquiring wealth by honest labor.[6]

Nearly everything he said was a lie. He knew that chiefs were dragooning men to work for their projects. But he was also fearful of alienating important collaborative groups, many of whom owned slaves and used coercive strategies to secure and contain labor. Therefore, throughout the British Empire, officials were quite cautious in tampering with slave and other systems of bondage lest they create conditions of such upheaval that colonial economies would collapse and the state would be faced with thousands of itinerant laborers, moving freely throughout the colony, causing disorder and chaos. And, with slavery, they took the course of least resistance to coping with slavery, borrowing a strategy first used in India. In Nigeria, Ghana, and Gambia, they banned slave trading and disruptive slave raids while leaving the institution itself intact. Lugard made the hideous distinction between outlawing the "legal status" of slavery while not abolishing the "institution of domestic slavery."[7] He instructed his aides to "*discourage the wholesale assertion of freedom*."[8]

This model of emancipation, called the Indian Model, was first used by the East India Company government in 1843. It outlawed slave dealing and removed slavery from its legal status. But it did not inform the slaves of their new status; had they left their owners, the courts would not allow owners to reclaim them as property.[9] In West Africa it was seen as an ideal method of outlawing slavery without creating social and economic disruption. In Nigeria these principles were embodied in the Slave Dealing Proclamation of 1901.[10] But officials feared that even this moderate bill could accelerate the decline of slavery in the palm oil-exporting coastal communities and therefore passed the Masters and Servants Proclamation in 1901, which criminalized desertion, and the House Rule Ordinance, which prevented slave members of the large canoe houses[11] in the Niger Delta from deserting, fined disobedient or vagrant house members, and authorized the head to claim a percentage of their profits and/or earnings when employed outside the house. Further, it imprisoned any person hiring house members without the consent of the head. Despite humanitarian opposition, the ordinance remained in force until 1914.

Both the Angolan and Nigerian examples illustrate how thin the line between "free" and "unfree" labor can be. After the slave trade had gradually

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been abolished in Africa and the Americas, employers invented many tricks to guarantee the ongoing supply of bonded workers. For example, scholars of Africa are finding that colonial policies notwithstanding, precolonial slavery and ever more innovative forms of bonded labor are flourishing on the continent, revealing the complexities and subtleties of power relations that deliver the labor-power of the vulnerable to all manner of domestic and international employers. The *serviçaes* in the Portuguese colonies were nothing unusual. In fact, the whole idea of obscuring slavery as contract labor was an older practice, applied, for instance, by French colonists since 1848 or perhaps earlier.[12] Veiled slavery was one of the solutions colonists and planters in various parts of the world invented after the slave trade and slavery had become illegal. Meanwhile, numerous historical studies have been published, revealing the slave holders' and slave traders' adjustment problems and trial-and-error attempts to cope with abolition.[13]

This special section of *International Labor and Working-Class History* was inspired by the striking proliferation of unfree labor systems in the midst of globalizing capitalist systems of production in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This proliferation has created an international concern in which the discourse is reframed as "human trafficking"—with striking resemblances to both eighteenth- and nineteenth-century abolitionist campaigns. This reframing has led to the establishment of new national and transnational agencies, consumer-led campaigns, and boycotts targeting companies (such as Gap) and products produced by extra-economic forms of coercion, and pressure on national governments to develop legislative instruments against slavery and human trafficking. Some systems of unfree labor have attracted international attention and led to renewed attempts to establish "acceptable" and "unacceptable" forms of labor mobilization and control. This has led to the creation of national agencies of state intervention and a resurgence of international monitoring, resembling the early twentieth-century interventions of the International Labor Organization, and to the promulgation of a series of conventions[14] that sought to establish an international consensus around a "modern" system of labor.

This resurgence of labor systems associated with precapitalist methods of production raises questions about the assumptions scholars and colonial policy makers made about the transformative power of capitalism subsuming and destroying earlier relations of production and about capitalism as a powerful vehicle for spurring "development," both socially and economically. The lively debates of the 1960s and 1970s engaged scholars of Africa, Latin America, and Asia, who challenged the "progressive" trajectory of capital, especially under colonial conditions, and argued that it more often developed a symbiotic relationship with unfree labor systems of considerable historical depth. The "development of underdevelopment," the dual-economy thesis, and the concept of the "informal sector" all indicated that the paths of development in what we now call the Global South followed another trajectory from that of Europe and the "West." Would the penetration and transformation of

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capitalism under colonial conditions render previous systems redundant, or would they develop a parasitic relationship with these systems and their structures of power that would hold them in near static condition while opportunistically extracting super-exploited forms of labor power? Would the symbiosis prove fatal and render these systems redundant? What we see now in the twenty-first century suggests another outcome: the creation of new systems of bonded labor that permit deeper levels of intensive labor exploitation. The triumph of neoliberalism as a model of economic "development" appears to have encouraged these new distortions of "free labor."

Not all of these super-exploitative systems are in the Global South. Periodically, newspapers uncover instances of forced labor and slavery within intercises of the North. The uproar surrounding the adoption and abduction of children after the Haitian earthquake suggests that at least some sectors of the US population suspect that slave relations can exist, particularly between adults and children.

The essays in this special section are but a preliminary exploration of the systems of bonded labor both historically and today. Two of our contributors, Kwabena Akurang-Parry and Benjamin Lawrance, focus on Ghana. Both allege that contemporary systems are related to a flawed system of colonial emancipation that sacrificed a vigorous antislavery public policy for dependence on slave-holding collaborators. Akurang-Parry's study of *abaawa*, a system of slavery tying poor prepubescent girls into domestic labor, is unique as an exploration of a system that is significantly understudied. He argues that the system is rooted in a flawed system of colonial emancipation that reflected British gender ideologies and transformed slave men into an urban working class, leaving women and young girls to perform domestic labor. Domestic slavery is particularly difficult to detect because it is enshrined in the patriarchal household and often reflects the idioms of the family. Thus, the persistent use of bonded female labor within the household expresses the consequences of the spatial dichotomy between male/public and female/domestic and proves especially hard to detect and to eliminate. Akurang-Parry argues that the historical linkage of *abaawa* bonded labor with colonial slavery is demonstrated by the position of Northern Ghana as the common regional source area for slaves and prepubescent girls. However, as post-independence social differentiation has sharpened and economic hardship has intensified, the supply system is becoming more diverse, drawing in young girls from urban families in Ghana's coastal cities. In this way *abaawa* serves as a bellwether of the impoverishment of larger and more diverse sectors of Ghana's poor.

Lawrance critiques the ambiguous impact of local and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) on Ghanaian legislative initiatives around human trafficking and slavery. His study fits within the literature examining the powerful influence that western NGOs have on the development of public policy in Africa. It explores the problematic ways that their links to international financing sources overshadow the impact of local NGOs who are more versed in the complexities of local societies. This gives international NGOs an inordinate

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amount of power to shape legislation and public discourse about slavery and trafficking. In this case, NGOs' failure to build a substantive analysis of complex and nuanced local realities of labor systems and to appreciate local conditions undermines their effectiveness and, hence, the effectiveness of the campaign. Thus, international NGOs are circumscribed by foreign organizational cultures and operational patterns that use a universal template for defining unfree labor within the rubric of "human trafficking." Lawrance's contribution particularly focuses on the absence of a strong NGO initiative that contains an analysis of the correct and incorrect use of child labor within the family. By skirting this complicated but essential problem, the campaign for legislation against human trafficking has had virtually no impact on exploitative and bonded systems of labor.

Jan Breman, a widely acknowledged expert on poverty in contemporary India, brings a unique contribution to this issue. His article is a reprise of over three decades of fieldwork in Gujarat on the shifting systems of bonded labor that predominate in certain sectors of Indian capital. It is an unusual format for an *ILWCH* article because the temporal frame of the research, which incorporates the succession of his scholarly publications, allows a nuanced perspective on the fluidity of economic conditions and social relationships that lead to the same tragic result—the indebtedness of the poor family, the father's control over the family and his being forced to deliver their labor, family labor, at below the cost of reproduction. As a case study, Breman's work reveals the complicated mix of labor systems behind the emergence of Indian capitalism as a major world force. While some sectors of Indian capital employ consistent "free labor," others hark back to precolonial systems with a type of creative dynamism that portends to give infinite possibilities of coercing Indian workers. This case study allows us to understand how, in the twenty-first century, given the technological sophistication and internationally diffuse and integrated nature of production and the thoroughly global nature of finance capital, we nonetheless get this infinite variation of bonded systems. Breman presents his findings as a kind of "autoretrospective," looking back on and integrating his recent work on neo-bondage with his pioneering earlier writings, from which he draws extensively in this piece.

The contribution of the economic historian Alessandro Stanziani presents some of the results of his ongoing research on the comparative history of forms of unfree labor. This piece, which is a historical treatment of Russian serfdom, argues that conventional assumptions about the homogeneity and temporal frame of Russian serfdom are overly simplistic and, indeed, inaccurate. He engages a debate about the economic transformation of Russia from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries by presenting a dynamic and diverse picture of the Russian peasant/serf family as a productive unit in the countryside. Challenging the definition of Russia as a periphery responding to "Western" Europe's capitalist development, he contradicts scholars who have argued that this process resulted in the emergence of serfdom in Russia. He also notes that the emancipation of Russian serfdom did not occur in the late

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nineteenth century, as is usually held, but was a three-century process from the late seventeenth through the early twentieth century. Moreover, he argues that the serf was a prominent historical actor astutely manipulating the contradictions between various sectors of the landholding Russian elite: the czar, regional nobles, merchants, and state. Thus, the 1861 reforms are part of a 150-year period of renegotiation among sectors of the elite that resulted in shifts in rural power over serfs. This then allowed these sectors to respond to market forces stimulated both by the emergence of industry in the rural areas and the expanded demand for Russian grain in eastern cities and Western Europe. Stanziani's central thesis is that "free wage laborers" in the Marxian sense, that is, workers, who as free individuals can dispose of their own labor-power as their own commodity and have no other commodity for sale, were exceptional across the globe until the beginning of the twentieth century. On the one hand, "unfree" labor was almost ubiquitous and knew many more variations than is usually assumed, but on the other, many forms of so-called free labor were not as "free" as the standard accounts lead us to believe. Stanziani here elaborates on one aspect of his central thesis and argues that Russian "serfdom" has very much been a social construction that was never simple and homogeneous.

These articles have striking similarities and differences. The ones by Akurang-Parry, Breman, and Stanziani all concern the family as a unit of production whose engagement with systems of bonded labor is often a forced negotiation by the patriarch, himself the victim of more powerful forces. All three authors argue against a static analysis of bonded labor as a redundant system of labor and describe societies experiencing economic change and transformation, some generated by internal forces, others by engagement with the global economy. All of these raise questions about the forms of labor that fit within capitalist production, domestically and internationally, and the transformative power or lack thereof of capitalism itself. In the Indian case, we can see an underbelly of all types of coercive labor systems even as that nation has expanded education and the professional class and emerged as a site of domestically stimulated capitalist development and as a partner in the global outsourcing of services and computer technology.

Finally, all articles complicate the parameters of "bonded" and "free" labor. There are varying degrees of freedom within unfree labor and of bondage or coercion within free labor. By careful analysis, as is demonstrated by our contributors in this issue, we can *begin* to capture the dynamic complexity of labor systems used by capital and challenged by labor.

NOTES

1. Henry W. Nevinson, "The Slave-Trade of To-day (III)," *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, 111/665 (October 1905): 668–676, esp. 670, 672.

2. Interview with Mazi Anyionovo Nwodo, Uhuona, Ugbawka, August 18, 1988.

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3. For a detailed discussion, see "The Labor Question Unposed" in Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge, 1996).

4. See Carolyn Brown, "Testing the Boundaries of Marginality: Twentieth Century Slavery and Emancipation Struggles in Nkanu, Northern Igboland, 1920–29," *Journal of African History* 37 (1996): 51–80.

5. Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*, 25.

6. PRO, CO 583/44, Address of the Governor General, Proceedings of the Second Meeting of the Nigerian Council, December 29, 1915.

7. Lord Lugard, *The Political Memoranda: Revisions of Instructions to Political Officers on Subjects Chiefly Political and Administrative, 1913–1918*, 3rd ed. (London, 1970), 218.

8. Ibid., 224.

9. D.R. Banaji, *Slavery in British India* (Bombay, 1933).

10. Suzanne Miers and Richard Roberts, *The End of Slavery in Africa* (Madison, WI, 1988), 12–13.

11. The canoe house was a commercial enterprise headed by a palm oil trader and included his wives and children as well as scores of slaves and poor free clients. Slave labor was used for manning huge eighty-man canoes that brought truncheons of palm oil from interior villages to the merchant's storehouses on the Niger Delta coast. See K.O. Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta* (Oxford, 1956).

12. François Renault, *Libération d'esclaves et nouvelle servitude: Les rachats de captifs africains pour le compte des colonies françaises après l'abolition de l'esclavage* (Abidjan and Dakar, 1976).

13. A few examples: Oscar Zeichner, "The Transition from Slave to Free Agricultural Labor in the Southern States," *Agricultural History* 13 (January 1939): 22–33; Albert Wirz, *Vom Sklavenhandel zum kolonialen Handel: Wirtschaftsräume und Wirtschaftsformen in Kamerun vor 1914* (Zürich, 1972); Alan H. Adamson, "The Reconstruction of Plantation Labor after Emancipation: The Case of British Guiana," in *Race and Slavery in the Western Hemisphere: Quantitative Studies*, ed. Stanley L. Engerman and Eugene D. Genovese (Princeton, 1975), 457–73; José Luciano Franco, *Comercio clandestino de esclavos* (Havana, 1980); Edward E. Reynolds, "Abolition and Economic Change on the Gold Coast," in *The Abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade: Origins and Effects in Europe, Africa, and the Americas,* ed. David Eltis and James Walvin (Madison, WI, 1981), 141–51; Suzanne Miers and Richard Roberts, *The End of Slavery in Africa* (Madison, 1988); David Northrup, *Beyond the Bend of the River: African Labor in Eastern Zaire, 1865–1940* (Athens, OH, 1988); Michael Craton, "Continuity Not Change: The Incidence of Unrest Among Ex-Slaves in the British West Indies, 1838–1876," *Slavery & Abolition* 9:2 (September 1988): 144–70; Nancy Priscilla Smith Naro, "Revision and Persistence: Recent Historiography on the Transition from Slave to Free Labour in Rural Brazil," *Slavery & Abolition* 13:2 (August 1992): 68–85; Paul E. Lovejoy and Jan S. Hogendorn, *Slow Death for Slavery: The Course of Abolition in Northern Nigeria, 1897–1936* (Cambridge, 1993); Babacar Fall, *Le travail forcé en Afrique-Occidentale française, 1900–1946* (Paris, 1993); Mary Turner, *From Chattel Slaves to Wage Slaves: The Dynamics of Labour Bargaining in the Americas* (Kingston [etc.], 1995); Frederick Cooper, *From Slaves to Squatters: Plantation Labor and Agriculture in Zanzibar and Coastal Kenya, 1890–1925* (Portsmouth, 1997); Kwabena O. Akurang-Parry, "Colonial Forced Labor Policies for Road-Building in Southern Ghana and International Anti-Forced Labor Pressures, 1900–1940," *African Economic History* 28 (2000): 1–25; Kwabena O. Akurang-Parry, "The Loads Are Heavier Than Usual: Forced Labor by Women and Children in the Central Province, Gold Coast (Colonial Ghana), ca. 1900–1940," *African Economic History* 30 (2002): 31–51; Hubert Gerbeau, "L'Océan Indien n'est pas l'Atlantique: La traite illégale à Bourbon au XIXe siècle," *Revue française d'histoire d'Outre-mer* 336–337 (2002): 79–108; Hai-Quang Ho, "La transition de l'esclavage au salariat à la Réunion (1828–1853)," in *L'économie de l'esclavage colonial*, ed. Fred Célimène and André Legris (Paris, 2002), 151–81.

14. International Labor Organization, Forced Labor Convention.

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