

Terms of Work – Shifting Boundaries of „Free“ and „Un-free“ Work

Veranstalter: DFG-Projekt „Der globale Wandel der Kategorie ‚Zwangsarbeit‘“: Marianne Braig / Léa Renard / Nicola Schalkowski, Freie Universität Berlin; Theresa Wobbe, Universität Potsdam

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The workshop was conceived as a first endeavor to initiate a conversation about the boundary making of „free“ and „un-free“ labor from a sociological perspective. Therefore, the organizers – all members of the research project ‘Forced Labour as a Shifting Global Category’¹ – brought together the few sociologists in the field and historians researching the topic in an online workshop gathering both conceptual and empirical contributions.

During the last decades, a broad and substantial body of historical research about „free“ and „un-free“ labor has emerged dealing with coercive working conditions and tense relationships between different, yet often simultaneous and juxtaposed, labor practices within various social and economic systems. So far, this research has developed largely unnoticed by sociology. As emphasized in the workshop’s outline, although work, inequalities and injustice are core objects of sociological research, US-European sociology has hitherto shown little interest in the topics of forced labor or slavery.² Therefore, mainstream sociological research is not well equipped with the instruments for investigating that field.

Another aim of the workshop was to connect different strands of research that barely interact with each other, namely research on forced labor/slavery on the one hand, and on sex work/sex trafficking and domestic work on the other. By doing that, the workshop not only attempted to bring together studies on the abolitionist movements against both slavery and prostitution. The assumption behind it was also that the efforts to conceptualize coerced labor beyond the free/unfree

divide could benefit from conceptualizations of (un)voluntariness in feminized sectors that have long not been acknowledged as work.

The first panel about sociological perspectives on slavery and forced labor began with the keynote speech of ORLANDO PATTERSON (Cambridge, MA). With his foundational sociology of slavery (1982) and freedom (1991), Patterson has provided a framework for conceptualizing the social prerequisites and impacts of enslavement.³ In his contribution, he argued that it is our very conception of categorization that needs revision. Since all social reality is ambiguous, slavery should not be treated as a taxonomical category. Instead, Patterson introduced an understanding of slavery as a graded status with instantiations between a prototypical center (e.g., plantation slaves in 18th-century Jamaica) and its margins (e.g., Ottoman Janissaries). Out of a family of properties, he identified three core attributes of slavery: total and violent domination, „natal alienation“ (a process by which enslaved persons were genealogically and culturally isolated from their ancestors and descendants), and „parasitic degradation“ (the master’s dependency on the slave in order to gain honor).⁴ In using the example of the co-evolution of slavery and serfdom from the late Roman Empire onwards, Patterson demonstrated how different forms of domination merge into each other, emphasizing the fuzziness of their boundaries.

By applying and extending Patterson’s conceptualization of „human parasitism“, FIONA GREENLAND (Charlottesville, VA) connected this framework to her historical sociological research on the long-range continu-

¹ The research project „Forced Labour as a Shifting Global Category: Classification, Comparison and Meanings of Work in the International Labour Organization (ILO), 1919 – 2017“ (Freie Universität Berlin / Universität Potsdam) is funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG).

² Fiona Greenland / George Steinmetz, Orlando Patterson, His Work, and His Legacy. A Special Issue in Celebration of the Republication of Slavery and Social Death, in: *Theory and Society* 48 (2019), p.785-797.

³ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death. A Comparative Study*, Cambridge 1982; Orlando Patterson, *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture*, New York 1991.

⁴ Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*.

ities of women's enslavement. She shed light on the violent and corporeal parasitic degradation imposed on captive Yazidi women and girls. In this context, forced labor was used to uphold the brutal regime of the Islamic State during the Syrian civil war. Greenland argued to treat their experience not as an outlier, but rather as a specifically analyzable example of gender-based forced labor. While Western media coverage often portrayed them as „sex slaves“ in a sensationalist and reductive way, the Yazidi women were treated as captive forced laborers in a wide array of activities, ranging from agricultural work to nursing or translating. As in other slave-like relations, their body was central in the process of enslavement. Building on Judith Butler's concept of „grievable bodies“, Greenland showed how Yazidi women were perceived as inhabiting „enslavable bodies“ – a circumstance that arose both from the „male captors' sense of deservingness“ and from the historically grown condition of Yazidi women as gender, ethnic, religious and political minority. Their domination by the Islamic State, hence, was built on already existing cultural, social and economic structures.

Drawing on his previous research on the history of social sciences with respect to a reflexive sociology and a sociology of empire, colonialism and racism, GEORGE STEINMETZ (Ann Arbor, MI) explored how forced labor was treated and ignored in sociology. By discussing the reasons for the „repression“ of forced labor in social theory and historical sociology he underscored the positivism and presentism of the discipline and its strive for generally applicable laws of today's social practices. Sociology has been unable to make sense of extreme economic and political forms, such as colonialism, Stalinism and National Socialism, contributing to the absence of such fields of investigation. By taking ethno-sociologist Richard Thurnwald's career from the colonial period of the Kaiserreich to National Socialism, Steinmetz tackled sociology's direct involvement with forced labor. Against this background, he argued to put forced labor in the context of violent practices and placing it in the context of respective research including slavery, sexual violence, totalitarianism, and genocide.

The second panel gathered sociological and historical case studies on crusades against (sex) trafficking and exploitative domestic work. Building on her historical sociological scholarship on anti-trafficking movements, STEPHANIE LIMONCELLI (Los Angeles, CA) asked whether the inclusion of businesses into these campaigns shifted the criminal justice perspective of earlier movements (around 1900) which focused on women's sexual exploitation. As a case in point, she used the United Nations Global Compact (UNGC), the world's largest corporate sustainability initiative. Limoncelli argued that a focus on labor exploitation and a labor law perspective are still missing in anti-trafficking efforts today, as the UNGC adopts a human rights and criminal justice framework. By emphasizing individual victims and perpetrators, the underlying system of international political economy is hardly questioned. Whereas workers are rarely ever mentioned, Western companies paradoxically present themselves as victims of forced labor and trafficking networks in the Global South – a view that disconnects them from their own global responsibility.

On the basis of her doctoral research, SONJA DOLINSEK (Erfurt) aimed at historicizing the politics of prostitution and anti-trafficking laws, both at the national and international level, through the lens of „shifting boundaries of 'free' and 'un-free' work“. In Western history, prostitution has been conceived from a moral point of view as „unfreedom“ and disconnected from the field of work. In the aftermath of the 1949 UN Convention that conflated all forms of prostitution with trafficking, state-regulation was legally abolished in many countries, among them France. Subsequently, commercial sex was literally pushed into the illegal space and sex workers were increasingly subjected to police repression and criminalization. Thus, Dolinsek's historical reconstruction brings to the fore the contradictions of the human rights perspective behind what she calls regulation-abolitionism.

Referring to her long-standing work on women's household, sex, and care work, EILEEN BORIS (Santa Barbara, CA) examined the case of Black women domestic workers

who migrated from the south of the United States to New York and its suburbs between the early 1950s and the mid-1960s. Based on media reports, advertisements and campaign materials, Boris showed how this work was shaped by forms of „un-free“ and dependent labor. In many cases, employment agencies were involved in the recruitment process; the payment of high fees for recruitment and transport constituted one mechanism of dependency. At the same time, the actual wages were often much lower than originally promised, confining the women in a situation that could amount to bonded labor. Meanwhile, many *white* northern households were „complicit“ in keeping the labor cheap and disregarding labor standards. The campaigns organized against this form of exploitation aimed at „rescuing“ so-called stranded domestics and sending them home, instead of insisting on better working conditions. The case of these southern Black domestic workers, Boris argued, is an expression of racial capitalism and testifies to the long-lasting impact of slavery on occupational segregation. Therein the very meaning of (un-)freedom needs to be reconsidered.

The presenters and the commentators initiated a lively discussion. The first four contributions shared a historical sociological approach to slavery and forced labor and, in particular, a strong interest in long-range comparisons. While Patterson discussed challenges of categorization related to the coevolution of slavery and servitude, Greenland analyzed contemporary experiences of women's enslavement as a phenomenon of human parasitism. Therein gender-based forced labor becomes integral to the social projects of male status maintenance. Steinmetz addressed colonial and Nazi forced labor in regard to „extreme“ forms of political structure with vigorous epistemological and methodological questions, while Limoncelli's exploration of current anti-trafficking frames echoed her research on earlier campaigns. As Patterson emphasized, the factual alterability of exploitative conditions today stands in contrast with the international organizations' generic use of the terms „forced labor“ and „modern slavery“. These phenomena need closer research.

The last two contributions underlined the

need to research the implicated meaning of work when exploring „free“ and „un-free“ labor. What is considered, recognized and paid as work? Dolinsek pointed to the longue durée of sexual politics tackling the „immorality“ of prostitution and the supposed need for behavioral redirection of women's labor to „useful“ work. Boris underlined the ongoing impact of slavery on Black women's treatment in the labor market and in *white* households. Combined with Patterson's and Greenland's insistence in the significance of corporeal domination, natal alienation and parasitic degradation, the workshop inspired more research in this regard. This holds also true for Steinmetz' call in favor of more reflexivity in sociology. Overall, the workshop stimulated the need for more detailed empirical and conceptual research in the ambiguous nature of slavery and forced labor, and its embeddedness in broader social institutions from a historical sociological view. These debates would further gain from the insights and perspectives of non-US-European based researchers.

Conference overview:

Marianne Braig (Freie Universität Berlin), Léa Renard (Freie Universität Berlin), Nicola Schalkowski (Freie Universität Berlin), Theresa Wobbe (Universität Potsdam): Opening remarks

Panel 1: Sociological Perspectives on Slavery and Forced Labor

Keynote speech

Orlando Patterson (Harvard University): Historical and Sociological Perspectives on Slavery and Forced Labor: Wittgenstein and Rosch to the Rescue

Fiona Greenland (University of Virginia): Enslavable Bodies: Unfree Labor and Human Parasitism in the Syrian War

Discussants: Léa Renard / Nicola Schalkowski (Freie Universität Berlin)

George Steinmetz (University of Michigan): Forced Labor and Modern Social Science, from Colonialism to Nazism

Discussant: Theresa Wobbe (Universität Pots-

dam)

Panel 2: Forced Labor as Field of Battle: Transnational Crusades and International Networks

Stephanie A. Limoncelli (Loyola Marymount University): Will the Real Victim Please Stand Up? International Organizations, Businesses, and the Framing of Labor Exploitation in Contemporary Anti-Trafficking Efforts

Discussant: Barbara G. Brents (University of Nevada, Las Vegas)

Sonja Dolinsek (Universität Erfurt): Moral Unfreedom: Historical Conceptualizations of Prostitution and Human Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation

Discussant: Julia Laite (Birkbeck, University of London)

Eileen Boris (University of California, Santa Barbara): Neither Free nor Slave: Migrant Domestic Workers, the Employment Agency, and Reproductive Labor under Capitalism

Discussant: Rhacel Salazar Parreñas (University of Southern California)

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