

# On Coerced Labor

*Work and Compulsion after Chattel Slavery*

*Edited by*

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## Dissecting Coerced Labor<sup>1</sup>

*Marcel van der Linden*

Science may indeed purchase its exactness at the price of schematization. But the remedy in this case is to confront it with an integral experience

MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY, *Signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), p. 128.

The previous essays reveal wide disagreement about the concepts needed to analyse coerced labor.<sup>2</sup> Contemporary Brazilian legislation regards as “modern slavery” what others would regard as “forced labor.”<sup>3</sup> Since very early on the definitions of slavery and other forms of coerced labor adopted by international organizations have been at odds with one another. The confusion dates from the 1920s at the latest. Article 1 of the League of Nations Slavery Convention of 1926 defined slavery in legal terms: “the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised.” Article 2.1 of the International Labor Organization’s Convention Concerning Forced or Compulsory Labour of 1930 (No. 29), however, does *not* presume the existence of a legal basis: indeed, “all work or service that is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself or herself voluntarily” is regarded as forced or compulsory labor.<sup>4</sup>

Not only have the standard definitions been inconsistent for so long, they are generally vague. That vagueness began already with the League of Nations. What does it mean when the League of Nations talks about “any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership”? Modern legal theory distinguishes at least eleven such “powers,” including the duty to prevent harmful use.<sup>5</sup> The Geneva Convention of 14 December 1956 refers to “Slavery, the Slave

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1 I’m grateful to Tamira Combrink, Jan Lucassen, David Mayer, and Magaly Rodríguez García for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this chapter. All mistakes and unclarity are my responsibility, of course.

2 The contributions by Magaly Rodríguez García, Nicole Siller, and Christine Molfenter show this convincingly.

3 See the contribution by Lisa Carstensen.

4 Lachs, “Slavery.”

5 Modern legal theory breaks property rights down into the following rights and duties: “(i) the right to possess, (ii) the right to use, (iii) the right to manage, (iv) the right to the income

Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery.” But what does “similar to slavery” mean?

Today’s non-governmental organizations have done nothing to lessen the confusion. The Walk Free Foundation defines “modern slavery” as “one person possessing or controlling another person in such a way as to significantly deprive that person of their individual liberty, with the intention of exploiting that person through their use, management, profit, transfer or disposal.”<sup>6</sup> Using this definition, in its 2014 report the organization estimates that 35.8 million people are “living in some form of modern slavery globally.” Other NGOs arrive at differing conclusions. The Anti-Slavery International takes the view that “Someone is in slavery if they are: forced to work – through mental or physical threat; owned or controlled by an ‘employer’, usually through mental or physical abuse or the threat of abuse; dehumanised, treated as a commodity or bought and sold as ‘property’; physically constrained or has restrictions placed on his/her freedom of movement.”<sup>7</sup> Based on this definition the ASI estimates that 21 million people are “in a form of slavery,” drawing on an estimate published by the International Labor Organization in Geneva.<sup>8</sup>

To advance the academic debate, it would seem advisable not to remain focused on discussions about general, but inevitably contentious, terms such as “slavery,” but to go beyond that and to analyse as precisely as possible all forms of coerced labor – of which “slavery” is one example. Probably only then will we be able to identify clearly the differences and similarities between various forms of exploitation and repression. This might make it easier to understand the causalities and to develop effective policies. The present essay makes a preliminary attempt at such an analysis.

### Conceptual Clarifications

If we are to discuss the phenomenon of coerced labor we also need to know what non-coerced labor entails. An example might help. On 21 November 1857

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of the object, (v) the right to the capital, (vi) the right to security, (vii) the right of transmissibility, (viii) the right of absence of term, (ix) the duty to prevent harmful use, (x) liability to execution, and (xi) the incident of residuary.” To enjoy full ownership in an object a proprietor must hold most (but not necessarily all) of these elements regarding that object. See Honoré’s classic essay “Ownership.”

6 Walk Free Foundation, *Global Slavery Index 2014*, p. 8.

7 <[www.antislavery.org/english/slavery\\_today/](http://www.antislavery.org/english/slavery_today/)>. Last consulted on January 6, 2016.

8 This ILO estimate (of 20.9 million, published in 2012) related to the number of “forced laborers.” <[www.ilo.org/forcedlabour](http://www.ilo.org/forcedlabour)>. Last consulted on January 6, 2016.

a Caribbean planter complained about his unhappy fate in London's *The Times* newspaper. The abolition of slavery in the 1830s had resulted in an acute shortage of laborers willing to work on the plantations, since the former slaves refused any longer to accept such a dependent labor relationship:

The freed West India negro slave will not till the soil for wages; the free son of the ex-slave is as obstinate as his sire. He will cultivate lands which he has not bought for his own yams, mangoes, and potatoes. These satisfy his wants; he does not care for yours. Cotton and sugar and coffee and tobacco – he cares little enough for them. And what matters it to him that the Englishman has sunk his thousands and tens of thousands on mills, machinery, and plant, which now totter on the languishing estate that for years has only returned beggary and debts? He eats his yams, and sniggers at 'Buckra'.<sup>9</sup>

Marx commented on this sort of lamentation when he observed that the former slaves had become "self-sustaining peasants for their own consumption"; for them, "capital does not exist as capital, because autonomous wealth as such can exist only on the basis of *direct* forced labor, slavery, or *indirect* forced labour, *wage labour*."<sup>10</sup> In other words: the slaves who had been able to cast off their chains completely and who now produce only for themselves are *free* laborers, while slaves and wage labor *both* perform forced labor. Or, in terms of modern microeconomics: anyone who works as an agent for a principal is unfree.<sup>11</sup>

Marx's view placed him in a long tradition. In his *Politeia* Aristotle argued that the actions of a man who "does or learns anything for his own sake or for the sake of his friends, or with a view to excellence, [...] will not appear illiberal [unfree]; but if done for the sake of others, the very same action will be thought menial and servile."<sup>12</sup> Based on that argument, wage labor in Ancient Greece was frequently considered unfree labor, which is why slaves (*douloi*) and wage laborers (*thêtes*) were often regarded as belonging to the same group.<sup>13</sup> The distinction between non-coerced and coerced labor mirrored,

9 Expertus, "Negroes and the Slave Trade."

10 Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 326.

11 "The principal-agent literature is concerned with how one individual, the principal (say an employer), can design a compensation system (a contract) which motivates another individual, his agent (say the employee), to act in the principal's interest." Stiglitz, "Principal and Agent (11)," p. 966.

12 Aristotle, *Politeia*, 1337b17-21.

13 Examples in Zelnick-Abramovitz, *Not Wholly Free*, pp. 34–35.

then, the distinction between labor for oneself and labor for others. Moses Finley described this distinction as follows:

“Oneself” is to be understood not in a narrow individualistic sense but as embracing the family, nuclear or extended as the case may be in any particular society. [...] Nor is interfamily cooperative activity, as during harvest periods. ‘Labour for others’ implies not only that others take some of the fruits but also that they customarily control, in direct ways, the work that is done and the manner of its doing, whether in person or through agents and managers.”<sup>14</sup>

Aristotle implicitly presumed that *all* members of the *oikos* (the household as a patriarchal community) performed “free labor,” but from a feminist perspective such a view is untenable of course. The male household head does indeed work for his family without having to submit to others. But women, children and servants working under his authority are *not* free; they, too, work and are subject to the authority of another, in this case the patriarch.<sup>15</sup> Whatever the case, the work of the patriarch is free, since it is autonomous, while “labor for others” represents a heteronomous activity that I will here regard as coerced labor. If free workers were to support one another mutually, through rotating labor for example, that, too, would be free labor.

What does coercion mean in this context though? To answer this question we must first briefly discuss “coercion” as an abstract concept. Every coercive act is a four-term relationship between two actors and two behaviours. There is a *coercer* who attempts to induce a *recipient of coercion* (the victim) to a *compliant response* by means of a *coercive act*.<sup>16</sup> The coercer might be a person, but it could equally be an organization or institution, or even a social structure. The coercive act can take two forms: constrained choice and physical compulsion. *Constrained choice* is when the coercer threatens the victim by making it clear that: If you do (do not do) X or Y, then harm will be inflicted on you. The victim is then being ordered by the coercer not to do something, or actually to do something. Sometimes the threat is multiconditional; in that case the

14 Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*, p. 67.

15 Finley himself did not share this view. He argued that “the work of the women and children within the family, no matter how authoritarian and patriarchal its structure, is not subsumed under [the] category of labour for others (though I am aware that I face objections from several directions when I say that).” *Ibid.*

16 Gorr, “Toward a Theory of Coercion,” pp. 384–385.

victim has two or more “permitted” choices (you may do A or B, but certainly not C). Sometimes the threat is biconditional, in which case the victim is permitted just one choice. The coercer threatens that the victim will be harmed if s/he fails to accede to what the coercer demands. This harm *can* be inflicted by the coercer (if, for instance, an attacker threatens: “your money or your life”), but that is by no means necessary. A statement along the lines of “If you violate this commandment you will go to hell” is also a threat. In constrained choice the coercer aims to induce the recipient of coercion to respond compliantly; this might take the form of an action or of an omission. Action, here, means purposeful behaviour or a failure to perform an action that one has the ability and the opportunity to perform.<sup>17</sup> In the case of *physical compulsion* the coercer uses force to restrict the spatial freedom of movement of the victim without the victim being able to do anything to resist. Examples include slave raiding and confinement in a labor camp. In the case of physical compulsion victims have no choice; in the case of constrained choice they have one or more choices.<sup>18</sup>

Sometimes, forms of coercion are completely coalesced; then they can be said to form intrinsic combinations. Torture as a means to force a confession from someone is an example of an intrinsic combination, with physical compulsion and threat (constrained choice) forming a whole. In the case of other coercive acts, forms of coercion are employed as two distinct, but closely related, methods.

The victim can respond to the coercive act in various ways of course: he or she can obey, refuse to obey, partly obey or just pretend to obey. The first two options are unambiguous; the last two are ambiguous. Hidden forms of disobedience can be both frequent and take a number of different forms.<sup>19</sup>

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17 *Ibid.*, p. 385.

18 Physical compulsion is sometimes also termed “occurrent coercion,” and conditional threats “dispositional coercion.” See Bayles, “Concept of Coercion,” p. 17. Unconditional threats exist alongside conditional threats, as when someone says “I will kill you,” without the person threatened being in a position to exert an influence on the person making the threat. For an interesting sociological analysis of threats see Paris and Sofsky, “Drohungen.”

19 See, for example, Robin Cohen, “Resistance and Hidden Forms of Consciousness amongst African Workers,” *Review of African Political Economy*, 7, 19 (September-December 1980), pp. 8–22; James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985); Julius O. Ihonvbere, “Resistance and Hidden Forms of Protest amongst the Petroleum Proletariat in Nigeria,” in: *Midnight Notes Collective* (ed.), *Midnight Oil: Work, Energy, War, 1973–1992* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1992),



### The Three Moments of Coerced Labor

In analytical terms, all forms of coerced labor are characterized by three “moments”: the entry into the labor relationship; the period during which the worker works; and the end of the labor relationship. These three moments are interrelated, of course – a point I will return to later.

*Entry.* Why do workers enter into a coerced labor relationship? There are, I would argue, ten varying reasons, of which only one is actually voluntary (Figure 13.1).

1. When the worker is *sold*, the worker becomes the property of one or more other individuals or of an organization, such as a company or a state, and is subsequently sold on to another person or organization for the purpose of performing work.

2. *Hiring out* occurs when a person, though the property of an owner, has to work for someone else, an employer. A Brazilian study of these slaves-for-hire (so-called *ganhadores*) in the nineteenth century says:

The *ganhadores* moved about freely in the streets looking for work. It was a common, although not general, practice for slaveowners to permit their slaves to live outside the master’s home in rented rooms, sometimes with former slaves as their landlords. They only returned to the master’s house to ‘pay for the week’, that is, to pay the weekly (and sometimes daily) sum agreed upon with their masters. They were able to keep whatever exceeded that amount.<sup>20</sup>

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries such slaves-for-hire could be found in various parts of the Americas and Africa.

3. *Self-sale.* Sometimes workers feel compelled to sell themselves to an employer for a number of years or the rest of their lives, because, for example, they would otherwise be unable to pay off their debts or because they would otherwise starve. This is self-sale, with the worker opting to become a slave. Self-sale is an ancient phenomenon, mentioned even in the Codex Hammurabi

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pp. 91–105; Matthew C. Gutmann, “Rituals of Resistance: A Critique of the Theory of Everyday Forms of Resistance,” *Latin American Perspectives*, 20, 2 (Spring 1993), pp. 74–92.

20 João José Reis, “The Revolution of the *Ganhadores*: Urban Labour, Ethnicity and the African Strike of 1857 in Bahia, Brazil,” *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 29, 2 (1997), pp. 355–393, at 359.

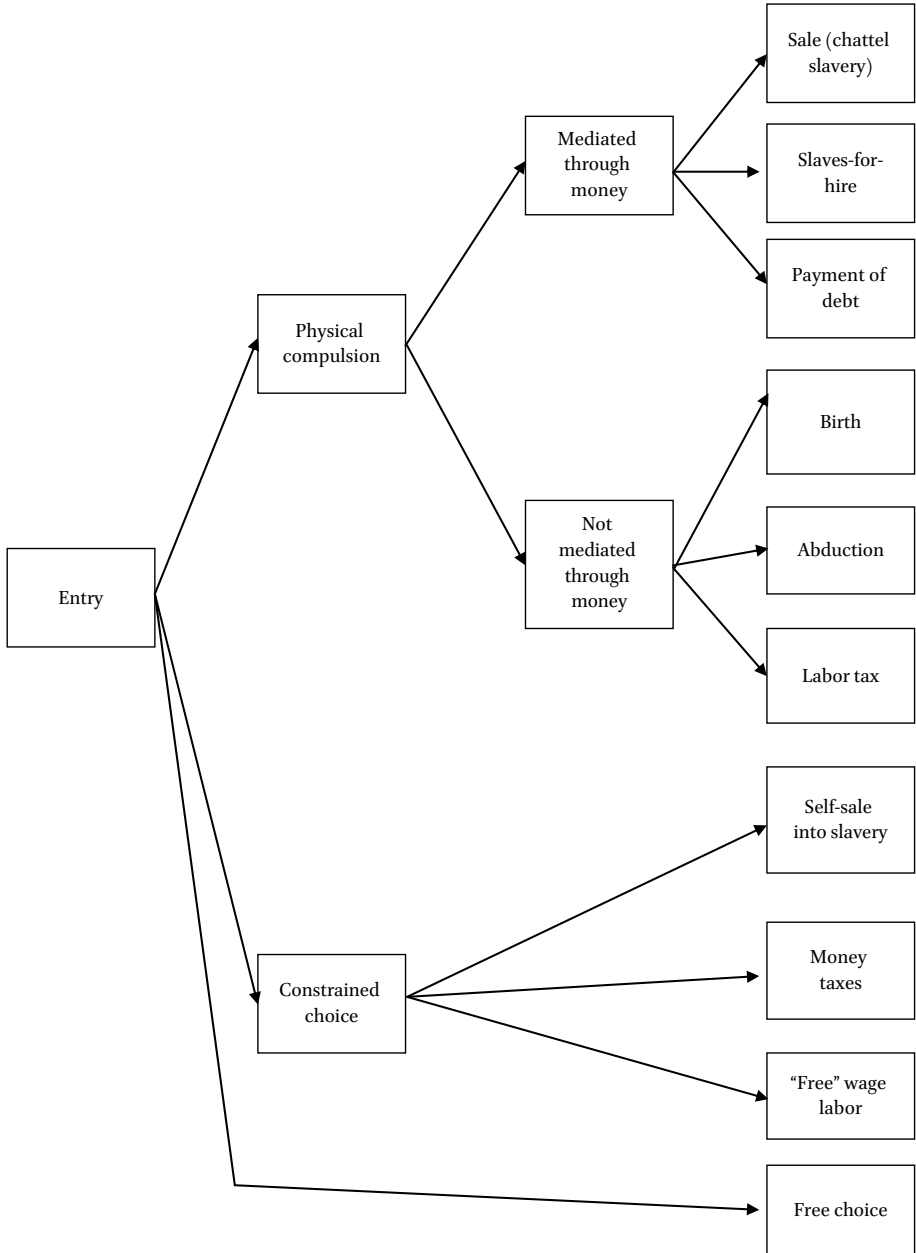


FIGURE 13.1 *Entering the labor relation*

(c. 1780 BCE), and it inspired theoretical reflections on the part of Locke, Montesquieu and Rousseau.<sup>21</sup>

Poverty was, of course, one of the main reasons for self-sale, and [...] in several advanced societies such as China and Japan it was at times a major source of slaves. In Russia between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries self-sale as a result of poverty was the most important reason for enslavement among the mass of domestic slaves. [...] Yet there were reasons other than poverty why persons sold themselves. Sometimes it was because of political rather than economic security. Strangers who found themselves cut off from their kinsmen in tribal societies often sought self-sale into slavery as the only path to survival. [...] Another cause of self-enslavement was the sale of self and relatives in order to escape either military services or prohibitive taxes – whether in cash, kind, or corvée labor.<sup>22</sup>

4. *Debt* can induce people to work for others. Tom Brass has distinguished two ways in which debt bondage can be created. The first is “voluntary” indebtedness and occurs:

[...] when an individual voluntarily seeks a loan which he or she is unable to repay subsequently. Thus loans taken for non-recurrent items of expenditure, such as the purchase of medicines for illness, the finance of important life cycle ceremonies (such as marriage or death rites) may result in the labor power of the debtor being acquired by the creditor. Because the advance is requested, this form lacks the coercive appearance of bonded labor: the worker becomes indebted and exits from the free labour market ‘voluntarily’.

The second is “involuntary”:

[...] a loan is neither sought nor is the necessity for doing so present initially. Indebtedness is involuntary, and furthermore appears as such.

21 Article 117 of the Codex Hammurabi stated: “If any one fail to meet a claim for debt, and sell himself, his wife, his son, and daughter for money or give them away to forced labor: they shall work for three years in the house of the man who bought them, or the proprietor, and in the fourth year they shall be set free.” *Code of Hammurabi*, p. 15. See also Dorn, “Selbstverknechtung.”

22 Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, p. 130. See also Hellie, *Slavery in Russia*, and Testart, *L’esclave, la dette et le pouvoir*; Engerman, “Slavery, Freedom, and Sen,” esp. pp. 94–100.

It follows from a situation in which payment due a worker at the end of his contract is withheld by the creditor-employer precisely in order to retain his services, the resulting period of unpaid labour (engineered by the creditor-employer) necessitating recourse to subsistence loans on the part of the worker. Though different in appearance, both these forms are in substance the same, and initiate the cycle of debt-servicing labour obligations which constitute bondage.<sup>23</sup>

Nicola Pizzolato gives a number of examples of this in his essay.

5. *Birth*. The principle that the child of a slave is also a slave is of ancient origin. We find it in pre-Columbian America, for example, and it has persisted ever since.<sup>24</sup> Slaveholders sometimes exploited this principle to engage in conscious slave-breeding, as in Ethiopia, as late as the end of the 1920s, when prices of slaves had risen to incredible levels owing to decreasing supplies.<sup>25</sup> The journal of the International Labor Organization remarked at the time that:

In fact, just as livestock is placed in favorable conditions for breeding, so a male may be assigned to a female slave in order that their offspring may add to their owner's property. [...] The owner has theoretically the right to dispose of the child from the moment of its birth; he can take the baby from the breast and sell it. As a matter of fact, it is clear that the owner's interest demands that the new-born child should live under the best possible conditions, so that he may be a fine specimen if sold young or that he may develop normally and become a vigorous worker. These two reasons usually prevail to prevent the child being taken from his mother until he is weaned.<sup>26</sup>

6. *Abduction*. An armed group captures one or more individuals and puts them to work or sells them for the purpose of having them work for others (which brings us back to the first variant). For example, a French traveller writing at the end of the nineteenth century about the Mossi people in Africa reported that:

23 Brass, *Towards a Comparative Political Economy*, pp. 11–12. For a slightly different view see Rao, "Agrarian Power and Unfree Labour."

24 See, for example, MacLeod, "Some Aspects of Primitive Chattel Slavery"; Watson, "Chattel Slavery in Chinese Peasant Society"; Mitchell, "American Origins and Regional Institutions"; Card, "Genocide and Social Death."

25 Edwards, "Slavery."

26 Griaule, "Labour in Abyssinia," p. 194.

From time to time, his cavalrymen storm the outskirts of some Gurunsi or Kipirsi village, taking by surprise and seizing the inhabitants who are farming or collecting firewood. His people also lie separately in ambush on the roads and capture anyone who comes within their reach [...] During my second stay in Banéma, Boukary, knowing my horror of plunder and slavery and fearing to displease me, sent out two expeditions at night without telling me: one into the west toward Nabouli, the other into the south toward Baouér'a. At ten o'clock the next morning, the sound of gunfire announced the cavalrymen's return. Soon afterwards, a row of male and female slaves appeared, tied one behind the other with a rope around their necks. The expedition to Nabouli brought back seventeen slaves, that to Baouér'a, only five, as well as a donkey loaded with salt and a little cotton fabric. Upon the arrival of these unfortunates, we let them drink, and used mallets to remove the copper rings and hoops they wore around their arms and legs.

The adult men and women were sold, but

[...] the little children, boys and girls, were divided up between the warriors, who took charge of them. Until further notice, these children will serve the warriors as their grooms; those who are deemed capable of later service and who prove themselves obedient will be kept on. The others will be sold off at the first opportunity. The girls are married off to those warriors who have distinguished themselves.<sup>27</sup>

It is important to note that abduction can also be state-supervised. In his essay in the present volume, David Palmer includes the example of Korean forced laborers who were "conscripted" by the Japanese government, a euphemism for abducted. We could include, too, the variants of conscript labor reported in their essays by Kelvin Santiago-Valles and Christian De Vito.

7. *Kinship and community pressure* refers to cases where workers felt obliged to work because their family wanted them to, or because the head of the community (the village chief, for example) wanted them to. In French West Africa in the early twentieth century the colonial administration obliged villages to supply contingents of laborers, to build railways for example:

To that end, the indigenous communities (e.g. families, ethnic groups and villages) are expected to give up the laborers required. Following their

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<sup>27</sup> Binger, *Du Niger au Golfe du Guinée*, pp. 470–473.

recruitment, the chief of the province chooses from his advisers and/or friends a person responsible for breaking down the contingent into three crews, appointing a leader and taking the entire workforce to the sites. He must remain there to ensure that laborers who are ill, who have deserted or who are otherwise unavailable for work are replaced, to provide information on the men mobilised and, if necessary, to receive complaints. The men are scheduled to set out for the sites after the harvest – starting from 1 November. Laborers are enlisted to work from 1 November to 1 May [...].<sup>28</sup>

Sven Van Melkebeke offers examples of related constructions in his study of East Congo.

8. *Monetary taxes* were levied, especially by the colonial authorities, to induce people to engage in wage labor because it was only through wage labor (or the production of cash crops for the market) that they could earn the cash that they were required to pay to the state. Two managers at a commercial company in Congo wrote about this on the eve of the First World War:

The goal of the tax system is not only to reimburse the government in some measure for the cost of occupying all the territories, and of providing protection for the native population. Taxes also have a higher purpose, which is to accustom the Negroes to work [...]. The native from the Upper Congo region has not yet reached that stage of evolution where he would increase his comfort by trade and work, and for this reason the tax system will continue to provide for a long time the main incentive to work.<sup>29</sup>

Sometimes, taxes were levied not in a monetary form but in the form of labor, what the French colonial authorities termed *prestation*. The link with kinship and community pressure (variant 7) is seamless since the *prestation* generally had to be paid by the community. In his essay Justin Jackson discusses a hybrid type of labor tax in the U.S.-occupied Philippines which took the form of forced wage labor.

28 Fall, *Le travail forcé*, p. 108. For similar recruitment practices in British Africa, see Mason, "Working on the Railway," and Cooper, *From Slaves to Squatters*, pp. 92–104.

29 Quoted in: Peemans, "Capital Accumulation in the Congo," p. 175. For other cases see, for example, Ford, "Political Economy of Taxation"; Gardner, *Taxing Colonial Africa*.

9. *“Free” wage labor.* In theory, under capitalism there are multiple alternatives to wage labor for the individual “free” wage earner;<sup>30</sup> he or she “can go on the dole, or beg, or simply make no provision [...] and trust to fortune.” He or she can also become self-employed, set up a workers’ cooperative, or become a capitalist employer.<sup>31</sup> Many of these variants make it possible to acquire the money required to purchase or rent the consumer goods necessary for one’s own household (a home, clothing, food, etc.). But for most wage earners these alternatives are neither reasonable nor acceptable. As individuals they often do not feel attracted by the alternatives because these are regarded as ignominious (begging) or difficult to realize (setting up their own business).<sup>32</sup> Moreover, there is also a collective unfreedom: the number of workers who manage to escape from wage labor by becoming employers is, by definition, limited: their freedom to escape is “contingent on the others not exercising their similarly contingent freedom”: “although most proletarians are free to escape the proletariat, and, indeed, even if everyone is, the proletariat is collectively unfree, an imprisoned class.”<sup>33</sup> Seen in this way, wage labor thus is a clear case of constrained choice.

10. *Free choice.* Finally, there are, of course, also those not forced by material necessity but who nonetheless enter into a heteronomous labor relationship. They include subsistence peasants who accept wage labor temporarily to acquire “extras” (luxury items, for instance) with the money they have earned, and also wealthy individuals who accept an employment position in order to ensure they are usefully occupied.<sup>34</sup>

Two caveats should be made concerning this classification. First, the distinction between these variants (and especially the first nine) is not always as clear-cut as it might seem. Take contemporary Brazil for instance:

30 Cohen, “Structure of Proletarian Unfreedom,” p. 3.

31 Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, p. 213.

32 When the U.S. social scientist E. Wight Bakke lived in the working-class neighbourhood of Greenwich (London) in the early 1930s, he observed an “unwillingness to launch out into some sort of independent enterprise.” He explained this by “the inability of one who has been born and bred in the tradition of a wage-earner to visualize himself as an independent worker, his own boss.” This “lack of imagination” resulted from the wage earner’s work socialization: “The work routine, the regularity and simplicity of the routine outside working hours, the plodding necessities of the household economy – all of these enforce a discipline which trains for stability as a wage-earner but not for the independence and adaptability and personality necessary for success in an independent enterprise.” Bakke, *Unemployed Man*, pp. 126–127.

33 Cohen, “Structure of Proletarian Unfreedom,” pp. 11, 12.

34 Berger, “Warum arbeiten die Arbeiter?”

Victims are recruited in poor regions of Brazil by labor contractors, who promise good jobs and transport voluntary workers in buses over long distances. Upon arrival, workers are surprised to find that the reality differs from the promises. Workers are informed that they already have a debt for the cost of transportation and for the food they received. They are told that they will be charged for the tools, boots, hats, and clothes that are necessary to carry out the job, as well as for the rental of their beds. The cost of their food is also retained from their salaries. Workers who complain are told that they cannot leave until they have paid their debt. Those who still do not submit are retained by violence.<sup>35</sup>

In this case the workers are victims of both abduction and debt peonage.

And what about the following case, from the United States? In 1908, thus long after slavery had been officially abolished, the sheriff of Shelby County, Alabama, arrested a young Afro-American man, Green Cottenham, for “vagrancy.” Cottenham, a 22-year-old descendant of former slaves, was sentenced to thirty days’ hard labor.

Unable to pay the array of fees assessed on every prisoner – fees to the sheriff, the deputy, the court clerk, the witnesses – Cottenham’s sentence was extended to nearly a year of hard labor. The next day, Cottenham [...] was sold. Under a standing arrangement between the county and a vast subsidiary of the industrial titan of the North – U.S. Steel Corporation – the sheriff turned the young man over to the company for the duration of his sentence. In return, the subsidiary, Tennessee Coal, Iron & Railroad Company, gave the county \$12 a month to pay off Cottenham’s fine and fees. What the company’s managers did with Cottenham, and thousands of other black men they purchased from sheriffs across Alabama, was entirely up to them. A few hours later, the company plunged Cottenham into the darkness of a mine called Slope No. 12 – one shaft in a vast subterranean labyrinth on the edge of Birmingham known as the Pratt Mines.<sup>36</sup>

Here, a relatively small debt was vastly inflated, after which the convict could be leased for a limited period as a slave. This particular case combined debt bondage with slave-for-hire. There are, in short, many combinations and hybrid forms.

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35 Sakamoto, “Slave Labor’ in Brazil,” p. 15.

36 Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name*, pp. 1–2.



A second point is that the coercion might be indirect, i.e. the coercer can compel the victim to work through intermediaries. The relationship between debt peon and employer can be indirect because, for example, intermediaries – perhaps multiple – are involved:

Employers provide a sum of money to these intermediaries who, in turn, use this money to provide wage advances to workers. In some instances the chain of intermediaries can be relatively long. In [contemporary] Peru, for example, it was observed that some employers pay an advance to so-called *habilitadores*, who then make smaller advances to local *patrones* (bosses), who in turn recruit workers through wage advances.<sup>37</sup>

Intermediaries (so-called jobbers, sirdars, etc.) were often used to recruit wage laborers and indentured laborers. This was the case in China's coalmines in the early decades of the twentieth century, but also, for example, in the Indian textile industry and in Russian agriculture.<sup>38</sup>

In short, my classification is more indicative than complete, and it is embedded in complex hierarchical relationships.<sup>39</sup>

*Extraction.* Once an employer has a worker at his disposal, he must induce that worker to translate his/her capacity to labor (labor power) into actual work. The question then arises: why do workers do this – why do they work? The fact that workers are present and available at a worksite says little about the effort they put in for their employer.<sup>40</sup> Individuals cannot be forced to work

37 Bedoya, Bedoya, and Belser, "Debt Bondage and Ethnic Discrimination," p. 41.

38 See, for example, Wright, "Method of Evading Management"; Chandavarkar, "Decline and Fall of the Jobber System."

39 Marradi, "Classification, Typology, Taxonomy."

40 There is a fundamental asymmetry here between "employer" and "worker" (where "worker" can also be a slave). In the transaction, the worker who hires himself or herself out or the slave who is sold (regardless of whether the worker himself is a party to the contract [the "free" wage laborer] or not [the slave]) merely represents labor power (labor capacity). Once the transaction has been effected, however, this potential energy still needs to be translated into work (labor). It is not until the actual labor process has commenced that work is extracted from the labor power. In relation to the example of wage labor, Herbert Simon once explained this distinction by comparing an employment contract with a standard sales contract: "We will say that W [the worker] enters into an employment contract with B [the boss] when the former agrees to accept the authority of the latter and the latter agrees to pay the former a stated wage (w). This contract differs fundamentally from a sales contract – the kind of contract that is assumed in ordinary formulations of price theory. In the sales contract each party promises a specific consideration in return for the consideration promised by the other. The buyer (like B) promises to pay a stated sum of

by dint of physical compulsion alone. Physical compulsion restricts the victim's freedom of movement, but the actions the victim can or is required to perform within the limited scope for movement available to him or her require a degree of cooperation on the part of that same victim. As Barrington Moore has rightly noted, even in Nazi concentration camps the SS guards "needed some minimal cooperation from the prisoners in order to carry out the day's routine of getting them to the dormitories, feeding them, and making them work."<sup>41</sup> Physically incarcerating a worker is therefore no guarantee that they will actually work. And using force to compel a victim to do something is not only very labor intensive – owing to the need to deploy permanently the means of coercion directed at that individual – it is also extremely ineffective. I do not mean that force cannot play a role within a labor relationship, but that force or the threat of force operates as part of a conditional threat: if you don't work hard/well you will be physically punished.<sup>42</sup> Physical compulsion would *seem* to be one component of constrained choice.

Whether workers work hard and well will always depend on a combination of three factors: compensation, conditional force and commitment. Together, these explain to what degree workers are motivated to work in accordance with the standards set by the employer (Figure 13.2).<sup>43</sup>

1. *Compensation*, or the offer of contingent rewards such as wages and other benefits, can be divided into three categories: First, *direct wages*, i.e. money wages. These can be further subdivided in (a) compensation for the *time* people work (time rates);<sup>44</sup> (b) compensation for the *results* of people's work (piece rates: payment for each item produced; commission (for salespeople): workers receive a fraction of the value of the items they sell; gainsharing: group incentives that are partially tied to gains in group productivity, reductions in cost, increases in product quality or other measures of group success; profit sharing and bonus plans (which relate wages to the enterprise's profits); and (c) combinations of time-based and result-based wages (hybrids).

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money; but the seller (unlike W) promises in return a specified quantity of a completely specified commodity. Moreover, the seller is not interested in the way in which his commodity is used once it is sold, while the worker *is* interested in what the entrepreneur will want him to do (what x [element of the set of possible behavior patterns] will be chosen by B)." Simon, "Formal Theory of the Employment Relationship," p. 294.

41 Moore, Jr., *Injustice*, p. 65.

42 Nor should we lose sight of the fact that unfreedom can lead to "unfunctional" violence, such as the rape of female workers by those "higher up."

43 Tilly and Tilly, *Work Under Capitalism*.

44 This is most common in the West: in 1991 86% of U.S. employees were paid either by the hour or by the month. See Ehrenberg and Smith, *Modern Labor Economics*, p. 412.

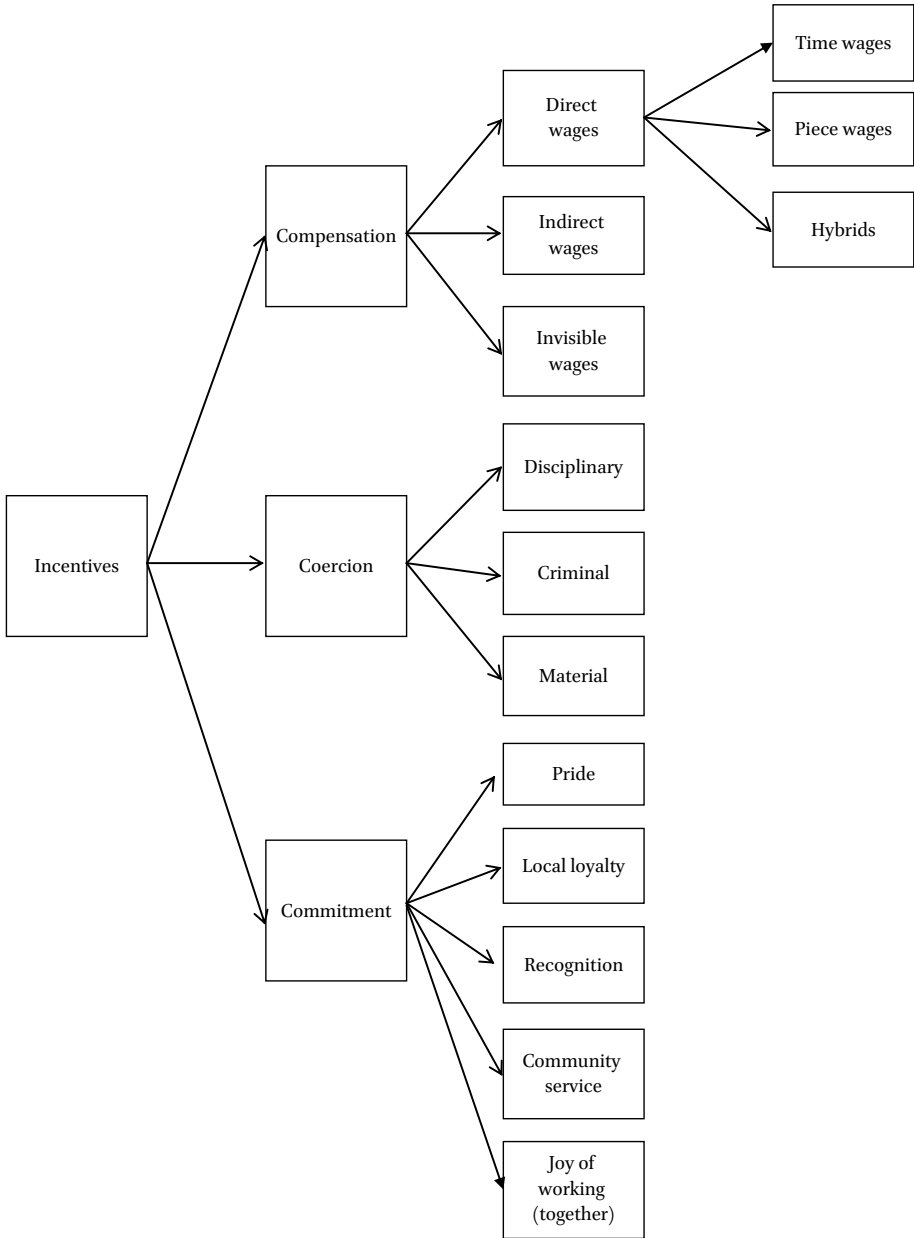


FIGURE. 13.2 *Extracting labor during the labor relation*

Second, *indirect wages*, such as perquisites, insurance arrangements, pay for holidays and vacations, and services.<sup>45</sup> Third, *invisible wages*, i.e. the non-contractual appropriation by employees of enterprise goods and services. This category covers a range of wage forms, including open and legal perks, semi-legal pilfering and outright theft.<sup>46</sup>

2. *Coercion*, or the conditional threat to inflict harm, comprises disciplinary rules and their sanctioning. Coercion can be applied to enforce discipline, but hardly as a punishment for a lack of creativity. Three areas in which coercion may be applied can be distinguished: (a) the area of *disciplinary liability*, i.e. the breaking of factory rules. Punishment may include reprimand, demotion (transfer to other lower-paid work for a certain period) or dismissal; (b) the area of *criminal liability*, i.e. violating the criminal law, with corresponding punishments; (c) the area of *material liability*.<sup>47</sup> Punishment may include restitution in cash or kind to the enterprise for damage to its property resulting from an infringement of labor discipline.

3. *Commitment*, or the invocation of solidarity, comprises incentives based on five main motives: (a) professional pride (craftsmanship); (b) loyalties with a local community; (c) loyalties with a wider community, (d) desire for public recognition and appreciation, and (e) the joy of working as such and/or with co-workers. These motives are closely linked to the cultural context. What the English observer Geoffrey Russell Barker wrote in the 1950s is illustrative in this respect:

The stimuli most widely used in the USSR, for example, would generally prove useless or worse in our conditions. The honours awarded to categories of people regarded as socially valuable in the way of uniforms, medals, decorations and badges would provoke not competition for them, as visible tokens of high status, but embarrassment and possibly even contempt. In this respect, the USSR was probably fortunately placed in having (a) a tradition upon which it was easy to build, and (b) in starting from a cultural level which largely reflected pre-capitalist conditions, in which awareness of the 'cash nexus' was not very fully developed – at

45 "Inasmuch as these are generally made uniformly available to all employees at a given job level, regardless of performance, they are really not motivating rewards. However, where indirect compensation is controllable by management and is used to reward performance, then it clearly needs to be considered as a motivating reward." Robbins, *Organizational Behavior*, p. 66o.

46 Ditton, "Perks, Pilferage, and the Fiddle," pp. 39–71.

47 Barker, *Some Problems of Incentives*, pp. 98–99.

any rate not so fully developed as to make it very difficult to persuade workers to accept such symbols of status as being equal or of comparable value to higher wages.<sup>48</sup>

The relative weight of these three motives, which varies over time and from job to job, defines the systems of work rules. These systems are always the result of “negotiation” between employers and workers and determine more or less what constitutes proper or improper behaviour among workers and what behaviour can be punished or rewarded. Punishments and rewards can be discretionary (i.e. applied at pleasure by the employer), or they may be bound by formal and informal rules.<sup>49</sup>

Regardless of the rules, there is always a lot of scope for manoeuvre among employers or their managers/overseers, if only because it is they who decide whether employee behaviour is correct and which incentives should be applied. Historically, workers have generally been in favor of restricting management’s discretionary power as much as possible and of expanding the domain of rules and meta-rules (rules about the making of rules).<sup>50</sup> The American sociologist Philip Selznick has written about the transition from a so-called prerogative contract – according to which management can deploy hired labor power at its discretion – to a constitutive contract that sets out procedures and regulations for the utilization of labor power.<sup>51</sup> This transition might reflect the enhanced power of workers at the worksite as well as the influence of external authorities, such as the state. In the case of a highly developed constitutive contract the rule system becomes relatively autonomous, “because it ensures the reproduction of relations in production by protecting management from itself, from its tendency toward arbitrary interventions that would undermine the consent produced at the point of production.”<sup>52</sup>

*Exit.* In what circumstances may the worker terminate his labor relationship? I distinguish seven important variants here (Figure 13.3).

48 *Ibid.*, pp. 113–114.

49 It might be useful to distinguish between (a) the *making* of the rules; (b) the *monitoring* of the personnel’s obeying of these rules; and (c) the punishing or rewarding of personnel (not) obeying these rules (*incentives*).

50 Jacoby, *Employing Bureaucracy*, has argued that trade-union opposition to managerial discretionary power has furthered the bureaucratization of American industrial firms.

51 Selznick, *Law, Society and Industrial Justice*, pp. 135–137, 151–154.

52 Burawoy, *Manufacturing Consent*, p. 117.

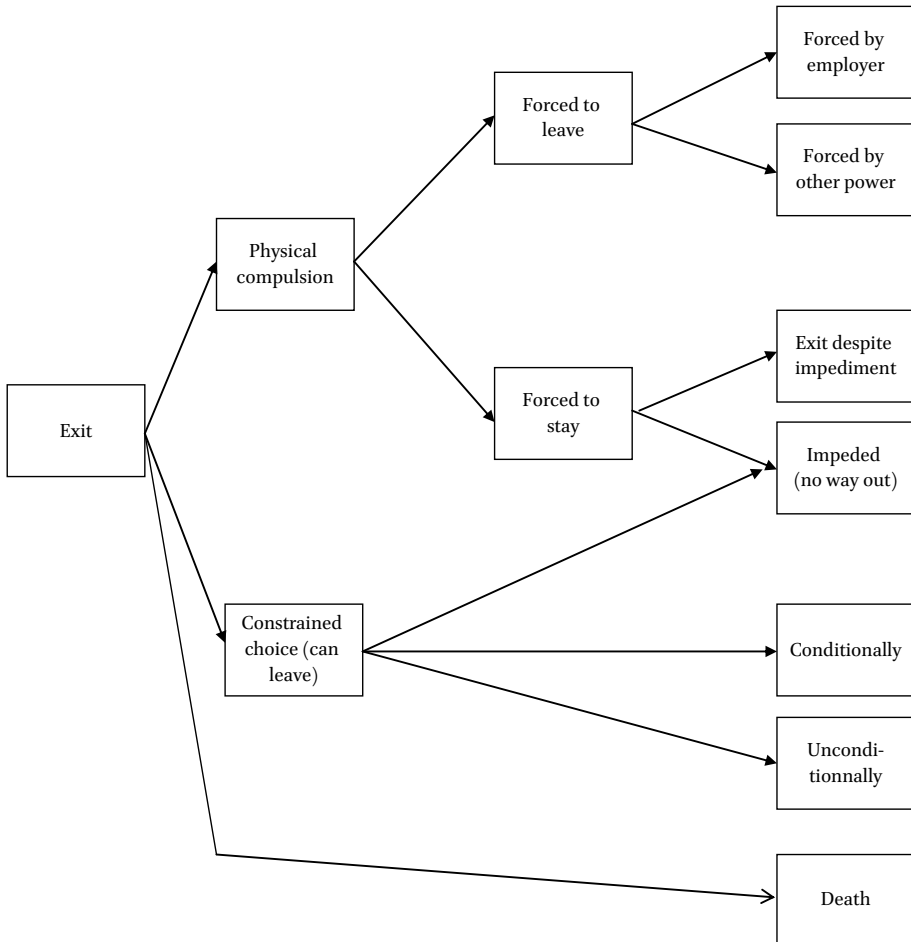


FIGURE 13.3 *Exiting the labor relation*

(1) *Exit forced by employer.* In some cases, employers wanted to shed their workers, by dismissal or deception for example:

Vessels with lengthy voyages typically had multiple stops, usually picking up a cargo in one and selling it at the next. The wait for more freight to come along could last for months. During this downtime the crewmen dared not leave because they would not receive their earned wages until reaching the agreed-upon final port of call. Those who did so lost all their pay. By law a [U.S.] captain had to feed and provision his crew

during such lulls, but if he chased them off, he kept their wages for himself. This prompted many unscrupulous masters to make their men's lives hell in an effort to entice them to desert. If successful, captains contracted a crimp for replacements when they needed to sail, then repeated the process in the next port.<sup>53</sup>

This was the case, too, with slaves who were sent packing because they were old or sick.

(2) *Exit forced by another power*. The British campaigns to abolish the slave trade (since 1807) and slavery (since 1834) changed labor relations throughout the world.<sup>54</sup> This was similarly true of the conventions adopted since 1919 by the International Labor Organization. The victory of the Northern states against the Confederacy in the American Civil War triggered important shifts, too, however, as did the emancipation of the serfs in the Habsburg Empire and Russia.

(3) *Impeded (no way out)*, temporarily or permanently. Permanent impediments to leaving can be seen in traditional forms of slavery, but also in the case of certain forms of debt peonage. Jan Breman reported the following in relation to poor peasants in Gujarat in the 1960s who had become bonded laborers (*hali*):

Because the hali's low income did not extend to celebrations in the household, like births and marriages, or setbacks, such as illness or death, the debt grew larger rather than smaller. This cumulative shortfall in income forced the labourer to remain attached to the master, and because it was impossible to end the relationship [...] the contract took on the characteristics of servitude. After a lifetime's work, the hali was just as poor as when he entered the master's service.<sup>55</sup>

Temporary impediments characterize seasonally related debt bondage for example. Jan Breman writes that cane-cutters and brickmakers in contemporary Gujarat could be bonded by payment of an advance:

[...] for the season's duration, a period ranging from six to eight months. Payment of an advance is intended to force them to move and to prevent

53 Strecker, *Shanghaiing Sailors: A Maritime History of Forced Labor, 1849–1915* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2014), p. 5.

54 This is covered more extensively in: Van der Linden, *Humanitarian Intervention*.

55 Breman, *Labour Bondage in West India*, p. 36.

them from withdrawing prematurely from their contracts. To ensure immobilization of the floating workforce for the duration of the production process, payment of the wage is deferred until the season ends. [...] The new regime of bondage differs from the traditional one in terms of the short duration of the agreement (often no longer than one season), its more specific character (labor instead of a beck-and-call relationship) and finally, its easier termination or evasion (even without repayment of the debt).<sup>56</sup>

The techniques employers used to bind relatively freer workers to them were many, varying from workbooks (*livrets d'ouvriers*) to company housing.

(4) *Exit despite impediment*. If employers try to retain their workers against their will, those workers can decide to run away, as tens of thousands of slaves and convict laborers have done in the course of time, or desert, as sailors sometimes did.<sup>57</sup> Mass protests culminating in the Revolution on Saint-Domingue (1791–1804) could also terminate certain exploitative labor relations.

(5) *Conditional exit*. Often the exit is conditional, with workers having to meet certain obligations before being permitted to leave. Examples include indentured laborers, who were first required to complete the duration of their initial contract, and slaves striving to purchase their freedom (manumission) and who had to save their own price before they could be manumitted. Conditional exit applies, too, to “free” wage laborers whose contracts include a period of notice.

(6) *Unconditional exit*. Some groups of workers can leave at any moment they choose; these include casual laborers hired for perhaps just a few hours.

(7) *Death* is of course the final and irrevocable termination of a labor relationship.

*Combination of the three elements*. Entry, labor extraction and exit are of course interrelated. How a worker enters into a labor relationship influences how he has to work and the scope for exiting the labor relationship. A worker physically compelled to enter into a labor relationship will most likely also be subject to physical force while in that relationship. These separate elements are thus inseparable, but they can be distinguished. In purely abstract terms, at least 770 combinations are possible ( $10 \times 11 \times 7$ ), but in practice not all variants are found.

56 Breman, “Study of Industrial Labour,” pp. 421–422. See, too, Bedoya, Bedoya, and Belser, “Debt Bondage,” p. 46.

57 On this see Van der Linden, “Mass Exits: Who, Why, How?”



The imprecise nature of our standard classifications is evident from the fact that, often, multiple combinations of the three elements are given the same label. In the case of *chattel slaves*, for example, four forms of entry are possible (sale, birth, abduction, self-sale); labor extraction tends to be the result of coercion and compensation, and seldom of commitment; and the labor relationship can be exited in all of the seven variants indicated earlier: owners can compel slaves to leave, or they can be forced to free them by another entity (an abolitionist state, for example), but they can also free them unconditionally; slaves can run away or mutiny; they can purchase their own freedom; they can remain as slaves; or they may die.

*Debt peons* enter into a labor relationship to pay off a debt or because they have been abducted; the main incentives inducing them to work are, as in the case of chattel slaves, coercion and compensation, seldom commitment; and they may not leave, or only under certain conditions, unless they run away or their debt is remitted.

*“Free” wage laborers* enter into a labor relationship on their own initiative; they are induced to do so primarily through compensation and commitment; they can leave their employer conditionally or unconditionally, or they can remain.

What this suggests is that we need more refined categories if we are to characterize individual forms of labor relationship.

### Multicausality

Of course, the approach sketched above is still rudimentary and can certainly be refined considerably. Nonetheless, it shows that coerced labor is a more complex phenomenon than is often thought. There is a second limitation in my argument: it is constructed at the level of the individual and disregards all broader structural and cultural factors. This might be taken to imply a tendency to methodological individualism on my part, but that is not the case.<sup>58</sup> Though I am of the opinion that individuals and their micro situations should be given priority from both the political and humanitarian points of view, that does not constitute individualism. As Alex Callinicos remarked: “To say this is to make no real concession to individualism, since the bases of collective action comprise not just agents but the structures from which they derive their

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<sup>58</sup> On this see Van der Linden, “Old Workers’ Movements and ‘New Political Economy.’”

power to realize their ends.”<sup>59</sup> A necessary next stage in the analysis is therefore to introduce structures, as being “both the ever present *condition* (material cause) and the continually reproduced *outcome* of human agency.”<sup>60</sup>

By integrating structures and their transformation into the analysis, the foundation is laid for a historical *explanation* of possible various forms of entry, extraction, and exit. So far, the debate has been characterized largely by two weaknesses, First, one often sees very different types of coerced labor being treated as if there were no distinction between them. Take, for example, Evsey Domar’s famous essay “The Causes of Slavery and Serfdom,” in which the author presupposes that serfdom and slavery have the same origins,<sup>61</sup> even though the possibility cannot be ruled out – indeed it is very likely – that “one institution has often been made possible by the very same set of factors that made the other impossible, because of what the two institutions do not have in common.”<sup>62</sup> Of course, refining the analysis in the way proposed above makes everything even more complex, for it now becomes possible to distinguish among a large number of variations whose causal configurations are congruent to a greater or lesser extent.<sup>63</sup> I suspect that, for the development of a more sophisticated typology, entry and exit will prove to be of crucial importance, while the way in which labor is extracted in the intervening period is of secondary importance and largely derived from those two elements. Of overriding importance is how laborers are recruited, and under what conditions they can subsequently leave.

Secondly, there is a persistent tendency to monocausal thinking, going back as far as Adam Smith, who could explain slavery only in psychological terms: “The pride of man makes him love to domineer, and nothing mortifies him so much as to be obliged to condescend to persuade his inferiors. Wherever the law allows it, and the nature of the work can afford it, therefore, he will generally prefer the service of slaves to that of freemen.”<sup>64</sup> Ever since Gibbon Wakefield, economic explanations have been fashionable, and even today new variants are adduced with great regularity.<sup>65</sup> In such analyses, neither resistance on the

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59 Callinicos, *Making History*, p. 134.

60 Bhaskar, *Possibility of Naturalism*, p. 43.

61 Domar, “Causes of Slavery and Serfdom.”

62 Patterson, “Structural Origins of Slavery,” p. 17.

63 For my interpretation of the concept “causal configuration” see Van der Linden, *Transnational Labour History*, pp. 173–180.

64 Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, p. 345.

65 Wakefield, *View of the Art of Colonization*.

part of labor nor the political, legal, or cultural environments play roles of any significance. Under the influence of the institutionalist turn seen especially among economic historians in recent years, some authors have become aware of this limitation. In a recent article on labor coercion, Daron Acemoglu and Alexander Wolitzky concluded their purely neoclassical thesis by observing that “In many instances, coercion comes to an end, or is significantly curtailed, when political forces induce a change in the institutional environment.”<sup>66</sup> What we now need to do though is to “endogenize” “political forces” and other non-economic influences, to fully integrate them into the analysis, just as Folke Dovring, Stanley Engerman, and Orlando Patterson advocated in the 1960s and ’70s.<sup>67</sup> Several years ago in their study of the relationship between child labor and debt bondage, Arnab Basu and Nancy Chau took a further step and argued that child labor was caused in part because peasant households were unable to “collectively bargain and coordinate child labor supply.” As a result “basic labor rights such as freedom of association, and the right to organize, complement efforts to eradicate forced and bonded child labor.”<sup>68</sup> Such a broadening of the horizon is of great importance.

Even if much of the current theoretical literature is simplistic, monocausal, and economistic, that does not of course invalidate its usefulness for further theoretical development. The countless studies by development economists and others include not only a great deal of factual material, they also reveal patterns that, though often remaining historically decontextualized, are nonetheless of heuristic value. The following lists a number of factors, without aiming to be exhausting.

- *Seasonal variations.* Some labor relations, such as in agriculture, are affected by seasonal factors irrespective of the state of supply and demand. Others are affected by seasonally variable supply of raw materials (industries, for example, that use or transport agricultural products as raw materials). Certain other labor relations are affected by the seasonal variations in the demand for goods produced and services provided.<sup>69</sup> Periodic fluctuations in the deployment of labor can lead to a two-tier system, in which the employer attempts to oblige some laborers to work for him relatively permanently (for example through indebtedness, or by providing a homestead)

66 Acemoglu and Wolitzky, “Economics of Labor Coercion,” p. 588.

67 Dovring, “Bondage, Tenure and Progress”; Engerman, “Some Considerations Relating to Property Rights in Man,” esp. p. 59; Patterson, “Structural Origins of Slavery.”

68 Basu and Chau, “Exploitation of Child Labor,” pp. 229, 233.

69 Jones, *Outcast London*, pp. 33–51; Kuznets, *Seasonal Variations*.

while others are employed on a casual basis. However, there are of course examples where the employer used only permanent laborers, but paid them very low wages or no wages at all (as in the case of chattel slaves), ensuring labor costs remained low even during slack seasons.

- *Labor supply.* Nieboer and Domar’s hypothesis of a positive relationship between labor scarcity and bonded labor and that abundant labor supply is a condition of “free” labor has proved untenable as a general hypothesis.<sup>70</sup> Nonetheless, their hypothesis continues to play a role in the literature because under extremely specific conditions it might be valid, although research has so far failed to delineate those conditions sufficiently.<sup>71</sup>
- *Credit facilities.* Employers as well as workers sometimes need credit to bridge periods of more modest income or greater expenditure. In the case of employers, that might, for example, mean their combining wage earners with rent tenants, to some extent.<sup>72</sup> Workers lacking access to cheap credit from banks are obliged to pay usurious rates of interest which render them dependent on the creditor – in many cases their employer.<sup>73</sup>
- *Supervision.* “With agricultural development, as the hired labor force grows in size, the landlord finds it useful to mobilize the services of his attached laborer in overseeing the work of casual laborers and reporting on cases of delinquency or rebelliousness. In general, the two-tiered labor system on a farm is an important check on the development of class solidarity of farm workers.”<sup>74</sup>

In addition to these factors, there is also a wide range of extra-economic considerations that might play a role, such as:

- *Resistance.* There is a constant latent struggle between employers and workers regarding the autonomy of the workers. Depending on power relations, there is an endlessly shifting “frontier of control” (Carter Goodrich) that defines what workers may and may not do. Sometimes, that latent struggle is transformed into open conflict, the most dramatic example being the

70 For example, Siegel, “Some Methodological Considerations”; Engerman, “Some Considerations”; Patterson, “Structural Origins of Slavery”; Vries, *Escaping Poverty*, pp. 190–192.

71 For one preliminary attempt, see Green, “Economics of Slavery.”

72 Harris, “Circuit of Capital.”

73 See, for example, Knight, “Debt Bondage in Latin America”; Boutang, *De l’esclavage au salariat*. For a seldom studied variant of bondage in which the employer obstructs the migration of workers by making payments in kind, see Friebel and Guriev, “Attaching Workers Through In-kind Payments.”

74 Bardhan, “Labor-tying,” p. 507.

slave revolt on Saint-Domingue in 1791, which culminated in the abolition of slavery.

- *Ideologies*. Racist or sexist belief systems used by employers – or some of the working class – to legitimize the exploitation of certain groups of laborers, and humanitarian belief systems that condemn such exploitation.
- *National legislation* prohibiting certain forms of coerced labor (slavery) or actually promoting them (convict labor).
- *International pressures*, such as the abolitionist movement, which, starting with Great Britain, succeeded in securing the abolition of the slave trade and slavery in more and more parts of the world in the nineteenth century, leading to the introduction of other forms of coerced labor, such as indentured labor, *engagés*, sharecropping, and debt bondage. There is also the influence of the International Labor Organization, which attempts, through its conventions, to ban certain forms of labor.
- *Wars*. During armed conflicts one often sees major changes in employment systems. The relative autonomy of workers is generally restricted; women who had previously performed largely subsistence labor might be mobilized for wage labor in industry, for example.

All these factors – and many more – together form the causal configurations that give rise to systems of labor relations, which then begin to develop their own dynamics. Stanley Engerman, for example, noted that we should distinguish between those features that lead to the imposition of a slave system and those that make for its continuation:

Although the inauguration of the system might be due to seemingly minor and accidental factors, once created the slaveowning class has an incentive to avoid capital losses by perpetuating the system. The initial rents upon imposing the system would not go to the slaveowners, the actual allocation of rents divided between owners and enslavers dependent upon the accuracy of forecasts as to the future course of the system, but the attempt to avoid a once-for-all capital loss from uncompensated emancipation has generated the political, social, and economic problems found in abolition discussions. ‘Buying in’ to the system need not provide more than normal profits; that, however, does not mean that slaveowners will easily accept its demise.<sup>75</sup>

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75 Engerman, “Some Considerations,” p. 60.

### Autonomy and Security

It is obvious that *within* dependency workers can have very different degrees of autonomy. Chattel slaves who are limitlessly exploited and whose owners, when purchasing them, will already have factored in a seven-year period of amortization have scarcely any room for manoeuvre during their lifetime; in contrast, wage laborers who have acquired many rights, who can switch regularly from one employer to another, supported by powerful trade unions, and who are in a position to negotiate their terms of employment are much more autonomous. For workers, the type of labor relationship in which they work makes a lot of difference.

However, autonomy is not the sole consideration of workers. Social security is a second important issue, and this can conflict with the desire for greater autonomy. The choice workers make is often complex. In relation to Prussian agricultural laborers at the end of the nineteenth century Max Weber wrote:

[The] labourer seeks money wages which free him from the dependence and good will of the landlord despite the economic decline that is a result. Just as money rent appeared to the medieval peasant as the most important sign of his personal freedom, so does the money wage appear to today's worker. The rural worker forsakes positions that are often more favorable, always more secure, in a search for personal freedom.<sup>76</sup>

Contrast this with Alexander von Humboldt's observation on Cuba around 1800:

[The] slave has the privilege of paying his master small sums of money on account, and thus becoming a coöwner of himself. Thus, if his value be \$600, by paying his master \$25 he becomes the owner of one twenty-fourth of himself; when he has paid \$50, he owns one-twelfth, and so on; [...] A slave who has partially manumitted himself is styled *coartado*.

<sup>76</sup> Weber, "Developmental Tendencies," p. 172. Another quote with the same meaning can be found on p. 174 in relation to migrant workers: "local employment is historically and mentally associated with traditional power relations – it is the urge for freedom that drives the worker to employment away from home" – even if that means earning less. Scott, "Irrational Choice?," p. 122, concludes from these types of example: "where you are exposed to both economic and political domination springing from one and the same source [...] the level of *personal* oppression is such that you will choose the wage relation whenever the opportunity arises and almost irrespective of the costs." This is an exaggerated formulation though.

Many redeem themselves excepting the sum of \$50 or \$100; and on this pay a rent to the master for the rest of their lives, no matter how much wealth they may acquire. [... This course] may sometimes arise from ties of affection, sometimes from interests, or an idiosyncrasy on the part of the negro to have some immediate and tangible superior, to whose opinion he can look with respect, and from whom he can claim protection in calamity.<sup>77</sup>

And a study of serfs in Russia's metallurgical industry in the nineteenth century states:

There is no evidence that the serf workers yearned for some condition of 'freedom' or were even aware of the Western concept of freedom. On the contrary, while they at times complained of harsh discipline, they considered the assurance of their basic security to have been an inalienable right, an inherent aspect of the social-economic system in which they lived. [...] The workers so valued this security that some of them received their emancipation in 1861 with dismay at the loss of their 'rights'.<sup>78</sup>

Sometimes workers are therefore willing to sacrifice security for autonomy; sometimes they are not. This assessment is complicated even further since relationships sometimes seem to be curvilinear. Debt peonage, for example, would seem to disadvantage chiefly the debtor when, in the eyes of the creditor-employer, the debt is relatively small. The greater the level of debt, the more this might promote the social security of the debtor-worker, since even in economically difficult times the creditor-employer will be reluctant to dismiss a debtor since he runs a real risk of never seeing his money again. On Peru, Peloso writes that:

Enganche, the advance on wages or credit against a future payment of rent, too easily is seen as a snare from which peasants could not extricate themselves, a never-ending debt. [...] Enganche was indeed an advance that indebted the peasants, but it also threatened for a time to clog the cotton plantations with an overly large resident labor force. Peasants accumulated debt in order to remain in residence on the plantations when wage rates fell. The planters undermined enganche of their own accord when they canceled debts to relieve themselves of labor costs in years

77 Humboldt, *Island of Cuba*, pp. 212–213.

78 Esper, "Condition of the Serf Workers," p. 671.

when cotton production stagnated. [...] Credit sometimes became an instrument of protest and resistance to plantation rules in the hands of the peasants. In the early twentieth century, Pisco valley tenants played the local credit market well enough that the momentum of power on the plantations momentarily shifted away from the planters and toward the peasants.<sup>79</sup>

Some workers were apparently more willing than others to renounce security, even if all of them aspired to autonomy without insecurity. The relative advantages and disadvantages of security compared with autonomy probably explain why, depending on the circumstances, workers opted for more or less autonomous labor relations. Adam Smith had noted that “In years of plenty, servants frequently leave their masters, and trust their subsistence to what they can make by their own industry. [...] In years of scarcity, the difficulty and uncertainty of subsistence make all such people eager to return to service.”<sup>80</sup> For us as scholars it is often difficult to gauge correctly the balance between autonomy and security, perhaps because we live in relatively safe social circumstances and therefore regard autonomy as a greater good. But appearances can be deceptive. For example, in the 1970s, after years of fieldwork, Jan Breman concluded that many debt peons in Gujarat (India) did not intend to repay their debt:

It is therefore more than doubtful that the *hali* [servant] strove to end his attachment. His being coerced to work is usually inferred from the condition that the servant was not allowed to leave his master as long as he was indebted to him. But the debt was rather fictitious in character and, if only for this reason, the term of debt slavery applied to this form of servitude is not very felicitous. Not only was repayment merely theoretical on account of the *hali*'s minimal remuneration, but it was not envisaged by either of the parties. [...] The master] tried to keep this debt within reasonable limits, as he well knew he could not recall it. The *hali*, on the other hand, did his best to maximalize it, and tried to get something out of his master as often as he could.<sup>81</sup>

A caveat should be added here. There might *seem* to be a continuum or spectrum of forms of labor with differing degrees of autonomy and different

79 Peloso, *Peasants on Plantations*, p. 160.

80 Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, p. 74.

81 Breman, *Patronage and Exploitation*, p. 44.



statuses merging seamlessly into one another, but such fluidity can be misleading. The historian of antiquity Moses Finley noted over fifty years ago that “the idea of a continuum or spectrum is metaphorical: it is too smooth.”<sup>82</sup> His colleague G.E.M. de Ste. Croix subsequently developed that view further: “to decline to draw firm lines inside this ‘spectrum’ is as capricious as refusing to speak of the colors red, blue, yellow and the rest, simply because any precise lines of division of the colour-spectrum must be to some extent arbitrary, and different people would draw them at slightly different points.”<sup>83</sup> Recently, Ravi Ahuja has rightly pointed out that it is politically dangerous to “arrange forms of socially organized labour along an uninterrupted line stretching from ‘freedom’ to ‘unfreedom.’” It would be too easy, and the temptation too great, to ignore the fact that workers with little autonomy actually aspire to greater autonomy, in a “seemingly chaotic struggle that unfolds in assertion of a ‘freedom which is still enmeshed in servitude’ [Hegel].”<sup>84</sup> Only by continuing to observe the different “colours” within the spectrum can we understand the struggle of workers. As Orlando Patterson has argued, the concept of freedom as such probably first emerged in slave societies.<sup>85</sup> Among coerced laborers the struggle for greater autonomy, or even for liberation from coerced labor, has always been an important motive for resistance.<sup>86</sup>

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82 Finley, “Between Slavery and Freedom,” p. 248.

83 Ste. Croix, *Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*, p. 137.

84 Ahuja, “Freedom Still Enmeshed in Servitude,” pp. 99–100.

85 Patterson, *Freedom*.

86 A further important caveat should be made here. Coerced laborers aspire *ceteris paribus* to greater autonomy, but this does not necessarily mean that they also aspire to greater autonomy for others in the same position. There are many documented instances of former slaves wanting to have slaves themselves. And in their struggle for greater autonomy male laborers did not generally intend to fundamentally change gendered power relations.