

Monday, 23.01.2023; 4:15 - 6:00 pm CET

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### **Slavery and Forced Labor in the West African Sahel: A Comparative Approach**

#### Abstract:

This presentation focuses on two forms of labor coercion common in West Africa in the first half of the twentieth century: one, based on interior slavery, was rooted in the *longue durée* of regional history. The other, colonial forced labor, was exogenous and introduced by European colonialists between the mid-nineteenth and the early twentieth century. In Tahoua (the region of today's Republic of Niger discussed in the presentation), these two forms of coerced labor co-existed in the first half of the twentieth century. In 1905, France abolished indigenous slavery in its recently acquired African territories. Concurrently, it introduced a regime of compulsory labor for the building and maintenance of colonial infrastructure. In spite of French legal abolition, indigenous slavery did not die out, but started being resisted more effectively by those who had been enslaved, who were also the first to be forcibly recruited to carry out construction work on colonial worksites. By comparing the labor regimes linked to internal slavery and colonial forced labor in Tahoua, this presentation shows that, in this desert-edge context, coercion was not determined by profit maximization; wage labor never developed; forced labor was hardly justifiable in economic terms and therefore largely ineffective; and slavery remained viable not as a form of extreme labor exploitation linked to agricultural commercialization, but because it provides a modicum of security, at very high human cost, in the face of environmental adversities.

#### Bio:

Benedetta Rossi is Professor of History at UCL. She is author of *From Slavery to Aid* (CUP 2015) and editor of *Reconfiguring Slavery: West African Trajectories* (LUP 2009, 2016); *Les Mondes de l'Esclavage* (Seuil 2021, with C. Vidal, dir. P. Ismard); 'Developmentalism, Labor, and the Slow Death of Slavery in Twentieth-Century Africa,' Special Issue, *ILWCH* 92 (2017); and 'Slavery and Marriage in African Societies,' Special Issue, *Slavery & Abolition* 43 (2022, with J. Quirk). She holds the ERC Advanced grant 'African Abolitionism: The Rise and Transformations of Anti-Slavery in Africa' (AFRAB, grant agreement no. 885418).