



SWEDISH
COLLEGIUM
for ADVANCED STUDY

REGULAR SESSION INFORMATION

Session: Rethinking Slavery After Western Hegemony

Session Convener(s): David Strecker, University of Jena

Chair: David Strecker, University of Jena

Comments: This session is organized by ISA RC 35

I) *Unfree Labour in India: Looking at Diversity and Change in a Structural Context*
Wendy Olsen, University of Manchester

II) *Global Inequalities Unbound: Transnational Processes and Transregional Entanglements*
Manuela Boatca, Free University, Berlin

III) *Can We Make Sense of the Distinction between Free and Unfree Labour? Contemporary Slavery and the Free Market*
David Strecker, University of Jena

IV) *Slavery and the Division of Labourers*
William F. Stafford Jr., University of Delhi

ABSTRACTS

Session description

What is the significance of slavery for the contemporary world? Today, there is widespread acknowledgement of the fact that European Enlightenment coincided with the climax of transatlantic slavery. Nonetheless, it is commonly held that, ultimately, slavery and Western modernity are incompatible. The present challenges to the alleged Eurocentrism of social theorizing bring with them the opportunity to question this more or less dichotomous conceptualization and to ask whether the relationship of modernity and slavery might be more complex.

Scrutinizing this relationship under the currently emerging epistemic conditions of a growing awareness of global connectedness and a space for intercultural encounters promises new insights with regard to at least the following three issues: First, the hybrid nature of Western modernity itself is put into focus: structurally (the triangular trade) as well as culturally (postcolonial classics like Eric Williams and C.L.R. James emerging within the West). Second, the preoccupation with transatlantic chattel slavery has to a large extent marginalized research into other forms of slavery and has more or less blocked the question about the relevance of different types of slavery within different modernities. Finally, there is growing concern that new forms of so-called contemporary slavery are intrinsic to today's world.

Hence, rethinking slavery today promises to enhance and deepen our understanding of Western modernity, of slavery, and of our contemporary world. Accordingly, the session aims to investigate the issues referred to and others regarding the significance of slavery for the entangled modernities of the present world at a time when Western hegemony in social theorizing is being corrected by a growing awareness of the diversity of human experiences within connected histories

Papers

1) *Unfree Labour in India: Looking at Diversity and Change in a Structural Context*

Wendy Olsen, University of Manchester

Unfree labour is diverse in its forms and causes. In various guises it is prevalent across India, but it is not a subsector in its own right. In this paper we explore how the underlying social structures that contribute to the perpetuation of unfree labour can be challenged. The major social structures of class, sector-wise government intervention, and formal education all intersect with unfree labouring. The paper explores four unfree-labour cases in depth and reviews an extensive literature as well as official estimates of the prevalence of unfree labour. This paper opens up a space to study how subsectors induce social change. Specific interventions aimed at general rural economic development and human wellbeing may aid indirectly in retaining workers closer to their natal or marital homes, and thus strengthen workers' bargaining power when faced with labour bondage or labour tying. In several ways, notably exemplary subsector regulation, innovations in certain education subsectors, and the management of specific housing subsectors such as slums, general development policy could and can inhibit unfree labour. A multi-pronged attack on unfree labour is called for, both aiming at prevention and cure, because of the multiple interacting causes of unfreedom. The arguments presented here are based on 25 years of experience working on the problems of the Indian rural poor, including ongoing field research in the state of Andhra Pradesh. The paper reflects an updated sociology that recognises the changeability of the society whilst also acknowledging that social structures are sticky and resistant to profound change.

II) *Global Inequalities Unbound: Transnational Processes and Transregional Entanglements*

Manuela Boatca, Free University, Berlin

Current sociological understandings tend to presuppose that the transformation of inequality patterns entails a series of “new” phenomena, which make the coining of new concepts such as the “Europeanization” and the “transnationalization” of social inequality necessary. In turn, the paper argues that, at least since the European expansion into the Americas, inequalities have been the result of transnational processes arising from transregional entanglements between shifting metropolitan and peripheral areas. To this end, the paper uses the example of the Caribbean as “Europe’s first colonial backyard” (S. Mintz) in order to show how the European slave trade laid the foundation for entangled labor regimes and migration patterns the impact of which can still be observed today. In showing how the transregional flows of people, goods, and capital initiated under slavery established transnational links between inequality patterns between Europe and its colonies in the Caribbean as early as the sixteenth century, the paper subsequently claims that theorizing the continuum of structures of power linking colonialism to (post)coloniality is an essential element in of the endeavor of creolizing Europe.

III) *Can We Make Sense of the Distinction between Free and Unfree Labour? Contemporary Slavery and the Free Market*

David Strecker, University of Jena

It has long been a commonplace that capitalist market society is incompatible with unfree labour. Slavery specifically, it was argued by authors as diverse as Adam Smith, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Karl Marx, Max Weber and Ludwig von Mises, would disappear in modern society. Their central argument was that the cost for supervision and motivation would render unfree labour unprofitable in comparison to free labour. However, unfree labour has not vanished. Different forms of servitude, bonded labour, peonage, forced labour and slavery-like practices flourish around the world, on all continents, in the peripheries and in the metropolises of the world market, in democratic and undemocratic systems, under illiberal as well as under liberal judicial conditions. According to human rights NGO Anti-Slavery International there are more slaves today than at any other time in history. How can we make sense of this situation? Taking up analyses published over the last two decades that question the link between free labour and capitalism I wish to ask whether the classical position has been misled by focusing on transatlantic chattel slavery alone and whether we would not better comprehend how capitalist market conditions relate to different forms of labour if we conceptualize free and unfree labour as a continuum rather than in dichotomous terms.

IV) *Slavery and the Division of Labourers*

William F. Stafford Jr., University of Delhi

B.R. Ambedkar argued that the principle of the organisation of the caste system was not one of pollution and occupation, but was rather a hyper-rationalisation of the existing institution of slavery. Slaves were always made to perform dirty work, and whoever was made a slave came to bear the burden of their denigrated status through their work. However, prior to an institution of the varna system, the question of who could command a slave and who could become a slave was relatively open. After its institution, however, a person of higher caste could never be the slave of any person lower in the hierarchy. This created a class of persons who were unique in their being prohibited from commanding slaves while being available as slaves to anyone else. The principle of a division of labour informed by principles governing pure and impure practices is thus a false representation of the truth of the caste system. It is not a division of labour, but – as Ambedkar famously argued – a division of *labourers*.

In his discussion of the failure of Aristotle (and the Greeks in general) to properly understand the principle of the creation of value, Marx points to the institution of slavery as that which prevented them from seeing that the labour of any person was in some fundamental way equal to the labour of every other person. They could not, then, develop a notion of abstract labour, which is the key to understanding the value-form. Of interest here is the question suggested for Ambedkar – what is it that allows for the imagination of a division of labourers in a system essentially informed by slavery? What is the notion and logic of labour being deployed here?

In my paper, I will look at the recent work of Kancha Illiah (focusing on a children's book) on the decency of and respect for work. Where Ambedkar has argued that the hierarchy expressed in the caste system is such that it precludes any reasonable consideration of India as a *society*, how can we understand the drive for recognition of work or as workers as part of a more complex dynamic? What is of interest in looking at Illiah's work is the way in which the descriptive use of the figure of labour is used to *assert* the equality of specific populations and by so doing to *create* a society. What is it that slavery precludes recognition of?