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Conceptualizing the Relationship between the Freedom of Labour and Capitalism*

Special Issue: Introduction

Around 60 BCE, three envoys from the northeast of Gaul travelled to Egypt. There, Asterix, Obelix, and Getafix observed the building sites outside Alexandria: Columns of half-naked men, pulling giant bricks on sledges, supervised by whip-wielding foremen. To Asterix's astonished question: "Are those slaves?," Edifis, the architect, responds: "No, there's a slave shortage. They're so emancipated you just can't get hold of them. Those are free labourers."¹

Obviously, this anecdote says nothing about ancient history. However, it stands as an example of the popularization of Marxism in post-Second World War Europe, while also shedding light on a central and longstanding question in the history of labour and capitalism: Did the political and economic revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries abolish unfree labour? And consequently, does capitalism inherently liberalize both trade and labour markets? Or is it instead a relationship of coproduction in which the developing capitalist economy both transformed existing forms of un/free labour and established new ones while remaining dependent on both? As is well known, these questions sit at the core of Marxist approaches to labour history since the notion of "free labourers" remains crucial to Marx's theory of "primitive accumulation":

Free labourers, in the double sense that neither they themselves form part and parcel of the means of production, as in the case of slaves, bondsmen & c., nor do the

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1 René Goscinny and "Albert" Uderzo, *Asterix and Cleopatra* (London: Waterstones, 2021 (first ed. 1965)), 14.

means of production belong to them as in the case of peasant-proprietors; they are, therefore, free from, unencumbered by, any means of production of their own.²

Marx not only considered “free” wage labour central to a theoretical understanding of capitalism, but also linked it to a historical argument. He assumed that it would successively replace “unfree” forms of labour. Since his prediction has not come true, the question arises as to its significance for theorizations of capitalism.³ Beyond such theoretical considerations, the problem of the freedom of labour is also crucial for the historiography, connecting two fields of labour-related research that have blossomed in the last two decades: the new cultural and social history of labour and global labour history. The former is interested in the production of labour and labouring subjects in the context of individual companies, the nation and the welfare state in the Global North during the “long” twentieth century, as well as its gendered and socioeconomic aspects.⁴ Historians have extensively examined processes of scientization and nationalization of labour, institutional and discursive exclusions and inclusions of individuals and groups, modes of leadership, the establishment of social insurance and labour markets and the relationship between labour and consumption.⁵ Particularly with respect to the contemporary history of the German-speaking regions, an assumption has emerged of an economic and labour-related caesura in the 1970s, which has had a major impact on the debate.⁶ Conversely, global labour history has brought the diversity

- 2 Karl Marx, *Capital. A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production, Vol I* (Moscow 1974), 668.
- 3 See Thomas Welskopp, “Kapitalismus und Konzepte von Arbeit. Wie systemisch zentral ist ‘freie Lohnarbeit’ für den Kapitalismus?,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 43 (2017), 197–216.
- 4 See Kim Christian Priemel, “Heaps of Work. The Ways of Labour History,” *H-Soz-Kult*, 23 January 2014, www.hsozkult.de/literaturereview/id/forschungsberichte-1223 [20.02.2023]; Stefan Berger, “Introduction. The Revival of German Labour History,” *German History* 37 (2019), 277–294. On the relation between discourses and practices, see Knud Andresen et al., eds., *Der Betrieb als sozialer und politischer Ort. Studien zu Praktiken und Diskursen in den Arbeitswelten des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Bonn: Dietz, 2015).
- 5 See Peter-Paul Bänziger, “Von der Arbeits- zur Konsumgesellschaft? Kritik eines Leitmotivs der deutschsprachigen Zeitgeschichtsschreibung,” *Zeithistorische Forschungen* 12 (2015): 1, 11–38; Jörg Neuheiser, “Arbeit zwischen Entgrenzung und Konsum. Die Geschichte der Arbeit im 20. Jahrhundert als Gegenstand aktueller zeithistorischer und sozialwissenschaftlicher Studien,” *Neue Politische Literatur* 58 (2013), 421–448. See as *pars pro toto* the examples in Lars Bluma and Karsten Uhl, eds., *Kontrollierte Arbeit – Disziplinierte Körper? Zur Sozial- und Kulturgeschichte der Industriearbeiter im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2012).
- 6 See Lutz Raphael, *Jenseits von Kohle und Stahl. Eine Gesellschaftsgeschichte Westeuropas nach dem Boom* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2019); Anselm Doering-Manteuffel and Lutz Raphael, *Nach dem Boom. Perspektiven auf die Zeitgeschichte seit 1970*, 3rd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012); Sebastian Voigt, ed., *Since the Boom. Continuity and Change in the Western Industrialized World after 1970* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021); Knud Andre-

of labour relations under global capitalism to the fore, highlighting the importance and persistence both of the division of labour and, in the broadest sense, of unfree labour on a global scale: from slavery and bonded labour to the domestic labour performed by migrants with insecure residency status.⁷ At the same time, it has explored practices of resistance and social movements related to these various, entangled forms of free and unfree labour, looking at their interconnections and contradictions.⁸

Both strands of this new labour history are reacting—partly implicitly, partly explicitly—to an increasing societal awareness of the issues at stake. This is expressed in the widespread preoccupation with the future of work on a global scale in light of ongoing processes such as globalization, digitalization and precarity.⁹ Both strands also share an understanding of labour under capitalism as a highly complex form of production and service provision. Previously, following Marx, only free wage labour was considered closely connected to capitalism, while other forms of labour were deemed remnants of the past.¹⁰ Global labour history, however, argues that capitalism has always been based on the exploitation of both free and unfree forms of labour. Opinions differ as to whether this is a historical development or a necessary precondition of capitalism, as well as what theoretical conclusions are to be drawn from this in order to better understand capitalism. However, there is a consensus that free wage labour

sen et al., eds., *'Nach dem Strukturbruch? Kontinuität und Wandel von Arbeitsbeziehungen und Arbeitswelt(en) seit den 1970er-Jahren* (Bonn: Dietz, 2011). For the nineteenth century: Sebastian Conrad et al., "Die Kodifizierung der Arbeit. Individuum, Gesellschaft, Nation," in *Geschichte und Zukunft der Arbeit*, eds. Jürgen Kocka and Claus Offe (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2000), 449–475.

- 7 See Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World. Essays toward a Global Labor History* (Leiden: Brill Academic, 2008); Karin Hofmeester and Marcel van der Linden, eds., *Handbook Global History of Work* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2018); Andrea Komlosy, *Work. The last 1,000 Years* (London: Verso Books, 2018); Alessandro Stanziani, *Labor on the Fringes of Empire. Voice, Exit and the Law* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018); Colin Palmer, ed., *The Worlds of Unfree Labour: From Indentured Servitude to Slavery* (Brookfield: Ashgate Variorum, 1998); Heather Wilpone-Welborn, "Finding Labor History in the History of Capitalism," *Labor. Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 14, no. 2 (2017), 13–20.
- 8 See Stefan Berger and Holger Nehring, *The History of Social Movements in Global Perspective. A Survey* (London: Springer 2017). From a conceptual perspective, see Stefan Berger and Alexandra Przyrembel, "Moral, Kapitalismus und soziale Bewegungen. Kulturhistorische Anmerkungen an einen 'alten' Gegenstand," *Historische Anthropologie* 24, no. 1 (2016), 88–107, and the publications from the European Union funded COST Action network Worlds of Related Coercions in Work (Worck): <https://worck.eu/> and <https://dkan.worck.digital-history.uni-bielefeld.de/> [20.02.2023].
- 9 For an example from the controversial global debate on the future of work, see Lisa Herzog, *Die Rettung der Arbeit. Ein politischer Aufruf* (Berlin: Hanser Literaturverlage, 2019).
- 10 For an overview, see Thomas Welskopp, "Kapitalismus und Konzepte von Arbeit."

in its pure form rarely existed anywhere in the world until well into the twentieth century. Rather, a heterogeneous mix of labour relations, organizations and legal statuses was the rule.¹¹ At the same time, labour historians have revealed how the system of free wage labour was and is, even in industrialized regions during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, rich in preconditions and historic specificity.

As such, the freedom of labour represents a vanishing point within both these historiographies: for the new cultural and social history of labour, it stands as the (never achieved) goal of the institutions and practices under study, whereas for global labour history it acts as a counter-model through which the object of study is demarcated. However, this point of connection remains understudied. By more directly connecting these two approaches, it becomes possible to discuss the relationship between capitalism and the freedom of labour more comprehensively—as well as establish stronger links between new labour history and the new history of capitalism.¹² While the latter was initially shaped by economic and social historians, a new focus on capitalist practices, the moral economy of capitalism and the perception of and knowledge about capitalism has emerged in the last decade, for instance with respect to the history of wealth.¹³ Apart from a few exceptions, this interest has thus far resulted in the uncov-

- 11 See for example Andreas Eckert, “Von der ‘freien Lohnarbeit’ zum ‘informellen Sektor’? Alte und neue Fragen in der Geschichte der Arbeit,” in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 43 (2017), 297–307; Marcel van der Linden, “How Normal is the ‘Normal’ Employment Relationship?,” in *Transnational Labour History: Explorations*, ed. Marcel van der Linden (Aldershot: Routledge, 2003), 197–204.
- 12 See Friedrich Lenger, “Die neue Kapitalismusgeschichte. Ein Forschungsbericht als Einführung,” *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 56 (2016), 1–36; the special issue on theories of capitalism, “Theorien des Kapitalismus,” *Mittelweg* 36, no. 6 (2017/18).
- 13 On economic and social history, see Jürgen Kocka, *Capitalism. A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Werner Plumpe, *Das kalte Herz. Kapitalismus: die Geschichte einer andauernden Revolution* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 2019). On practices of capitalism (“Praktiken des Kapitalismus”), see *Mittelweg* 36, no. 1 (2017); Jens Beckert, *Imagined Futures. Fictional Expectations and Capitalist Dynamics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); fundamental on this topic: Thomas Welskopp, *Unternehmen Praxisgeschichte. Historische Perspektiven auf Kapitalismus, Arbeit und Klassengesellschaft* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014). On the moral economy of capitalism, see Martin H. Geyer, *Kapitalismus und politische Moral in der Zwischenkriegszeit. Oder: Wer war Julius Barmat?* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2018); Berger and Przyrembel, “Moral, Kapitalismus und soziale Bewegungen.” On knowledge about capitalism, see the contributions in *Moving the Social* 67 (2022); Timo Luks, *Die Ökonomie der Anderen. Der Kapitalismus der Ethnologen – eine transnationale Wissensgeschichte seit 1800* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019). On the history of wealth, see the 5th Swiss Congress of Historical Sciences, which took place from 5 to 7 June 2019 in Zürich, where the topic was wealth; see also the special issue on wealth, *WerkstattGeschichte* 73 (2017); Simone Derix, *Die Thyssens. Familie und Vermögen* (Paderborn: Schöningh 2016); Eva Maria Gajek, Lu Seegers, and Anne Kurr, eds., *Reichtum in Deutschland. Akteure, Netzwerke und Lebenswelten im 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2019); Alexandra

ering of only a few interconnections in empirical research.¹⁴ Yet as the contributions in this special issue vividly demonstrate, the new histories of labour and capitalism have an enormous potential to cross-fertilize and, in parts, correct each other.

This special issue approaches the relationship between the freedom of labour and capitalism by bringing together contributions from both strands of new labour history, which operationalize the notion of freedom in two ways. On the one hand, in line with the long tradition of the study of capitalism and labour since Karl Marx and Max Weber wherein scholars have attempted to use the freedom of labour as a heuristic concept,¹⁵ Marco Tomaszewski conceptualizes free wage labour as one form of livelihood among others. On the other hand, Jan De Graaf, Anna Elisabeth Keim, Sibylle Marti and Sibylle Röth begin from the perspective of discourse history and historical semantics, wherein the freedom of labour and related notions are not heuristic concepts but communicative events, appellations and claims.¹⁶ David Mayer, in turn, brings together both perspectives by asking, through the lens of the history of historiography, about the use of the term by Latin American historians. In the interplay between these two vectors of analysis, certain wider questions arise, which seem to be decisive for outlining the relationship between the freedom of labour and capitalism:

First, about the history of practices and appropriations of un/free labour: To what extent has recent research changed and expanded our knowledge about free forms of labour on a global scale? How was legally guaranteed contractual freedom of labour shaped in colonial and non-colonial labour contexts since the nineteenth century? As Jan De Graaf shows in his contribution, the categorizations of un/free labour within

Przyrembel, "Moralizing Wealth. German Debates About Capitalism and Jews in the Early Twentieth Century," in *Moralizing Capitalism. Agents, Discourses and Practices of Capitalism and Anti-Capitalism in the Modern Age*, eds. Stefan Berger and Alexandra Przyrembel (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), 59–77. On poverty as counterpart to wealth, see Beate Althammer, *Vagabunden. Eine Geschichte von Armut, Bettel und Mobilität im Zeitalter der Industrialisierung, 1815–1933* (Essen: Klartext, 2017); Christoph Lorke, *Armut im geteilten Deutschland. Die Wahrnehmung sozialer Randlagen in der Bundesrepublik und der DDR* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2015).

- 14 See for instance Andreas Eckert, "Capitalism and Labor in Sub-Saharan Africa," in *Capitalism. The Reemergence of a Historical Concept*, eds. Jürgen Kocka and Marcel van der Linden (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 165–185; Kocka, *Capitalism*; Jürgen Kocka and Jürgen Schmidt, "Arbeitergeschichte. Global and national," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 43, no. 2 (2017), 181–196; Welskopp, *Unternehmen Praxisgeschichte*.
- 15 See Welskopp, "Kapitalismus und Konzepte von Arbeit."
- 16 See for example Patrick Eide-Offe, "Weisse Sklaven, oder: Wie frei ist die Lohnarbeit? Freie und unfreie Arbeit in den ökonomisch-literarischen Debatten des Vormärz," in *Geld und Ökonomie im Vormärz*, ed. Jutta Nickel (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2014), 183–214; Willibald Steinmetz, *Begegnungen vor Gericht. Eine Sozial- und Kulturgeschichte des englischen Arbeitsrechts (1850–1925)* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2002).

the post-Second World War heavy industry, for example, were fluid. In order to resume production in the coal mines of Belgium and the Ruhr region, the Allies and the Belgian government resorted to compulsory labour laws that dated back to National Socialism. In this context, the freedom to work became an argument made by the trade unions and workers to contest the perceived illegal restriction of their contractual freedom. In so doing, De Graaf's findings emphasize the crucial role of the moral economy of labour in the reconstruction of postwar European economies. Hence, the term moral economy brings together the history of consumer, commodity and property markets with the history of labour markets, thereby linking the history of capitalism and labour history.

Second, on the contemporary history of labour: How does the historiography of work relate to interpretations—most often put forward by social scientists—of the dissolution of the boundaries of work beginning in the late twentieth century? Can the diagnosed emergence of a “self-entrepreneurial workforce,” the “entrepreneurial self” and the “flexible individual” be understood as a transition from empowerment to disempowerment through freedom, or is this ambivalence instead constitutive of free wage labour under capitalism? Furthermore, what might a historiographical perspective on such contemporary diagnoses of current labour transformations look like? In her contribution, Anna Elisabeth Keim examines a phenomenon widely considered emblematic of the contradictions and constraints of “new work”: temporary work. Using the German case as an example, she analyses the changing connotations and perceptions of freedom that structured the discussion around this form of work organization. Since the Weimar Republic and until the 1950s in West Germany, a broad consensus rejected “Leiharbeit” (subcontracted employment) as a form of slavery—and thus as a restriction to the freedom of work. This consensus radically changed with the 1960s: Renamed “Zeitarbeit” (temporary work), it increasingly appeared as an expression of a particularly progressive form of free labour. Temporary work thus served as leverage to attract more women to the labour market and to break up the structures of the traditional employment relationship of the male industrial worker to his employer, which was now understood as unfree.

On the basis of the debates on “informal work,” Sibylle Marti also deals with (re)interpretations of the freedom of work in contemporary history, whereby clear parallels to the discussion on temporary work become apparent. In her contribution, Marti examines the terms and visions used to paint a positive picture of informal forms of economic activity in the Federal Republic of Germany in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Different political orientations started to appreciate the freedom associated with informal work while at the same time criticising the lack of freedom in existing labour relations. Proponents of neoliberal economic ideas were thus able to legitimize their demands for a “deregulation” of labour markets and a “flexibilization” of wages and working hours, whereas proponents of alternative economies emphasized the potential of the informal or self-service economy to create “freer”—ostensibly more fulfilling—working and living arrangements.

Third, as the contributions mentioned thus far have shown, we need to consider the function of freedom in the struggles over the meaning of labour. What concepts of free labour have been used in the historiography on the one hand and by various historical actors concerned with labour (politicians, authorities, scientists and the like) on the other, including, not least, the labouring subjects themselves, across world regions, historical periods and relations of production? What role did freedom as a norm play in the labour movement and in other social movements? In turn, what notions of unfree labour did different actors contrast to free wage labour? How did they understand the entanglements of the different labour relations in global capitalism? In her contribution, Sibylle Röth examines the prehistory of Marx's conceptualization of the "doubly free wage labourer," who was characterized by personal or legal freedom on the one hand and economic propertylessness on the other, which forced him to sell his labour power. Röth examines the debate on the abolition of serfdom in late German Enlightenment discourses. She demonstrates that liberal Enlightenment thinkers justified abolition by appealing to the notion of personal freedom, which they considered to be guaranteed by natural law. In contrast, they almost completely ignored the economic preconditions necessary for the realization of this freedom. Röth argues that this liberal blind spot cannot be explained by a "bourgeois" Enlightenment ideology or by the emergence of a previously unknown pauperization, but was the result of the very structure of the contemporary discourse. The fact that conservative advocates of serfdom emphasized the importance of economic independence blocked liberal opponents of serfdom from referring to this problem. The arguments for and against the abolition of serfdom were thus co-determined by the political positions of the participants in the debate.

Like Röth, David Mayer examines a subject seemingly peripheral to the debates on the relationship between the freedom of labour and capitalism. In his contribution, he analyses changing conceptions of labour in the Latin American labour historiography of the late twentieth century. Focusing on Argentina, he demonstrates that the broader concept of labour in use in academic discussions about free labour in the 1960s narrowed in the 1980s. This was the result not only of scholarly controversies about Latin America's place in the history of capitalism, but also correlated with contemporary political debates and constellations. While many intellectuals linked their advocacy of revolutionary upheavals in the 1960s to a broad understanding of labour, their support for (re)democratization in the 1980s was connected to a focus on the "doubly free wage worker." Here, notions of democratic inclusion went hand in hand with conceptions of a relatively homogeneous society. Mayer's contribution further illuminates the relationship between the history of labour and the history of capitalism by highlighting how historiographical conceptions of labour and capitalism are often mutually dependent. Mayer also challenges the often implicit assumption of a linear development of the understanding of labour in global labour history from a narrow focus on free wage labour to a broader emphasis on multiple forms of dependent labour.

Fourth, with a view to the future of labour history-writing and its relevance to a history of capitalism, what are the advantages and disadvantages of a more explicit emphasis on the freedom of labour or its increased theorization? Are there blind spots in the existing research on labour that become apparent through a focus on free wage labour? Might this be a way of linking different research strands on labour and capitalism, as well as the new social and cultural history of labour and global labour history, more closely? Additionally, what other concepts might be useful for the future development of the historiography of labour? Does it make sense, for example, to start from a non-specific concept of labour and to understand free wage labour simply as one variety? As Marco Tomaszewski argues in his contribution, the diversity of forms of labour and labour relations explored within new labour history requires analytical tools that overcome the geographical and temporal biases inherent to the concept of labour. Instead, he suggests the use of the broader concepts of “livelihood activities,” which refers to the social and material practices of earning a livelihood, and “Lebenslage” (life situation), which describes the external conditions for action of a person or a group, including their social and legal status, place of residence and origin, age, gender, access to information and economic resources, and thus determines the structural foundation of livelihood activities.

The contributions to this issue are characterized by the systematic use of freedom as an analytical perspective on the history of labour in capitalism. Since the late eighteenth century, striving for and reclaiming the freedom of labour has constituted a continuous field of symbolic, social and political conflict, and laid the groundwork for the establishment of an economic and legal codification of labour after the ancient régime. At the same time, the notion of freedom was used to not only stabilize and defend the traditional employment contract system, but also to undermine it. The notion was thus pivotal in negotiating the relationship between capital and labour. Against this background, focusing the history of capitalism and the history of labour through the lens of conflicts on freedom refers to fundamental questions in economic, social and cultural history. To what extent and under what circumstances has labour been conceived of as commodified and commodifiable? If so, was the commodification of labour interpreted as a gain in freedom or as its inverse? Did the societal organization of labour exclusively follow economic constraints, or did it also appeal to societal norms, derived from criteria such as gender, nationality, religion, race and class? Further research must focus on the double role of free labour in the moral economy of capitalism: Referring to notions of freedom, organized labour acted as moralizing force. At the same time, driven by diverse political interests, the “freedom of labour” figured as a crucial object of moralization in society as a whole.

This special issue assembles selected contributions presented at the first conference of the German Labour History Association (GLHA), which took place from 6 to 8 February 2020 in Bochum, Germany. We organized the conference together with Thomas Welskopp, in whose work the issue of the freedom of labour stood at the centre. Thomas participated in the initial preparation of this publication, and we owe a lot to him—not least for introducing us to the Adventures of Asterix. We deeply regret that he could not see the fruit of our combined labour, as Thomas passed away in August 2021. We dedicate this issue to his memory.

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