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Capitalism and Unfree Labour: A Review of Marxist Perspectives on Modern Slavery

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Abstract

Contrary to the expectations of liberal and neoclassical economists, as well as many Marxists, the deepening and extension of capitalism appears to be heightening the prevalence of unfree labour. By most accounts, the forms of exploitation encapsulated within unfree labour – including those typically referred to as forced labour, human trafficking and modern slavery – are proliferating in the global economy, including in advanced capitalist societies. We evaluate these developments in light of the relationship between capitalism and unfree labour through the prism of Marxism, revealing a deep-seated divide between a neo-Smithian reading, according to which capitalism and unfree labour are incompatible, and a more faithful Marxist tradition that views forced labour as one possible form of labour control and exploitation under capitalism. Building on this second tradition, we argue that IPE scholars who seek to shed light into the contemporary and historic dynamics of unfree labour must transcend the rigid theoretical binaries that have long characterised Marxist debates on capitalism and unfree labour.

Capitalism and Unfree Labour: A Review of Marxist Perspectives on Modern Slavery

Introduction

Contrary to the expectations of liberal and neoclassical economists, as well as many Marxist theorists, the deepening and extension of capitalism seems to have reinforced unfree labour rather than diminished it. The forms of labour exploitation encapsulated in the concept of unfree labour – typically described as forced labour, human trafficking, and modern slavery – remain resilient in the global economy. High profile news stories and activist exposés have shone light on the enslavement of workers on shrimp boats off the coast of Thailand (Hodal et al 2014), bonded servitude in a Taiwanese factory making Apple products (BBC 2015), and the trafficking and enslavement of workers on United Kingdom (UK) cannabis farms (Gentleman 2017), to name just a few examples. The production of a wide range of commodities, including tea, palm oil, electronics, garments, cotton, metals, and meats remains heavily dependent on unfree labour (Phillips 2013; Verité 2014; Mezzadri 2017; LeBaron 2018). Although it has been documented in a wide array of industries, unfree labour is highly concentrated in the agricultural, construction, manufacturing and mining industries, as well as sex and domestic work, and thrives across advanced capitalist states, as well as in countries where production and extraction processes feed global and domestic supply chains (ILO 2014; LeBaron 2018).

While unfree labour remains a substantive and pressing concern within the global economy, its definition remains contentious. Different descriptions of the problem reflect varying political and normative commitments, and tend to be attached to divergent solutions (Breman, Guérin and Prakash 2009; O’Connell Davidson 2015; Bunting and Quirk, 2017; Taylor and Rioux 2017; LeBaron 2018; LeBaron and Phillips 2019). The term ‘modern slavery’ is a catch-all and nebulous umbrella term used to describe a range of labour relations; for instance, some socially conservative

groups use it to describe all sex work and civil society groups use it to encompass a wide range of exploitative labour relations including domestic servitude, forced and bonded labour, sex trafficking, and forced marriage (O'Connell Davidson 2015).

The standard legal definition of 'forced labour' comes from the International Labour Organization (ILO), which defines it as 'all work or service which is exacted under the menace of any penalty for its non-performance and for which the worker does not offer himself voluntarily' (1930). This designation includes human trafficking for the purpose of exploitation, debt bondage, serfdom, and slavery. To fall into this definition, a victim must be working involuntarily and facing coercion that precludes their exit, including physical, financial and psychological coercion (ILO 2012: 19; see also ILO 2014). The ILO definition expressly excludes economic coercion, such as the threat of starvation or destitution (Lerche 2007; Rogaly, 2008). It also disregards military conscription, some forms of prison labour, most forms of child labour, and forms of 'free' labour that are highly exploitative.

Marxists tend to reject the labels 'modern slavery' and 'forced labour,' using 'unfree labour' instead. The precise definition of this term is also contentious, but for our purposes it can be distinguished from more narrow definitions of 'forced labour' that prevail in policy circles (see: Lerche 2007; LeBaron and Phillips, 2019). In contrast to these approaches, the concept of unfree labour seeks to capture the full range of coerced labour relations that exist in the capitalist global economy. Unlike the ILO's definition, the concept of unfree labour encompasses labour obtained through economic coercion. It is also often used to draw attention to the structural relations between workers and employers, rather than simply conceptualising 'unfreedom' in individualised terms.

Although Marxist debates may seem marginal and archaic to many scholars of international political economy (IPE), we argue that they hold important insights regarding the relationship between capitalism and unfree labour that can help us better understand the forms of severe labour

exploitation that continue to thrive in the global economy today. This is a critical task, given the longstanding neglect of unfree labour relations within IPE (Barrientos, Kothari & Phillips, 2013). This focus reflects theoretical pre-conceptions common across many strands of IPE, which tend to anchor their conceptualisations of labour in an imaginary of white, male factory workers, seldom accounting for the highly racialised, gendered, and violent relations of unfree labour that ensnare large swathes of the global labour market today.

In the hopes of stimulating further discussion and debate about unfree labour's role and its dynamics within the global capitalist economy, this review essay charts the key debates within classical political economy on unfree labour, with a particular focus on Marx and Smith, and their influence on this scholarship. Our overview reveals a deep-seated divide within the reception of Marx's writings between a neo-Smithian approach, according to which capitalism and unfree labour are incompatible, and what we argue is a more faithful Marxist tradition that views forced labour as one possible form of labour control and exploitation under capitalism. Highlighting some promising veins of contemporary scholarship, we argue that IPE should continue to bridge the divide between normative theory and empirical research by seeking to answer questions about the formal relationship of unfree labour to capitalism through empirically-driven investigation of the role, dynamics, and value of unfree labour within the global economy today.

The argument unfolds in four parts. Section 2 briefly explains why Marxist scholarship on unfree labour is so important, juxtaposing it against natural, moral and developmental explanations for unfree labour. Section 3 examines the *Rezeptionsgeschichte* (history of reception) of Marx, explaining how this scholarship has evolved as the result of its entanglement with the labour movement, the success of the Russian Revolution, and the discovery of his early, unpublished manuscripts in the 1920s and 1930s. As a result of this complicated history, different traditions have interpreted Marx's thought on free and unfree labour in strikingly different ways. Sections 4

and 5 respectively discuss the neo-Smithian approach to unfree labour and a different Marxist tradition, which stresses the dialectical relationship between capitalism and unfree labour. Building on the latter, we argue in the conclusion that IPE scholars who seek to shed light into the contemporary and historic dynamics of unfree labour must transcend the rigid theoretical binaries that have long characterised Marxist debates on capitalism and unfree labour. We highlight some promising directions for future study.

The Importance of Marxist Perspectives

Explanations based on ‘nature’ have a long history arching back to the ancient Greeks, who distinguished between citizens belonging to the community and slaves who did not. Plato and Aristotle justified slavery as a natural institution, while Roman law considered a slave a thing that could be owned, used and controlled. In both Greece and Rome, slavery meant social death and the effective exclusion from social and political life. By contrast, moral explanations emerged during the Middle Ages with Christian theologian St. Augustine, who believed that slavery resulted from humanity’s state of sin originating from the fall of man. Although Aquinas agreed that the imperfect and sinful nature of humankind made slavery inevitable, he also thought that slavery reflected observable natural structures of power and hierarchies (Bradley 1994; Patterson 1982; Dyson 2005: 89-115).

Renaissance thinkers were the first to reposition slavery as a social phenomenon. While the sixteenth century French political theorist Jean Bodin conceived of slavery as an affront to religion and against human dignity, seventeenth century thinkers Hugo Grotius and Thomas Hobbes thought it to be inevitable in a world traversed by power relations. Enlightenment philosophers brought the issue further, seeing freedom as a natural right. Rousseau’s clear anti-slavery stance represents one avenue within the liberal tradition, yet the record is rather mixed, as many theorists

such as John Locke and Charles-Louis Montesquieu justified slavery through a racist ideology excluding certain populations from humankind, and therefore denying their natural right to freedom. In the US, slavery was legal until 1865 even though democracy, liberty, equality, individual rights and freedoms stood as core values of the young republic (Davis 1966, 2006).

The eighteenth-century political economist Adam Smith was the first to condemn slavery on economic grounds by associating unfree labour with a lack of development. In his view, free workers were economically more efficient. Not only were they cheaper than slaves and worked harder and better because it was in their interest; they were also crucial as consumers to the constitution of a national market in goods and services. By contrast, slaves were seen to inhibit productivity growth and technological development, as well as posing adaptability problems in a dynamic, competitive market environment. However, Smith was not entirely optimistic about the ability of capitalism to get rid of unfree labour. He was unable to explain why slavery had expanded during his time, nor the key role it played in the economic development of capitalist structures in Britain. In order to account for the seeming contradiction between his claims that capitalism would prefer free workers, yet seemingly could not eradicate slavery, Smith was forced to introduce a second, *ad hoc* argument about humanity's tyrannical disposition and love of domination and authority (Brass 2011: 14-43; David 1966; Pack 1996).

Smith's economic argument against forced labour not only influenced thinkers such as Thomas Robert Malthus, John Stuart Mill and Max Weber; it also proved central to liberal, neoclassical and some streams of Marxist political economy. Walt Whitman Rostow and other modernisation theorists have developed these tenets of economic liberalism to explain the progressive transition from pre-modern to modern societies (Rostow 1960; Lipset 1959; Kuznets 1966). More recently, Amartya Sen's influential capability approach has maintained that the expansion of human freedom is both the primary end and the principal means of capitalist

development, and that this expansion is a dual process consisting of the elimination of various types of unfreedom, including forms of bondage denying or limiting one's access to the open labour market, and the concomitant promotion of new freedoms essential to fostering individual choices, opportunities and capabilities. Like many liberal theorists, Sen understands capitalist markets as a source of economic growth promoting individual choice and freedom (Sen 1982, 1999).

Despite the ongoing influence of developmental explanations, natural and moral arguments are also prominent. While justifying the 'natural' subjugation of people based on race, class, or gender is less common than it used to be, today such ideas often take the form of Malthusian anxiety over unchecked population growth and scarce resources. Having shed their overtly religious tone, moralistic explanations nonetheless continue to see unfree labour as the outcome of an imperfect human nature plagued by moral shortcomings. They tend to explain the existence of unfree labour as being rooted in the moral failings of individual employers, or sometimes even whole communities (Bales and Soodalter 2010). Ultimately, both natural and moral explanations consider unfree labour to be a human rights issue arising either from a lack of social, political, economic and cultural rights, or the inability to enforce existing regulations and politico-legal rights.

All of these approaches, however, fail to explain how and why unfree labour has become a part of the broader system of social relations, which include relations of production, property, trade, social reproduction, and distribution. By contrast, Marxist scholarship has developed powerful alternatives to both natural and moral perspectives. As regards the latter, Marx's focus on the systemic level emphasises the incentives of capitalism and the structure of free labour itself. For Marx, the basic problem is not rooted in moral failings, but in the fact that within a free labour market the worker is not only free in the sense that 'he can dispose of his labour-power as his own commodity', but also in that he is 'free' from other sources of sustenance and 'has no other

commodity for sale' (Marx 1990: 272). The worker is therefore 'free to starve' if he does not enter into a 'free' labour contract (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018: 16; Rioux 2017).

In addition to rejecting moral explanations, Marx also opposes arguments about unfree labour based on nature. He does so by pushing back against the equation of economic laws with the natural laws discovered by the physical sciences, which assume that the observed phenomenon is stable and constant. Instead, he argues that the economy, while subject to certain analytic laws internally, is actually a human creation that can and should be subjected to social control. For Marx, the view of 'relations of production as being determined primarily by the given "natural" forces of production' ignores the fact that 'all these physical data have always existed in a form historically handed down' (Marcuse 1972: 36) and subjected to social processes. Building on his seminal insights, Marxist scholarship has developed several alternative explanations of the relationship between capitalism and unfree labour as a result of the different ways that scholars have read and interpreted Marx's writings.

Divisions in the Reception of Marx

Marx and Marxism mean many different things to many different people. This is not surprising as the work of all thinkers is subject to interpretation. However, this dynamic is even more pronounced in Marx's case for three main reasons: the oversimplification of his work within the labour movements at the end of the nineteenth century, the attempts to establish an orthodox interpretation of Marxism based on a stagist understanding of history that could legitimise the Soviet Union following the Russian Revolution, and the discovery and release of many of Marx's previously unknown and unpublished writings from the 1840s in the 1920s and 1930s.

As regards the first point, Marx himself was well aware that workers involved in the struggle to improve their working conditions would be unable to devote themselves to an in-depth

study of his philosophy at a time when their wages hovered around subsistence for themselves and their families. After his death in 1883 it fell to Friedrich Engels to explain his complex thought and incomplete intellectual legacy to the leaders of the trade unions. In his interactions with the labour movements at the beginning of the Second Industrial Revolution (roughly 1870-1914), Engels emphasised the materialistic and scientific aspects of Marxism at the expense of the more complicated philosophical dialectics.¹

This tendency, which was reinforced by the advances in mathematics and the natural sciences, conformed to the desires of many labour leaders, who encouraged this naturalistic and materialistic interpretation of Marx in their correspondence with Engels (van der Pijl 2002: 137). The entanglement of Marx with the labour movement – and the naturalistic interpretations to which it gave rise – tended to downplay the philosophical depth of Marx’s work, presenting it as a materialistic theory that obeys an objective, compulsive logic. Although this is an oversimplification, it also reflects some of the dynamics of Marx’s approach in his late work, where he takes on the assumptions of classical liberal economics in order to show that the capitalist system is incoherent on its own terms. As a result, it was easy to present his work as consistent with the classical liberal economics of Adam Smith and David Ricardo.

In addition to this practical-political imperative to simplify, materialise, and naturalise Marx’s work, this tendency was further reinforced by the fact that in the period immediately following his death Marx was known primarily for *Capital*, the *Communist Manifesto* and his other economic works. Andrew Feenberg (2014: 2) notes that these texts ‘seemed to authorize a scientific interpretation’ of Marx, who ‘is careful to minimize the use of philosophical terminology and to avoid the exploration of philosophical problems.’ As a result, in this period he was usually

¹ See Rees 1994 for more on the debate about whether there is a ‘fundamental divergence’ between Marx and Engels.

thought of not as a philosopher, but as a ‘minor post-Ricardian’ (Brewer 1995) working in the more scientific tradition of liberal economics inaugurated by Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*, not as a critic of the broader social system that had developed around capitalist forms of production.

Engels reinforced this neo-Smithian understanding of Marx’s work in the editorial approach he took in the posthumously published volumes of Marx’s *Capital* (van der Pijl 2002: 137), where he emphasised Marx’s ‘scientific materialism’ as an approach based on formal definition and deductive logic. While this interpretation of Marx is plausible, its stagist view of development is a product of Engels’ interpretation of Hegel not as a thinker of self-conscious activity in the making of history – as Marx saw him – but as a determinist who argues that ‘nature (and history) follow a pre-ordained course’ (Lichthiem 1961: 253). This move transforms Marx’s critical theory into a scientific, materialistic eschatology that is incompatible with own critiques of linear accounts of development that ignore the role of human agency and culture determining the external circumstances of individuals (Avineri 1968: 144).

Second, the success of the Russian Revolution reinforced deterministic interpretation of Marxism, as the leaders of the new Soviet Union sought to legitimise their regime by arguing that the spread of the revolution was inevitable. While this stagist approach was enshrined as Marxist doctrine under Stalin, heterodox thinkers outside the USSR reacted against ‘the oppressive legacy of Stalinism’ (Rees 1994). For example, based on Marx’s correspondence, where he restricts the scope of his own claims to ‘historical inevitability’ significantly (Marx 1881), Leon Trotsky developed an account of capitalism’s ability to generate uneven and combined forms of development (see Ashman 2009). However, like Rosa Luxemburg, Georgi Plekhanov, Karl Kautsky, Franz Mehring and other opponents of Stalinist Marxism, Trotsky’s goal was not theoretical development, but ‘the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of world socialism through permanent revolution’ (Rioux 2015: 489).

Lastly, a new, theoretically-driven understanding of Marx became possible when the Marx-Engels Archive in Moscow released a number of his more obscure and previously unpublished early texts in the 1920s and 1930s. The most important of these are the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, also referred to as the ‘Paris Manuscripts’ or the ‘EPM,’ which have ‘come to rival *Capital* as the text of reference for Marxists and others interested in Marxism’ (Feenberg 2014: xi). These texts reveal Marx as a deeply historical thinker interested in alienation (*Entfremdung* or *Entäußerung*) and the effects that capitalist production has on individuals. Although some excerpts had previously been released in Russian and French translation, they were first published in their entirety in the original German in 1932.

The neo-Smithian model presents Marx as a thinker who shares the basic individualistic, mechanistic model of classical liberal economics (Brenner 1977: 27). The publication of the EPM demonstrated the problems with this interpretation by showing that Marx interpreted capitalism not as merely a system of economic exchange, but also as a broader institutionalised social order (Fraser 2015) that needed to be subjected to immanent critique to demonstrate that it did not fulfil its own theoretical principles (Verovšek 2018: 400). This perspective allowed for a re-evaluation of Marx’s critique of political economy in *Capital*. It demonstrated both its indebtedness to Hegel (Fine 2001) and the fact that for Marx ‘social phenomena and processes exist, and can be understood, only in their historical context’ (Fine and Saad-Filho 2016: 5), not merely as abstract theoretical models.

These methodological insights have important implications for later interpretations of Marx. Whereas Smith’s more positivistic, scientific approach was based on individual interest and the existence of a ‘natural order’ of ‘natural liberty’ that made fully developed capitalism incompatible with unfree labour, Marx’s sociologically- and historically-informed understanding

of the economy in the EPM shows that older characteristics can continue to exist within capitalism. Although they are rooted in a slightly different understanding of Marxism, both Trotsky's understanding of historical laws as reflecting 'only a general proposition or observation about historical development' (Knei-Paz 1978: 89) and Luxemburg's analysis of imperialism also allow for the continued existence of unfree labour under capitalism.

More generally, these newly released texts show that Marx opposes naturalised views of economic laws, which equate them with the kinds of 'covering laws' discovered by the natural sciences. Marx argues that the economy, while subject to certain analytic laws internally, is a human creation that is institutionalised and sustained within social structures. Therefore, instead of defining capitalist economics through an analytically deduced logic, such as the idea that capitalism is internally inconsistent with the existence of unfree labour, he argues that the supposedly immutable 'laws' of capitalist economics are much more malleable, serving the ideological interests of the ruling classes.

This perspective grounds Marx's broader critique of classical liberal political economy. For Marx, the real issue with the naturalised, materialistic approach taken by Smith, Ricardo and their followers is ideological, as it encourages individuals living under capitalism to see economic laws as indisputable. As he argues: 'These formulas, which bear the unmistakable stamp of belonging to a social formation in which the process of production has mastery over man, instead of the opposite, appear to the political economists' bourgeois consciousness to be as much a self-evident and nature-imposed necessity as productive labour itself' (Marx 1990: 175). This fetishisation of economic laws hides the fact that they are actually the products of social relations, which are subject to change.

The publication of the EPM and Marx's other early works thus allowed for a new interpretation of Marx. In his early review of the EPM after their publication in 1932, Herbert

Marcuse (1972: 12) identifies ‘the breakthrough from economic fact to human factors, from fact (*Tat*“*sache*”) to act (*Tat*“*handlung*”)’ as grounding the ‘revolutionary significance’ of Marx’s theory. The key move is from ‘the comprehension of fixed ‘situations’ and their laws (which in their reified form are out of man’s power)’ to the idea that ‘all these physical data have always existed in a form historically handed down and have formed a part of particular human and social “forms of intercourse”’ (Marcuse 1972: 36). For the thinkers opposing the neo-Smithian interpretation of Marxism, the realisation that economic laws are not natural and immutable, but are instead social and controllable is the core of Marx’s ‘fully-developed,’ ‘positive’ or ‘real’ humanism (Marcuse 1972: 40). It marks a key break in the methodological approach of Marxism, from the more naturalised, materialistic interpretation of his ‘post-Ricardian’ economics, to a more critical, philosophical and sociological understanding of his attacks on the capitalist system. It is these interpretive differences in the historical reception of Marxism that underlie the opposing understandings of the compatibility of capitalism with unfree labour between a neo-Smithian and what we perceive to be a more faithful Marxist tradition, to which we now turn.

Neo-Smithian Marxism

The crux of the debate is between those who view capitalism as reducible to economic coercion and market compulsion, and those who conceptualise it as compatible with unfree labour. While Marxist thinkers minimally share a conception of capitalism as involving labour exploitation through economic coercion, only the first approach follows Adam Smith in defining capitalism exclusively as a system of free labour that is incompatible with extra-economic coercion and politico-legal constraints. It is in this sense and this sense alone that we can refer to this tradition as neo-Smithian Marxism. Premised upon a rigid definition of modes of production as deducible from the given forms of labour exploitation, neo-Smithian Marxism is deeply influenced by

Maurice Dobb's work on the transition from feudalism to capitalism and his emphasis on relations of production. Challenging the over-emphasis on trade and the tendency to search for 'principles of universal application ... holding true of all types of economic society', Dobb argued that scholars interested in economic development would do better to focus on the laws of motion of different economic systems (2001: 48). In pleading for a shift from the study of similarities in trade relations to an understanding of discontinuities in relations of production, Dobb insisted on the historically specific dynamics of modes of production (1959: 26).

In this framework capitalism is characterised by a distinct class structure rooted in the separation of the producer from the land and the means of production, specific developmental tendencies based on the imperatives of market competition (i.e. heightened division of labour, relentless technological changes), and the transformation of the producer into wage-labourer. The 'purely contractual form' between labour and capital signifies that the performance of surplus labour in modern society proceeds 'not by virtue of legal compulsion', as in pre-capitalist modes of production, but in a 'purely economic and "objective"' way (1959: 7, 17). Dobb's main propositions prefigure most of the key themes of neo-Smithian Marxism: (1) the specificity of capitalist dynamics and rules of reproduction; (2) the ontological priority given to production over exchange; (3) a conception of social change and development trapped in methodological nationalism; (4) a concept of the mode of production based on the conflation between relations of production and forms of exploitation; and (5) a sanitised view of capitalism based on free wage-labour.

Eugene D. Genovese, a historian of the American slavery, was one of the first to adopt Dobb's definition of the capitalist mode of production, arguing that capitalist and non-capitalist societies are distinguished by 'the difference between the buying and selling of labor-power and the extra-economic compulsion of direct human labor—the difference in systems of property'

(Fox-Genovese and Genovese 1983: 18). According to Genovese, the ‘Old South’ was unequivocally characterised by precapitalist, non-bourgeois master-slave relations. To begin with, planters’ aristocratic values led them to favour conspicuous consumption over labour-saving technologies. Planters also took greater risks in buying slaves rather than employing cheap agricultural wage-labourer, thus lacking the ability to adjust the size of the labour-force according to price fluctuations. Genovese considered slavery to be inefficient and economically backward because it relied on keeping slaves ignorant, unskilled, resentful and unproductive. In this context, productivity growth tended to result from close (and expensive) supervision and geographical expansion, rather than from the introduction of labour-saving tools, methods and technologies. Genovese followed the Smithian tradition in arguing that unfreedom undermined any incentives to work better or harder (1989: 16, 26, 43).

Gaining traction throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Dobb’s productionist stance became widely accepted amongst Marxists who found reassurance in its rigid theoretical formalism. By the late 1970s, Perry Anderson’s (1979: 403) argument that capitalism was ‘the first mode of production in history in which the means whereby the surplus is pumped out of the direct producer is ‘purely’ economic in form’ was commonplace. This idea achieved its most developed form with the theory of social-property relations, or political Marxism. In a series of important contributions, Robert Brenner (1977, 1986, 1988) highlighted the link between modes of production, class structures (themselves determined by social property relations or surplus-extraction relations), rules of reproduction, and long-term development dynamics. Following in Dobb’s footsteps, Brenner (1977: 52) argued that capitalism could only exist ‘under a system of free wage labour, where labour power is a commodity’. As Ellen Meiksins Wood (1981: 80) puts it, a defining feature of capitalism is that producers are ‘not in a relationship of dependence or servitude; the transfer of surplus labour and its appropriation by someone else are not conditioned by such an “extra-

economic” relationship.’ To the extent that they conceive of capitalism as incompatible with forms of extra-economic coercion in surplus appropriation, Brenner and his followers can be qualified as neo-Smithian Marxists.²

Building on Brenner and Meiksins Wood, Charles Post (2013: 80) argued that for capitalist rules of reproduction to apply, two conditions must be met. On the one hand, both exploiters and producers must depend upon the market for survival. While this entails the presence of free wage-labourer capable of commodifying their labour power, subjection of capitalists to the imperatives of competition and accumulation forces them to lower production costs by introducing labour-saving technologies and methods, thus suggesting that relative surplus value is the real form of capitalist relations of production. On the other hand, all economic actors must be capable of responding to price fluctuations and changing market conditions, which means that capitalists must be able to expel both their less efficient competitors from the market and their wage-labourers from production in order to introduce technical innovations.

These conditions provide Post with the rationale to argue that neither American nor Caribbean slavery was capitalist, for while planters were dependent on international trade, they were unable to respond to market compulsion by introducing labour-saving technological changes. Because they purchase the labourers rather than the labour-power of direct producers, slaves – understood as fixed capital – could not easily be expelled from production (Post 2011, 2017: 182-5). In this respect, Post is even more severe than Genovese who argued that in the particular case of the Caribbean, slavery was a capitalist enterprise (1969: 28-30; Fox-Genovese and Genovese 1983: 22-3).

² Ben Fine, Costas Lapavistas and Dimitris Milonakis (1999) have also accused Brenner of being a neo-Smithian Marxist, albeit in relation to his later work on the contemporary global economy where he explains the current long downturn as the result of the competitive struggle between capitals, rather than through class conflict, like in his earlier work on the transition debate.

It is therefore not surprising that this tradition has very little to say about colonial contexts. Although there has been an attempt to redress this important blind spot, the overwhelming majority of case studies remain firmly anchored in the global North (Lafrance and Post 2018). For example, Meiksins Wood (2005) argued that although Britain was capitalist, the British Empire was not, thus leading to serious theoretical and historical difficulties. Similarly, in the early 1970s Ernesto Laclau (1971, 30) contends that Latin America could not have been capitalist since the Conquest Period, because ‘the direct producers were not despoiled of their ownership of the means of production, while extra-economic coercion to maximize various systems of labour service ... was progressively intensified.’ Focusing on relations of production, Laclau pointed out that the absence of free wage-labour in Latin American agriculture in general, and Brazilian agrarian economy in particular, made it non-capitalist. However, in order to account for the incorporation of the region into a world imperialist system characterised by capitalist social relations, he argued that feudal and capitalist modes of production coexisted within a single social formation or economic system. For Laclau (1971: 31), Brazilian feudalism was connected to capitalist world economy through what he called an ‘indissoluble unity’.

The application of the Dobbian framework outside of Europe probably received its most sustained support in the context of the transition debate in India in the late 1960s and 1970s. Rising to predominance after the 1949 Chinese revolution, the semi-feudal thesis remained one of the most influential Marxist approaches to development until the 1980s (Brass 2011: 75-103). Mao Zedong, who argued that China was a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society, identified the main contradiction in the opposition between peasants and landlords, and argued that the immediate task of the revolution was the struggle against imperialism and feudalism through a national bourgeois democratic revolution aimed at the nationalisation of international capital and the redistribution of land (Mao 1939). This stagist approach was influential in India as an important debate emerged

over the nature of the country's economic system following independence and the introduction of Green Revolution technologies. Amit Bhaduri (1973) and Pradhan Prasad (1974) argued that agrarian relations in India were semi-feudal, a concept that conveyed 'that the existing relations of production have more in common with classical feudalism of the master-serf type than with industrial capitalism' (Bhaduri 1973: 120). Semi-feudalism sought to capture the antagonistic unity between capitalist economic development in the metropolises and precapitalist labour relations in Third World countries by insisting on a distinction between world capitalism and national social formations (Patnaik 1971; Bagchi 1975). Surpluses generated in the colonies were appropriated by the imperial bourgeoisie through the subordination of local lords to feed the expanded reproduction of capital in the metropolises (Alavi 1975).

Semi-feudalism posits that capitalism is characterised by free wage-labour, market expansion, labour-saving technologies and methods, and skilled workers (Patnaik 1990: 41-44). In contrast, pre-capitalist social formations are characterised by unfree labour, economic inefficiency and backward productive forces (Ramachandran 1990). The transition from feudalism to capitalism thus entails the emergence of a class of free wage-labourers with nothing to sell but their labour-power. The semi-feudal thesis is the theoretical expression of the Dobbian framework applied to (post)colonial spaces, which are never capitalist enough. In addition, because the development of a mature capitalism is seen as a necessary step to socialism, proponents of the approach locate class struggle in semi-feudal and semi-colonial countries between progressive (e.g. workers, peasants, nationalist bourgeoisie) and reactionary (e.g. landlords, international capital) social forces. To the extent that capital-intensive forms of industrial agriculture are encouraged, Japan, Taiwan and South Korea have been praised as successful agrarian transitions, while most of Latin America – except Mexico, Chile and Peru – has tended to be seen as trapped in a 'landlord capitalism' inhibiting the development of Third World agriculture (Byres 1996; Rao 1970). The decline in the

popularity of the semi-feudal thesis lies in the continuous transformation of the Indian countryside, even though some continue to use it (Harriss 2013; Kar 2018).

Criticising the historical geography of capitalism arising from the rigid application of Dobb and Brenner's Eurocentric framework in (post)colonial contexts, Raju J. Das has tried to relax some of its main premises. Given that agrarian structures in the periphery rarely correspond to the expected model of capitalist development, proponents of the Dobbian tradition almost always conclude that the countryside is (or was) pre-capitalist or semi-feudal. 'The assumption, including that of Brenner, is that once there are capital-free labor relations in place of unfree relations characteristic of pre-capitalist modes of production, there will be advanced capitalism based on the dominance of the appropriation of relative surplus value' (Das 2012: 184). Against the uncritical acceptance of this linear conception of capitalist development from absolute to relative value, Das argues that the balance of class force is key in facilitating or limiting the transition from the formal to the real subsumption of labour under capital. In other words, 'class struggle is important not only to the transition *to* capitalism (as argued in the transition debate by Dobb, Brenner, etc.). It is also important to the transition *within* capitalism' (Das 2012: 185). While Das' theoretical renovation undermines the semi-feudal thesis's narrow conception of capitalism, it nonetheless remains within the Dobbian tradition in arguing that both formal and real subsumption of labour are characterised by free wage-labour and the absence of extra-economic coercion in surplus appropriation (Das 2012: 180-81, 195).

Within the neo-Smithian tradition, Robert Miles's *Capitalism and Unfree Labour* (1987) represents a key contribution. Miles follows Dobb and Brenner in defining capitalism exclusively as a system of generalised commodity production where labour power itself is a commodity. Accordingly, 'the distinction between free and unfree labour is one which turns on the presence or absence of a commodification of labour power; unfree labour is non-commodified or only formally

commodified, while free labour exists where the individual retains access to his/her labour power as private property and can freely dispose of it within a labour market' (1987: 171). In reducing capitalism to free wage-labour, however, Miles is forced to introduce two new concepts to make sense of the complexities of history: firstly, the concept of modes of production to account for the multiplicity of existing relations of production; and, secondly, the concept of social formation or economic system which, in referring to the socio-spatial limits within which the dominant class exercise its economic, political and ideational power (i.e. state formation), offers a broader framework to account for the articulation of modes of production. Given that multiple modes of production may coexist within a given social formation, the challenge is to explain why non-capitalist modes of production are maintained and reintroduced in a social formation dominated by capitalist relations of production.

Miles's (1987: 197-98) main argument is that unfree labour is an anomalous necessity arising from labour shortages. Unfree relations of production 'are *anomalous* when viewed in relation to the tendency for the emergence and increasing dominance of free wage-labour, and yet they are *necessarily* introduced and reproduced because historical conditions obstruct the universalization of wage relations of production.' Contrary to unfree non-wage labour such as slave labour or convict labour, where no commodification of labour power is present, unfree wage-labour such as contract migrant labour refers to a situation where politico-legal limits are placed on the exchange or commodification of labour power. This distinction is important for Miles because it demonstrates that the formal appearance of wage-labour on the market is no indication of capitalist relations of production, even in advanced capitalist social formations. Unfree wage-labour is not the absence of bourgeois political freedoms (e.g. rights of political participation or trade union activity) – rather, it is the existence of political-legal restrictions or extra-economic coercion intended to restrict or prohibit the circulation of certain categories of labour power within the labour

market. For Miles, the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production during labour shortages may be secured through the introduction and/or maintenance of non-capitalist forms of exploitations.

As we draw this discussion on the neo-Smithian tradition to an end, it seems appropriate to go back to Dobb's cautionary approach to the theorisation of capitalism. While insisting on the specificity of capitalism, Dobb recognised that 'systems are never in reality to be found in their pure form', further noting that 'in any given period to speak in terms of a homogeneous system and to ignore the complexities of the situation is more illuminating at least *as a first approximation*, than the contrary would be' (1959: 11, our italics). Over the years, however, Dobb's 'first approximation' on the historically specific nature of capitalism has been transformed into a rigid, formalistic, abstract and homogeneous theoretical framework characterised by a separation between theory and history (Rioux 2013). Privileging theoretical clarity over historical complexities, the neo-Smithian tradition is limited by the explanatory power of its concept of capitalism. Given that modes of production are never 'to be found in their pure form', as Dobb himself recognised, this tradition had tended to explain 'the complexities of the situation' through the articulation of self-contained, externally related and homogeneous modes of production coexisting within a single social formation. It is therefore not surprising that in its attempt to explain the maintenance or reintroduction of unfree relations of production, this tradition has tended to rely on a functionalist argument whereby capital 'uses' non-capitalist forms of exploitation (Meiksins Wood 2005: 104; Patnaik 1995: 84-5; Das 2012: 188, 195-6; Miles 1987).

In many ways, the Dobbian tradition, which emerged and was consolidated during the postwar era, captures a period characterised by the formalisation of labour relations in advanced capitalist countries, the rapid expansion of industrial development in postcolonial contexts and the collapse of the Soviet Union. To the extent that these events contributed to a monumental expansion

of wage-labour at the global level, they have also tended to reinforce the view that as capitalism expanded unfree labour would recede. In light of the continued prominence of unfree labour under global capitalism, however, especially as neoliberal restructuring has dramatically transformed the balance of power between capital and labour (LeBaron and Ayer 2013; LeBaron and Phillips 2019), the inability of the neo-Smithian tradition to explain theoretically the inner relationship between capitalism and so-called extra-economic coercion must be overcome.

Marxist Perspectives

Unlike the neo-Smithian tradition, we argue that Marx's writings demonstrate that he understood the dialectical unity between capitalism and unfree labour (Banaji 2003; Brass 2013; Rioux 2013). In addition to the philosophical and sociological grounding revealed through the publication of Marx's early writings in the 1920s and 1930s, this more dialectical approach also builds on the research Marx conducted on non-European societies late in his career. In these texts, he argued that plantation slavery in the Americas, child labour in Britain and the colonial system in India were capitalist. While making clear that the wage form is one of the '*essential* mediating forms of capitalist relations of production,' Marx criticised 'those who regard this superficial relation, this *essential formality*, this *deceptive appearance* of capitalist relations as its true *essence*', thus rejecting the association of the capitalist mode of production exclusively with wage-labour (Marx 1990: 1064). That so-called extra-economic coercion could be capitalist relations of production was obvious to Engels, Kautsky, Lenin, Trotsky and Hilferding, who recognised how the expanded reproduction of capital was premised upon the geographical mobilisation of both free and unfree labour relations (Brass 2011: 51-73). This tradition was upheld in the postwar period by numerous thinkers, including Georges Lefebvre, Richard H. Tawney, Paul A. Baran, Eric Williams, Sidney Mintz, Ernest Mandel, Robin Blackburn, Domenico Losurdo and Dale Tomich.

The circulationist approach represents one key avenue in this tradition. Better known for the contributions of Paul Sweezy, Andre Gunder Frank and Immanuel Wallerstein, the approach is based on what Walter Rodney (1982: 75) has called ‘the internalization of trade’. For this body of literature, the unity underpinning the historical constitution of a geographically expansive and economically integrated capitalist world economy is organised around an international division of labour and trade. The authors subscribing to this view have therefore tended to argue that: (1) European development was not achieved independently; (2) colonies contributed massively to the wealth of Europe, notably by financing the Industrial Revolution; (3) imperialism drained colonial resources while enforcing economic backwardness; and (4) the uneven geographical development of capitalism was constituted through violent and coercive forms of labour exploitation at the periphery. They have produced rich case studies on the relationship between capitalism, underdevelopment and unfree labour in Africa (Amin 1970; Jalée 1970; Nkrumah 1970), Asia (Clairemonte 1960), the Caribbean (Williams 1944; Moreno Fraginals 1976; Moulrier Boutang 2002), Latin America (Furtado 1964; Gunder Frank 1967) and the United States (Du Bois 1954). While colonial agrarian economies may not have been based on free wage-labour and the systemic introduction of labour-saving technologies and methods, they were key to the deepening and geographical expansion of capitalist social relations (Wallerstein 2011).

World-system theorists stress the internal unity between free and unfree labour in order to understand how different regions and forms of labour are integrated within a hierarchical international division of labour (McMichael 1991; Tomich 2004). While this unity represents the objective condition for the permanent state of ‘backwardness’ within peripheral regions of the world-economy, it also constitutes the theoretical basis for the explicit rejection of a definition of capitalism as industrialism: ‘Free labor is the form of labor control used for skilled work in core countries whereas coerced labor is used for less skilled work in peripheral areas. The combination

thereof is the essence of capitalism' (Wallerstein 2011: 127). One key aspect of world-systems analysis is therefore its conceptualisation of free and unfree labour as a spatially differentiated process. While upward and downward mobility is possible, as countries may shift from lower to higher value-added production and vice-versa (Selwyn 2012), the specific form of labour control nonetheless remained determined by one's position within the international division of labour (Miles 1987: 58). Although Brenner (1977: 53) is right in arguing that Wallerstein's definition of 'capitalism as trade-based division of labour' constitutes a Smithian argument, it is no small irony that his own critique is premised on the neo-Smithian presupposition that capitalism is reducible to a system of free wage labour. Whatever the value of Brenner's critique of Wallerstein, it is severely limited by its inability to recognise, as Wallerstein does, the historical and contemporary role of extra-economic coercion and politico-legal constraints in the dynamic of capitalist economic development.

Jairus Banaji's early works offer yet another avenue to understanding the inner relationship between capitalism and unfree labour. Although still influenced by the semi-feudal thesis, Banaji's argument for a theory of colonial modes of production in the early 1970s already contained some of the key theoretical developments that were to characterise his approach. On the one hand, Banaji (1972: 2498) upheld the circulationist view of the unity of world economy yet criticised its failure to recognise 'that modes of production are not defined ... in terms of exchange relationships'. On the other hand, he (1972: 2499) maintained that Dobb was mistaken in confusing relations of exploitation and relations of production, further noting that 'in theory there is no reason why a given mode of production should not combine a variety of relations of exploitation.'

Taken together, these claims allowed him to argue that the fundamental constituents of the structure of world economy were not countries but '*modes of production* mutually linked in relations of hierarchy, subordination and dependence' (Banaji 1973: 399). Hence the key

importance of the concept of colonial modes of production to understand the relationship between core and peripheral countries. In defining colonial modes of production as ‘the circuits through which capital was drained out of the colonies in the form of bullion, consumption goods, raw materials and so on’ (1972: 2500), Banaji recognised the centrality of production relations in explaining how backward economies are internally related to the pressures of the capitalist accumulation process in core countries.

By the late 1970s, Banaji had sharpened his analysis of the relationship between capitalism and unfree labour. To begin with, he argued that Marx ascribed two distinct meanings to the concept of mode of production (Banaji 1977a). According to the first meaning, which underpins neo-Smithian Marxism, the concept is reducible to specific forms of labour exploitation or relations of production. In this framework, bonded labour is to feudalism what wage-labour is to capitalism. According to the second meaning, however, Marx understood the mode of production at a higher level of abstraction, this time encompassing relations of production in their totality. At that level of abstraction, the concept of mode of production refers to a period or epoch of production, a social form of production within which historically specific forms of exploitation coexist and interact.

For Banaji, this allows Marx to maintain the centrality of wage-labour in capitalism without reducing the latter to the former. Banaji’s appreciation for Marx’s ability to conceptualise accumulation at different levels of abstraction is echoed in his differentiation between individual and total social capital: ‘the real issue of theory here is whether we can sensibly visualise the accumulation of capital being founded on unfree labour ... at the level of the expansion of the total social capital. And the obvious response is, no, since the mobility of labour *is* essential to the mechanism of capital at *this* level’ (Banaji 2003: 80). At the historical level of *individual* capitals, however, ‘it is accumulation or the ‘drive for surplus-value’ that defines capitalism, not the

presence or absence of “free” labour’ (2003: 81). Banaji thus offers a conception of capitalism that is compatible with various degrees of coercion and bondage.

Banaji’s willingness to follow Marx’s method and levels of abstraction is key to his critique of the Dobbian tradition’s false dichotomy between trade and production (1977b). Criticising the tendency to equate capitalism with industrialism, Banaji distinguishes between the formal and the real subsumption of labour to capital. While ‘the *formal* subordination of labour to capital presupposes a process of labour that is ‘technologically’ continuous with earlier modes of labour’, Banaji notes that the real subsumption of labour ‘presupposes the production of capital in the form of *relative surplus-value*, hence a process of *labour* that is *specifically capitalist*’ (1977b: 1376).³ An understanding of the historic process of capitalist development would therefore have to be sensitive to the dialectical unity between the formal subsumption of labour characterised by a multiplicity of labour-intensive forms of capital accumulation, and the real subsumption of labour based on labour-saving technologies and methods. For Banaji, any approach that reduces capital to its industrial form is bound to promote a sanitised, nationalistic and overtly productionist history of capitalist development (Banaji 2007: 51ff; 1980: 511).

Emerging in the 1980s and developed throughout the 1990s, Tom Brass’s deproletarianisation thesis aims to understand the ways in which class formation and class struggle shape and are shaped by free and unfree labour. Brass starts from Marx’s double freedom of the wage-labourer as both free from access to the means of production, which is the moment of dispossession of pre-capitalist producers, and free to exchange her labour-power to capital for a wage, which is the moment of proletarianisation. The commodity labour-power is therefore key to

³ Contrary to Das, Banaji does not reduce the formal and real subsumption of labour to the wage-labour form, which is consistent with the conceptual distinction that he operates between relations of production and relations of exploitation.

understand the difference between free and unfree labour. ‘Unlike a free labourer, who is able to enter or withdraw from the labour market at will, due to the operation of ideological constraints or extra-economic coercion an unfree worker is unable personally to sell his or her own labour-power (in other words, to commodify it), regardless of whether this applies to employment that is either of time-specific duration (e.g. contract work, convict labour, indentured labour) or of an indefinite duration (chattel slavery)’ (1994: 256). In short, free labour is characterised by the ability to commodify and recombine labour-power.

Brass calls ‘deproletarianisation’ the process of class composition/recomposition by which capitalists seek to limit or eliminate labour rights and freedoms, including the ability to withdraw labour-power from the labour market. Because free labour represents an important obstacle to accumulation, ‘assaults by capital (actual or potential, preemptive or reactive) on the freedom of wage labour ... are a *general* feature of capitalism’ (Brass and Bernstein 1992: 6-7). By focusing on the contradiction between capital and labour, Brass avoids the teleological fallacy according to which unfree labour cannot be reintroduced once free labour exists. In this respect, one of the main effects of globalisation is to reinforce and accelerate tendencies towards deproletarianisation by shifting the balance of power between capital and labour. The decentralisation, outsourcing and downsizing of production since the 1980s must be understood as capital’s attempt to circumvent the postwar class compromise by taking advantage of a cheap and increasingly global labour force. At the same time, ‘it is precisely in the combined circumstances of anti-union legislation, compulsory ‘training’/‘retraining’ schemes for youth and the long-term unemployed, the replacement of welfare provision with workfare, cutbacks in the social wage, declining real wage levels, and the rising unemployment now occurring in the metropolitan capitalist countries that the linkage between an oversupply of workers and unfree relations becomes important’ (1988: 186).

The growing market competition between workers, especially in time of crisis, strengthens the capacity of capitalists to decommodify labour-power.

Although Brass's contribution highlights the key role of class dynamics in shaping free and unfree labour, Jim Hagan and Andrew Wells (2000: 478-9) have argued that under the deproletarianisation thesis 'the Marxist critique of "free labour" is replaced by a conceptual common ground between Marxist and neoclassical conceptions.' For the authors (2000: 485), too strong an emphasis on the circulation of labour-power as the measure of free and unfree labour runs the risk of reproducing the economic formalism of bourgeois legalism, while eluding the extent to which 'free' labour implies a formidable curtailment of the freedom of the labourer within the workplace. While both Brass and Marx identify 'free labour with the free circulation of labour,' the difference, noted Banaji (2003: 91), is that Marx 'did not view the worker as a free agent – whereas, for Brass, free labour resonates with its opposition to unfree labour, evoking subliminal images of freedom from bondage, oppression, and coercion, as if free labour was exempt from violence, much less from subtler forms of bondage and coercion'. To the extent that '*all* wage-labour is subject to compulsion' (2003: 87), 'free' wage-labour is better understood as a legal fiction that mystifies the intrinsic, coercive nature of labour exploitation under capitalism.

Banaji's argument is based on the distinction that he makes between individual and total social capital, which arises from the double freedom of wage-labour. At the level of individual capital, it is workers' ability to sell their labour-power – the moment of commodification – that constitutes the operative logic, and at that level Brass is right to equate free labour with the free circulation of labour in the labour market. As Banaji (2003: 70) notes, however, 'what the worker sells is the 'right to control his labour-power'. Since labour-power is never disembodied, what employers buy when they 'buy' 'labour-power' is command over the use of workers' bodies and their persons.' It is the appearance of freedom in the sphere of circulation, which stems from the

ability to enter into and exit from a working arrangement, that mystifies the actual domination and lack of freedom of labour in the sphere of production.⁴

At the level of total social capital, it is workers' freedom from the means of production – the moment of dispossession – that presides over the constitution of a free labour market. That the free seller of labour-power can choose her master does not alter the fact that she is always already subjected to the capitalist class as a whole. Because he focuses exclusively on the moment of proletarianisation, 'Brass conceives capitalism *entirely* from the standpoint of individual capital, ignoring the fact that the logic that regulates capitalist economy is, necessarily, that of the *total* social capital' (Banaji 2003: 80). While it allows him to construct a critique of unfree labour, he can only do so by 'endorsing the liberal mystification of a 'free' bargain, against Marx's conception of the labour market as an instrument of coercion' (Banaji 2003: 78).

Contrary to Banaji, Brass (2003: 117-8) asserts that Marx did in fact 'conceptualize wage-labour as free or labour-power as a commodity at the level of individual worker'. Building on the Hegelian concept of freedom based on labour-as-property, Brass defines free labour as someone 'who possesses and retains the capacity personally to sell (= commodify, re-commodify) his/her own labour-power' (2011: 44). Such freedom is premised upon a relative – rather than absolute – transfer that takes place over a definite period of time. The slave is unfree because the transaction involves the purchase of the labourer rather than the labour-power of the direct producer. Free labour thus involves the freedom to enter into and exit from the sale of labour-power. Brass does not believe that capitalism entails truly free workers (that would be socialism). However, he stresses the conceptual importance of distinguishing between free and unfree labour to emphasise

⁴ Yann Moulier-Boutang (1998) has documented at length the extent to which the control over the mobility of labour has always been key to capital accumulation, thus stressing the continuous historical discontinuities between the expansion of capital mobility and restrictions placed on the mobility of labour.

the role of class formation and class struggle in the reinforcement or weakening of that freedom. The distinction between free and unfree labour is not only key to understand the historical difference between feudalism and capitalism and the extent to which free labour constitutes a historical achievement for Marx; it is also necessary to make sense of contemporary struggles aimed at restricting or prohibiting the circulation of certain categories of labour power within the labour market (e.g. prison labour, migrant farm workers, workfare schemes).

While they both agree that ‘free’ wage labour is not an end in itself and that coercion is pervasive under capitalism, the positioning of their respective argument at different levels of abstraction has important political consequences. For Banaji (2003: 91), it is the ongoing logic of dispossession that renders the free/unfree labour dichotomy incoherent, with the result that ‘the only real freedom workers possess under capitalism or any system of domination is their power of resistance’. For Brass, however, it is the ongoing process of (de)proletarianisation that justifies the analytical distinction between free and unfree labour. Because ‘conditions where wage-labour is free are better – and perceived by workers themselves as such – than where it is not’, it plays a key role in class formation and class consciousness and the overall organisation of class interests to assert and extend labour rights and freedoms (Brass 2003: 121).

Despite disagreements about what should constitute the proper theorisation of the relationship between capitalism and unfree labour, scholars in this tradition would agree that: (1) unfree labour under global capitalism is not an anomaly but the result of capital dynamics; (2) the reduction of capitalism to relative surplus value is bound to run into important historical problems; and (3) the spheres of production and exchange stand in dialectical unity, the specific dynamics of which being a historical rather than a theoretical question. In contrast to neo-Smithian Marxism, therefore, this tradition argues that market compulsion can (and does) include extra-economic coercion.

Conclusion

We have argued that there is great value in re-visiting classical political economy approaches to understanding the relationship between capitalism and unfree labour, and subsequent Marxist political economy efforts to build on these. In contrast to prevailing liberal accounts of ‘modern slavery,’ Marxist approaches seek to shed light into the root causes of social, economic, and political power relations between unfree workers and the individuals and organisations who exploit them, and to explain the ongoing presence of unfree labour in the capitalist global economy. They help us to understand how and why people become vulnerable to unfree labour, and the systemic compulsions underlying demand for it by businesses and individuals. Natural, moral and developmental approaches, which obscure these dynamics, continue to be prominent and influential in both academic and policy circles. IPE scholarship that emphasises and explains the endurance and dynamics of unfree labour within the capitalist economy is therefore urgent and important.

However, we have also highlighted the divide between two veins of scholarship within the Marxist tradition, which we characterised as neo-Smithian and a more authentically Marx’s important work and thinking about unfree labour. In our view, the latter tradition provides the strongest theoretical foundation for future studies of unfree labour. There is a need to go beyond the current emphasis on what Banaji has called ‘formal abstractionism’ – in other words, the tendency to focus on highly theoretical and formal questions at the expense of studying the real world — and to develop more holistic and grounded forms of theorisation. While Marxist theory is no doubt important, the fixation of political economy scholarship on theoretical questions about the formal relationship between capitalism and unfree labour over the past several decades has meant that we still know very little about the actual contemporary dynamics of unfree labour,

including: how they relate to global, national, and local political economic relations; broader patterns of production and social reproduction; the geographic distribution of unfree labour and its prevalence within different sectors; or whether or not unfree labour is expanding or diminishing alongside the globalisation and intensification of capitalism.

A burgeoning interdisciplinary literature has begun to tackle these problems (LeBaron, 2018; LeBaron and Phillips 2019; LeBaron and Ayers, 2013; Barrientos et al 2013; Mezzadri, 2017; Breman, Guérin and Prakash 2009; Breman 2010; Fudge and Strauss 2013; McGrath 2013). While these scholars differ with respect to their precise relationship to Marxism, all are aligned on the view that unfree labour comprises an important and poorly understood phenomenon within the global capitalist economy. Furthermore, all are pushing beyond abstract theoretical debates about the relationship between capitalism and unfree labour to investigate its role, dynamics, form, and contribution within contemporary capitalism. While, there is still too little IPE scholarship on unfree labour, future research could build on this body of work to shed light on the role that unfree labour plays within contemporary capitalism, as well as how the global economy – and worker organisations, state, civil society, and business actors within it – needs to change for unfree labour to be eradicated.

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