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# Introduction: labor coercion, labor control, and workers' agency

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In April 2018, the European Social Science History Conference (ESSHC), taking place in Belfast, Northern Ireland, hosted a session entitled *Labor Coercion, Labor Control, Workers' Agency*. Organized by members of the Free and Unfree Labour working group of the European Labour History Network (ELHN), this session successfully moved beyond the commonly regarded polar opposite forms of labor relations: slavery and free wage labor.<sup>1</sup> Connecting different geographical areas and times, it offered a timely contribution to the new directions labor history as social history is taking and produced three scenarios along which the intertwinement of unfree labor conditions can be better understood. The common research theme around which the articles in this special theme revolve looks at ambiguities and possible contradictions between the dichotomy of free and unfree work. Concretely, the presented research investigates the existence of unfree labor relations within the realm of free labor.

The articles analyze case studies in different parts of the world and in different historical and social contexts, which nonetheless reveal striking similarities between them. The first case on 'Pacified Indians' and the Legal Fight Against Enslavement' includes men and women who were forced to work in situations which closely resembled the experiences of enslavement, although slavery was neither institutionalized nor were they considered enslavable by law. The second article 'Early Undocumented Workers' looks at people who had already managed to exit one form of coerced labor relations, yet ended up on the bottom of the labor market due to a mix of extra-economic (formal and customary law) and economic forces.<sup>2</sup> The last article, 'The *livret d'ouvriers*,' deals with workers who were formally free subjects and at the same time found themselves in legally constructed conditions that forced them to undertake certain work. The articles bundled here, then, combine three issues: 'virtual enslavement' (contrary to law), severe exploitation of nominally 'free' people, and the coercion of allegedly 'free' wage workers. Other two important themes of labor history that these articles touch upon include the recruitment and control of laborers, and workers' agency and abilities to resist or challenge impositions, or comply with specific situations.

Besides the surging interest in slaveries, notably expanding outside the Western hemisphere and the colonial setting, labor history increasingly challenges the linear trend in the development away from coerced labor and towards free wage labor, and consequently the persisting myth that capitalism is driven by the latter.<sup>3</sup> New contributions stress the unfreedom of free labor, go beyond the black-and-white picture of slavery versus free labor, and emphasize the legal ambiguities further complicating the narrative (for instance, conflicts between official and customary law).<sup>4</sup> In fact, increasing numbers of scholars are moving towards understanding coerced labor relations as a continuum (Steinfeld & Engerman, 1997), or are attempting to nuance the picture according to particular contexts (De Vito, Schiel, & van Rossum, *in press*). By doing so, these recent questions

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and approaches can 'speak to ongoing developments in the contemporary global economy' and touch discussions on today's labor markets (ELHN Labour History, 2018).<sup>5</sup>

The following three articles empirically support the finding that 'the coexistence, entanglement, and overlapping of diverse labor relations has been the rule throughout history' (De Vito et al., *in press*). Men and women in different places and at different times found themselves entering different forms of coerced labor relations. Some of them managed to exit them again, achieving certain degrees of freedom, while others stumbled from one coerced condition into the next, or from a form of free labor back to a form of unfree labor. The paths were multi-directional, repetitive, and mutually overlapping – and are important observations in order to understand ongoing social tensions and labor conflicts. Slavery, captivity, coerced labor, servitude, apprenticeships, and severe exploitation of wage labor have to be seen and studied as intertwined and mutually interchangeable and complementary.

Paola Revilla Orías opens this special section with "Pacified Indians' and the Legal Fight Against Enslavement at the Crossroad Between Free and Unfree Labor Conditions.' She contrasts the dynamic *practice* of enslavement to the formal static institution of slavery and identifies different *moments* of coercion and resistance. Her contribution on Bolivian indigenous enslavement during colonial times is close to the approach suggested by Joseph Miller (2012) to study slavery not as an institution but rather as a process shedding light on the actions of the enslavers as well as on the agency of the enslaved. Moving the focus from South to North America, Viola Müller traces the footsteps of runaway slaves who fled to cities within the American slaveholding South to pass as free people of color. 'Early Undocumented Workers: Runaway Slaves and African Americans in the Urban South' demonstrates that many members of the free black communities in American cities of the nineteenth century possessed a variety of illegal statuses that facilitated their exploitation in the labor markets. Urban capitalist labor markets with their high demands for a flexible workforce offered opportunities to these undocumented workers while dramatically undermining the position of legal city dwellers. The topic of the mechanisms of slave control that were translated into controlling wage labor is also taken up by the last contribution, this time as control of legally free yet *de facto* unfree workers. In 'The *livret d'ouvriers*: Rethinking Time and Space of "Free" Labor in Nineteenth-Century France,' Martino Sacchi focusses, like Revilla, on negotiations of work conditions and resistance to coerced labor. In 1803, Napoleon Bonaparte introduced the *livret d'ouvriers*, an internal passport to control the mobility of workers and to satisfy the labor demand of employers. Following studies on the ambiguity of 'free' labor (Moulier-Boutang, 1998; Steinfeld, 2002), Sacchi problematizes the status of dependent workers at a time when the mobility of legally free individuals came to be supervised on basis of a body of civil law and shows how workers found ways to negotiate wages and work conditions, either through formal claims or through absenting themselves.

Conflicting legislation, non-execution of laws, and diverging interests of different stakeholders are processes and outcomes that are discussed by all three authors. These dynamics were made possible through distinct claims by local actors that bent, challenged, or disregarded legal frameworks. These articles on wage workers who were supposedly free but highly restricted, *de facto* enslaved people who were officially exempted from enslavement, and people who fled slavery and integrated into highly exploited communities between nominal freedom and an illegal status, offer three perspectives beyond the free/unfree labor dichotomy. Moreover, they offer windows through which to study the developments of capitalism. On the one hand stands Revilla's case, in which in colonial Bolivia, the laboring subjects were bluntly forced to work by extra-economic compulsion. According to Tom Brass and van der Linden (1997, p. 59), these conditions mark pre-capitalist labor relations. Sacchi and Müller, on the other hand, scrutinize scenarios in which compulsion was introduced into labor markets to target specific social groups. While in the nineteenth-century U. S. South this happened in a much more subtle way than in France, both cases took place within increasingly capitalist economic systems in which coerced laborers were less often recognizable as such and frequently worked alongside less restricted laborers.

In conclusion, the articles in this special theme on labor coercion, control, and agency emphasize that many employers preferred unfree over free labor. They illuminate how exactly unfreedom was created and how control over workers was exercised. Ultimately, they support claims by scholars who find that the classification of labor into free and unfree is arbitrary (Steinfeld and Engerman's 1997, p. 108), and contribute to debunking the myth that capitalism is driven by free labor.

## Notes

1. See van der Linden & Rodríguez García (2016, p. 1).
2. See Brass (1997, p. 59).
3. A good example is the special issue by Bellucci (2017).
4. To take only two examples each, see Engerman (1999), Pesante (2009), Brass and van der Linden (1997), Stanziani (2014), Benton and Ross (2013), and Vernal (2008).
5. See also Brass (2013) and Lucassen (2016).

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

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