

REVIEW ESSAY

Brassed-Off: The Question of Labour Unfreedom Revisited

JIM HAGAN AND ANDREW WELLS

TOM BRASS. *Towards a Comparative Political Economy of Unfree Labour. Case Studies and Debates.* [The Library of Peasant Studies, 16.] Frank Cass, London [etc.] 1999. £47.50. (Paper: £20.00).

Free and Unfree Labour. The Debate Continues. Ed. by Tom Brass and Marcel van der Linden. [International and Comparative Social History, 5.] Peter Lang, Bern [etc.] 1997. 603 pp. S.fr. 98.00.

The debate on free and unfree labour has a long history. That history has a political and administrative character as well as a historical and scholarly quality. More than a century ago, those interested in the abolition of the slave trade on the one hand, and those interested in plantation profits on the other, argued about whether the labourers that the latter employed were really “free” – or if they were not, whether that really mattered. Closer to our own times, the International Labour Office and the British Anti-Slavery Society investigated and reported on forms of employment by planters and governments in Africa, India, and Asia.

In the last thirty years, scholars from Europe, the United States and some of the excolonial countries have debated the issues. What constitutes “freedom” or “unfreedom” in labour relations? What is the importance of legal prescription, compared with social pressures? Can we point to compensations flowing to technically “unfree” labour that offset its legal disadvantages? Is there a continuum between free and unfree labour? What are the political consequences of labour being understood as free or unfree?

These two books make an important contribution to the debate. *Towards a Political Economy of Unfree Labour* provides a theoretical survey of the principal writings since about 1960. *Free and Unfree Labour* combines theoretical debate, empirical case studies and comparative historical enquiry. It is, in effect, a major companion piece. In both books Tom Brass has ample opportunity to attack conventional wisdom, and advance his particular contribution to the debate. We begin with Brass’s monograph.

In Part One, the author illustrates some of the points at issue by reference to his own researches and writings on South America; others he considers

by surveying the work of authors who have written on the employment of labour in northwestern and northeastern India. Part Two of the book takes up the various debates at a more theoretical level, and considers the contributions of neoclassicism, Marxism, and postmodernism. A conclusion summarizes the author's own position. There are copious notes and a voluminous bibliography.

The volume edited by Brass and van der Linden, *Free and Unfree Labour*, is a very large and uneven collection of conference papers. Brass provides the long and detailed theoretical introduction, and a chapter on unfree labour, capitalist restructuring and deproletarianization. Van der Linden draws the material together into synoptic conclusion. The book combines a number of theoretical papers and analytical overviews, with more empirical essays and case studies from diverse historical locations and set over different historical periods.

Some of the chapters – van der Linden on “Forced Labour and Non-Capitalist Industrialisation: The Case of Stalinism”, Kerr on “Free or Unfree?: Railway Construction Labour in Nineteenth-Century India”, Roth on “Unfree Labour in the Area Under German Hegemony, 1930–1945: Some Historical and Methodological Questions”, and Casanovas on “Slavery, the Labour Movement and Spanish Colonisation in Cuba” – are important essays in historical explanation and revisionism in their own right. Others are rather too empirical or undertheorized to make a major impact on the conceptual issues raised by the editors. Sad to say, some of the Antipodean essays fall into that category. While some of the same general arguments surface in both books, both writers and case studies suggest very considerable diversity, even by adherents of the same theoretical position. Both books suggest that there are four major themes central to the contemporary discussion. Since a review essay cannot possibly comment on all the individual contributions, we concentrate on these more general themes.

First, there is the theoretical (and political) distance between Marxist conceptions of freedom (and unfreedom), and those conceptions which underpin neoclassical and neoliberal theory and policy. There is a very substantial philosophical debate, to which G.A. Cohen in particular has made a major contribution, which addresses these issues in an abstract way. The reason for this debate – sometimes polite, often polemical and occasionally ferocious – revolves around the definitional, conceptual, methodological, and political differences that separate the two traditions. To this binary opposition must be added the more recent and eclectic postmodernist contribution: critical and emancipatory in flavour (and thus closer to the Marxist orientation), but subjectivist and individualistic in method (and thus closer to the neoclassical approach). These books explore the differences between these theories and make explicit their implications and ramifications.

Second, both books demonstrate that historical and sociological accounts

of labour are limited unless careful preliminary definitions and concepts are developed. This is not an area of discussion where innocent empiricism or clumsy theorization is acceptable. Indeed, we are reminded that these apparently simple and distinct frameworks can yield findings of great conceptual complexity and subtlety. Shlomowitz shows in his comparative essay based on neoclassical assumptions, using examples from the Cape Colony, the West Indies and the American south, that Marxists do not monopolize these skills. Apart from the archetypal (and historically rare) pure proletariat, most workers who sell their labour power are enmeshed in a wide variety of relations of unfreedom in their working and nonworking lives. Freedom and unfreedom are to be understood in the complex circuits of production and consumption, in the spheres of commodity, money capital, and ground rent.

Even technically free labour, in the most advanced capitalism, may experience wage slavery in the factory, school, mine, and office. A careful analysis of the many modes of labour, understood in a continuum from freedom to unfreedom, is only a starting point for empirical research. So while a worker may be technically free (and this is by no means an unimportant matter), it is only when the entire set of economic relations are theorized and described that we can access exactly what this condition of freedom means. These two important books demonstrate the endemic problems for writers who neglect the theoretical complications or follow the theory in a half-hearted way. In the 1920s the communist left in Australia tried to explain to one of the best paid, most unionized, politically active, white, male labour forces (a classic labour aristocracy by most measures) that they were simply wage slaves – this was not a very effective strategy!

Third, theory and case studies in both books suggest that an unproblematic “teleology of labour” – the march from unfreedom to freedom – cannot be derived from the historical record. The forward march of labour, the progressive emancipation of labour, might remain the object of theory and practice, but history has invalidated the optimistic expectation that this is an inevitable, or even likely, outcome. The general notion that the peasantry is being rapidly proletarianized or that capitalism depends on the exploitation of free wage labour needs interrogation. Even the simple idea that wage labour is the antithesis of serf or slave labour needs questioning. Some of the case studies and theoretical literature in these books, especially Brass’s own writings, invite us to consider that unfreedom is increasing and defining much of contemporary labour relations.

Fourth, the arguments presented in these books suggest (with some important qualifications) that there is a necessary disjunction that must be understood and explained between structural analysis of free and unfree labour, and related studies of labour consciousness, identity and action. Indeed the classical problems associated with base/superstructure, truth/ideology, class consciousness, and in turn the distinction between objective

and subjective understanding, all return with a vengeance to haunt the careful reader. Many of the contributions appear to drive a sharp wedge between structure and consciousness: the battle for precision in the economic and legal distinctions seems to exact a considerable cost in the less rigorous area of feeling and doing. In contemporary humanities and social sciences the distance between postmodern anthropology and structural political economy replicate this separation of class position and subjective outlook. We return to this problem below.

Parts of *Free and Unfree Labour*, and much of *Towards a Comparative Political Economy* are not easy to read. Admittedly the subject matter is complex, but this increases the need for careful and clear exposition. Brass is the most serious offender in both books. He lapses into long and convoluted sentences in which brackets, multiple slashes, abstract nouns and equal signs abound, so that translation into standard English requires real effort. This sentence, for example, eventually yields a meaning, but only to those who are patient:

[...] unfreedom possesses only a discursive existence, linked to the construction by Amazonian colonists of a mythological/folkloric image of indigenous horror/terror (based on savagery/rebelliousness/cannibalism) and projected by them on to the tribal workforce they recruited/employed.¹

Brass makes his obscurity doubly dense by criticizing postmodern authors in their own peculiar jargon.

Still, if readers are prepared to make the effort, the reward is there. Historians need books that compel them to think about the theoretical underpinnings of their craft, and these two books require their readers to think carefully about the range of issues that historians of “free” and “unfree” labour have traversed in about four decades. Brass’s own book is almost a concordance, a dissection of some scores of articles and a critique of their arguments; it identifies the questions asked, their significance, and the evidential and theoretical strengths of the answers. For someone writing on these subjects now, it provides a kind of a checklist. If I write what I propose, in what way does it add to what has been written? To what extent has it taken account of evidence presented, and theoretical injunctions on its use? To what extent are my conclusions limited by the evidence I have, and my methods of acquiring it? When I strip back what I think I know, what assumptions do I find?

How do we define “free” labour? Brass proposes and maintains a simple definition. “Free” labour is that which its owner is free to sell in a labour market; by extension, it is labour which can be withdrawn if its owner so wishes. Curiously, Brass, a Marxist, is not so interested in elaborating the difference between “labour” and “labour power”, although

1. Tom Brass, *Towards a Comparative Political Economy of Unfree Labour* (London, 1999), p. 260.

purchase and control of the latter by the employer robs the labourer of considerable freedom within the workplace. Employers “own” and deploy the capacities of the labourer once the contract has been agreed upon. Brass seems to use the simple term “labour” to include the idea of “labour power”. Freedom consists of the ability to commodify labour – to exchange it for cash or kind. At this point the Marxist critique of “free labour” is replaced by a conceptual common ground between Marxist and neoclassical conceptions.

“Unfree” labour in this conceptualization is therefore labour that its owner cannot sell freely. The variety of it that most interests Brass is bonded labour, that is to say, labour which the owner performs in paying off an obligation, most usually a debt. Bonded labour is not archaic; it is popular with many capitalists and protocapitalists in the contemporary world. It is also very flexible in form. Payment of the debt by the labourer may be enforced by law, or by family and kin, or by violence, or by a combination of all three. It may be transferred to another member of the family, including children, or even down the generations. But in all its various forms it has one unalterable characteristic. Bonded labourers may not work for anyone else until they have acquitted the debt, or made arrangements for its acquittal. They can “change masters” but the debt remains until it is worked off.

Some of the advantages of this arrangement for the employer are obvious. Bonding ensures a continuity of labour supply, and an adequate one during peak periods. When the price of local labour rises, employers can recruit immigrant labour in places where the going rate is cheaper, and reduce their wages bill. Skilfully managed, recruitment of immigrant labour can also ensure the employment of wives and children at bargain rates. And an adequate supply of cheap bonded labour can break strikes, and dampen down militancy in a local labour force planning to withdraw its labour. As a consequence the market freedom to enter into new labour contracts is undermined.

But why would labourers enter into arrangements which bind them to a single employer? Mostly because they do not have any real choice; the freedom to sell their labour power has already been compromised either by actual, or impending indebtedness. There were (and are) many reasons why the rural poor need to take loans. Smallholders who find their plots of land diminished by forced sale to pay taxes in cash, or subdivided by inheritance, often find the remnants too small to support them. Sometimes they borrow against the prospect of a good harvest – perhaps only to find that the harvest fails, and they need another loan. There are the costs of ritual ceremonies to be met – marriages, betrothals and funerals – and there are emergencies like accidents and illness.

For all these reasons and more, the impoverished take out loans. Sometimes they borrow from landlords, or from moneylenders, who might

require as a condition of repayment that they are engaged to a particular employer. Recruiting agents for distant employers offer advances in wages, sometimes for six months or so ahead, provided the labourers sign contracts or indentures that bind them to the service of that particular employer for a much longer period. Labourers who sign find that they have to survive the first period of their employment (and keep their families as well) without any wages whatsoever, or at best, a small proportion of the agreed-upon rate. This often means taking another loan, either from the employer direct, or from the contractor, who frequently doubles as a foreman on the plantation. Sometimes the employer simply withholds wages, or pays them infrequently. Without sufficient funds to buy in cash, labourers on isolated plantations have to rely on credit from the company store, which sells goods that are heavily overpriced. Labourers might also become addicted to alcohol, drugs, or gambling, and thus have to borrow to maintain these habits. For all these reasons, labourers might find that when the period of their contract ends, they are still in debt to the employer or the foreman – in which case they have to sign up for another term.

Brass's studies of the bonding of labour and its consequences have led him to formulate two theoretical concepts. The first of these is "deproletarianization". In its classical and dictionary sense, a proletarian is someone who has no property. In conventional Marxist theory, it follows that peasants who have been dispossessed become wage labourers, potentially free, by selling their labour power in the market. But the potential to become fully free labourers is often undermined by the debt bondage and indenture relations noted above. It is this second characteristic that Brass refers to in his use of the word "deproletarianized". Thus, bonded labourers, though no longer peasants, are not fully proletarianized; they have become deproletarianized because they have lost their ability to sell their labour power freely. Deproletarianization takes place at certain stages of capital accumulation, as landowners expand their investments.

The process of increasing investment relates to the second of the theoretical concepts that Brass considers essential to the understanding of unfree labour. This is not so much a new concept as a reworking and application of a principle central to Marxist thinking: the struggle between classes. Brass argues that class struggle is an inseparable part of the bonding process. To omit it renders any analysis ahistorical, and can lead to serious error. Class warfare may be conducted against landless peasants by wealthy and prosperous peasants with aspirations to accumulate more land and capital. They aim to achieve this by controlling the labour power of poorer peasants by bonding them to their service. Besides serving the economic purpose of keeping the costs of labour down, bonding also helps prevent the development of conscious resistance among the labourers so that the "class for itself" does not emerge. It is to draw attention to the element of class struggle

present in unfree labour that Brass has incorporated the phrase “political economy” into the title of his book.

The case studies in Part One of *Towards a Comparative Political Economy of Unfree Labour* attest to the validity of these two central concepts. Brass draws on the results of years of fieldwork to review the circumstances of workers, which are explained by the application of these ideas in various contexts. The multiplicity of studies is important. They allow him to argue that deproletarianization and class struggle are not limited in their explanatory usefulness to a few instances scattered through place and time, but have a universal quality. On the other hand, their universal quality reminds us that the movement of history does not necessarily enhance freedom.

His argument is the stronger because he recognizes the limits set by the techniques of gathering evidence. He is especially wary of what he calls “the fetishization of oral history” (*Towards a Comparative Political Economy*, p.17). Oral history is “innately empirical”; its novelty has tended to displace traditional methods, and as a result, tempts investigators not to set their enquiries into theoretical and historical frameworks. Without those perspectives, they ask the wrong questions, and misinterpret answers. This is endemic to the practice of anthropology.

Brass’s own studies make a determined use of theory, and history-as-theory. That does not mean that he has approached his research intent on demonstrating a truth he already knows. There is, in most of his case studies, a nice balance between theory and empiricism, between the exposition of what an explanation ought to be and what it actually is. Comparisons, using diverse case studies, are used to validate the theory he employs. His review of the work of others in Part Two of *Towards a Comparative Political Economy of Unfree Labour* has the same intent, as well as offering him the opportunity to settle some old scores. Brass surveys the work of authors in three categories: the neoclassicists; the Marxists who have got it wrong; and the postmodernists. Some of these authors have contributed chapters to the book he coedited with van der Linden.

Between them these two books provide a very important contribution to contemporary and historical studies of workers, and class relations into which they are inserted, and against which many of them struggle. Every schoolchild knows (or used to know) that “class location” describes a position in structured relationships between property owners and direct producers. But what has eluded even scholarly debate is a deeper understanding of the myriad relationships that spring from the simple ownership relations on which class position rests. Without a deeper understanding of the entire ensemble of these relations three problems emerge. First, a “teleology” of class forms is assumed. Slavery, feudalism, and capitalism not only indicate different types of class structures, but are steps from unfreedom to freedom. Freedom in this context means increased self-ownership; implying enhanced individual and class freedom for the direct producers. Socialism was thus

understood as the final step from the unfreedom of capitalist relations of production (encapsulated in the discipline of the factory) to the freedom inherent in the democracy of associated producers.

In *Free and Unfree Labour*, the central theoretical debate is between Marxism, neoclassical theory, and postmodern conceptions of labour, and the complex debates within Marxism. Despite the sometimes polemical and even theological tone of the debate, the key theoretical and empirical issues are raised. Indeed, they are raised in a manner that is both stimulating and original. This book not only continues a debate, but also shapes its principal themes and categories. The neoclassical approach is undoubtedly the most common in contemporary social science. It is based on the notion that freedom is derived from self-ownership, and the unfettered right to enter into market transactions with rights over the commodity, labour. Naturally the property owner seeks to secure the most advantageous terms for the sale of his labour power. The neoclassical tradition understands on the one hand that the ownership of self by another is a negation of freedom, and on the other hand, that regulation of the labour market (by monopolies, the state or unions) will also negate or limit individual freedom. As Shlomowitz argues, and Steinfeld and Engerman agree, this concept can be effectively used for historical analysis, but not without some logistical difficulties.

In general terms, the labourers featured in Brass's account, enmeshed in relations of unfreedom (the indentured worker being the classic example, but also the debt-bonded proletarian) are seen in a very different light within neoclassical concepts. Different because the neoclassical approach is willing to acknowledge that the terms of the contract might be less than perfect, but nevertheless argues that they are a major gain compared with unambiguous modes of slavery or forced labour. The important conceptual (and political and moral) distinction lies in the neoclassical preference for market relations over all other forms of labour allocation. Allied to this preference is a belief that most labourers are expressing a natural preference for wage labour, even when signing an indenture, because it represents a market-determined – albeit imperfect – form of contract. So market relations and the capacity of labourers to exercise choice become the principal and entwined defining concern. Thus, in historical studies the neoclassical author can quickly recognize – even highlight – imperfections in the labour market, and note restrictions on the capacity of an individual to make an informed and coercion-free decision about the sale and deployment of her labour. But it is very unlikely that the neoclassical writer will provide a similar context in which to understand the ensuing work, or draw the same theoretical or political conclusions as a Marxist.

The neoclassical essays in *Free and Unfree Labour* show the common ground that can be profitably shared at an empirical or descriptive level (indeed the two traditions can learn an immense amount from the excellent research done, regardless of theoretical approach), but the enormous differ-

ence is in theory, concept and explanation. In turn this means a radical difference in understanding the dynamics of social change, the role of class and class struggle serving as the point where explanations of social change radically diverge. It should also be recognized that, despite a neoclassical starting point, some historians come close to incorporating a class struggle analysis. This debate is thus somewhat more complex than a simple dichotomy might suggest. Indeed an eclectic history is not as unusual as one might expect. This is possibly because the relationship between history and theory is especially problematic in this area. Olsen has shown in her very informative chapter, "Marxist and Neo-Classical Approaches to Unfree Labour in India" where these apparently differing approaches intersect and overlap.

The Marxist position is, however, at least as complicated. The problem here is a kind of inversion of the neoclassical paradigm. The facts are not greatly in dispute, but their different conceptualization is crucial; the idea of labour freedom is constituted differently and the role of class and class struggle is emphasized. Many of the essays in the edited book employ a Marxist framework, but, as we have already noted, they generate quite diverse outcomes: compare for example its employment by Markey to explore Australian labour, and the chapter by McCreery on Guatemalan labour. One reason for the variety lies in a distinction between "structural Marxism" and "cultural Marxism". This distinction is neither peculiar to writings on labour freedom, nor is it of recent origin. Many of the Marxist debates in historiography – most famously that between E.P. Thompson and the structural Marxists – revolve around the relative importance of rigorous conceptual distinctions compared to the singularity of cultural factors.

In Brass's own contributions the formalism is impressive but problematic. It is not so difficult to prove that cultural Marxists have relied too heavily on unexamined theoretical assumptions and unconsciously on assumptions that a "teleology of freedom" underlies the chaos of historical complexity. But this is only half of the story. As Kerr and other Marxists demonstrate, it is possible to be aware of the complex theoretical issues that Brass belabours and still produce accounts of labour that are specific and derive an understanding of responses by workers that is culturally grounded. On the other hand it is possible to get the definitions into precise order and still run directly into the classic problem of consciousness – the workers continue to understand their circumstances in ways that elude the theoretician. This also is a familiar problem in Marxist historiography. A failure to address this problem of consciousness, cultural identity, and thus political response, continues as the weakness of many of the essays presented here, and of Brass's own contribution. The problem seems to lie with reliance on a kind of traditional essentialism. By essentialism we mean an assumption that we can derive understandings of thinking and feeling from location in

the relations of production. This is not only an inadequate theoretical position, but an approach that undermines the full impact of class analysis.

It should be a commonplace of class-based historiography that social life inscribes into the consciousness of workers (or employers for that matter) a complex, even contradictory set of understandings about their identity. While work will provide one – possibly the most significant – social experience, that does not mean that in “normal” circumstances it determines the significance of the extremely diverse range of other total experiences. Workers are as steeped in the cultural meanings derived from language, religion, ethnicity, and gender as in those created by their location in the relations of production. Indeed as the rigour of labour regimes intensify (in commodity relations or in more overt forms of exploitation), a response that privileges “tradition” over “modernity”, consumption over production, or caste over class, is not so inexplicable as is frequently assumed. We should be wary of theoretical accounts, no matter how sophisticated, that reduce meaning, identity, and subjectivity to structural positions in economic activity. The valuable insights that postmodernists have brought to critical social theory should be welcomed rather than rejected by the Marxist historian.

In our research on plantation labour in the French-owned rubber plantations of Indochina we have been struck by the creative Vietnamese response to the expansion of wage labour in conditions of indenture, myriad forms of extended exploitation (through extortionate loans, fraud and rotten food) and extra-economic coercion. The response saw the simultaneous return to longstanding social and cultural traditions, and the embrace of a particular adaptation of international communism. Without a theory of consciousness that allows for complex cultural and social identities, and locates these in the world of symbol, meaning, and tradition, an understanding of the Vietnamese resistance to French colonialism and the spread of wage labour would be impossible. Even where wage labourers have experienced decade after decade of unrelenting commodification, not only in their working lives, but in their lives as consumers, citizens, lovers, and dreamers, resistance does not automatically produce a proletarian consciousness. It is at this point that the apparently superior postmodern explanations of consciousness become apposite.

Postmodernism becomes, in the understanding advanced by Brass, the source of further theoretical problems, distractions, and irritations, rather than a possible source for their resolution. At one level, the postmodern contribution to the debate on free and unfree labour seems unhelpful. By focusing on the issues of cultural meaning and subjectivity, it appears to reject or undermine the importance of the relations of production. The postmodern interest in consumption, and the sites where identities are produced and reproduced, seems to undermine universal claims about the logic of modernism (and commodity and class). An interest and sympathy for the strategies of the marginal and “traditional” undermines the logic of class

formation and progressive social movements. Individualizing social choice and political response works against the idea of a collective subject imposing its logic on an alienated world. All these theoretical and empirical claims both disturb and disrupt the Marxist project. It also appears to champion contradictory logics: its emphasis on individual choice and consumption appears to ally its concerns with the neoclassical economists; but its focus on the “subjectivities of emancipation” seems to speak (perhaps indirectly) to Marxist concerns. Undermining the reified concepts of the modernist and enlightenment project seems deeply subversive of the ordered world of both neoclassical economic history and Marxist political economists.

It is something of a problem for the continuing debate on free and unfree labour that the postmodern outlook is strongly underrepresented in *Free and Unfree Labour*, and its provocative assertions are not more closely examined. It is a matter of significance that the anthropologists who are undoubtedly the scholars best equipped to explore the complex responses of workers to wage labour, bonded labour, and coercive labour in noncapitalist or protocapitalist settings have turned to postmodern theory, and generally rejected both Marxism and neoclassical approaches. This development is unlikely to be accidental.

These books probably take the debate to its limits for the moment. They suggest that the reconciliation of the different theoretical positions is unlikely. The demolition of the neoclassical and postmodern positions is too one-sided and lacks the generosity and engagement of serious dialectical critique. Thus, the precision and dogmatism of Brass's approach needs to be qualified. Brass takes a rather mathematical attitude to questions of definition, concept, and theory. To that extent, he moves us closer to the formalism of “bourgeois” legal and economic conceptions than he might desire. A consequence of this formalism is a difficulty in connecting the structure and consciousness.

Finally, the economic formalism that Brass appears to share with his neoclassical adversaries, makes the relationships between legal and economic positions, ideological representations, and social action very hard to understand. He reproduces the old structural functionalist and Weberian distinction between the “legal-rational” and “economic practices”, and the arena of emotions, actions, and possible unreason. Postmodernists have worked successfully to undermine this dichotomy and thereby fill this conceptual gap. A Marxism that reproduces these dichotomies in order to outmanoeuvre neoclassical theorists and historians is in danger of becoming distracted from the more difficult task of rethinking labour emancipation. The debate about free and unfree labour is far from concluded. In the next phase of the debate the terms might have to be recast.

