

Free and unfree labour – an introduction to this special issue*

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In the autumn of 2012, the Swedish furniture company IKEA confirmed the serious accusations that had circulated in the international media for some time: certain assembly parts of the company's products in the 1970s and '80s had been manufactured by prisoners in the *Deutsche Demokratische Republik* (DDR), including political prisoners.² IKEA thus joined the large number of companies around the world who, historically and currently, have used and benefited economically from prisoners' labour.³

Prison labour is an example of unfree labour – that is, a labour relationship where people work under different degrees and types of coercion, such as threats of fines, detention, physical violence or even death.⁴ Coerced labour comes in many forms and still exists in today's Nordic countries. One example which has received attention in recent years is the case of foreign berry pickers in Swedish forests. Scholars examining the labour situation of the berry pickers have concluded that they in several cases have been victims of human trafficking and that their labour conditions violate international conventions on coerced labour.⁵

In this context, however, it should also be noted that there are many more or less coerced labour relationships which are broadly accepted in the international community and therefore are not prohibited by international law.⁶ One example of this is the forced recruitment of military personnel through military service, which is explicitly excluded in the International Labor Organization's Forced Labor Convention.⁷ Recently, coerced labour of such kinds has attracted increased attention among researchers seeking to elucidate and explore labour relationships between what labour historians Marcel van der Linden and Magalay Rodriguez Garcia refer to as 'two extremes': chattel slavery and wage labour.⁸

This special issue of *Arbetarhistoria* (*Labour History*, the journal of the Swedish Labour Movement's Archive and Library) includes four empirical articles in which free and unfree labour relations are illustrated and explored. All of them are revised versions of conference papers presented at the Nordic Labour History Conference in Reykjavik in the late autumn of 2016. Before moving to these articles and the conference in question, we would like to

introduce briefly the debate on free and unfree labour and locate it within the broader field of global labour history.

Global labour history and free/unfree labour

From its start in the late nineteenth century, labour history as a field of study developed in close relationship with the organised working-class movement, that is, first and foremost, with the movements and organisations of wage labourers.⁹ Understandably, labour history itself has been predominantly conflated with the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century wage labour. This trend is still largely visible today, notwithstanding the discipline's institutionalisation in the academic system. Not only do labour historians usually focus much less on other labour relations, such as unpaid housework, convict labour or indentured work, than they do on wage labour, but the overrepresentation of wage labour in labour historiography has also created major distortions: to begin with, the idea that a historical tendency has existed towards wage labour and away from coerced labour relations. Furthermore, there has been the association of wage labour with industrial capitalism's 'modernity'. Taken together, these views have strengthened a Eurocentric perspective in which the expansion of wage labour is seen as a distinct sign of Western modernity. This has additionally led to a short periodisation of labour history centred on the period following the Industrial Revolution. Indeed, the latter has been considered *the* turning point in the history of capitalism, wage labour and workers' organisations.

Nevertheless, during recent decades, a growing body of scholarship has contributed to deconstruct this standard image. Three insights stemming from these studies are especially relevant here. First, coerced labour, rather than wage labour, has been the standard in history. Indeed, scholars have shown that slavery, convict labour, indentured work, debt servitude and other forms of unfree labour have been present, and often quantitatively predominant, across the centuries and virtually in any historical context.¹⁰ Second, coerced labour has been proven compatible with capitalism.¹¹ In fact, all forms of unfree labour have been imbricated in the process of commodification, with forced labour being commodified by third parties (polities or private employers) rather than by the workers themselves.¹² This means that capitalism itself, as a mode of production, cannot be conflated with wage labour. More generally, it entails that all modes of production have relied on multiple combinations of labour relations. Therefore – this is the third insight emerging from recent scholarship – the study of the entanglements and co-existence of multiple labour relations becomes essential. Why do certain clusters of labour relations appear in a given historical context? Under which circumstances do shifts in combinations of labour relations emerge? As part of this conversation, scholars have also engaged in a sustained debate about the connections of free and unfree labour.¹³ They have traditionally taken two opposite sides: on the one hand, authors like Tom Brass have argued for a clear-cut distinction between free and unfree labour, based on the distinct ways labour commodification is achieved; on the other hand, Robert J. Steinfeld and Stanley L. Engerman have claimed that all labour relations exist along a continuum of coercion, thus making any classification of labour into free or unfree arbitrary.¹⁴

Ongoing studies seek to bridge such opposition. In particular, they suggest the opportunity to address simultaneously the distinction and fluidity of free and unfree labour by focusing on specific contexts and connections.¹⁵

These insights have stemmed from distinct sub-fields (slavery studies, historiography of convict transportation, etc.), and they have long developed in mutual isolation. Starting from the early 2000s, however, global labour history has offered a common ground for discussion and further theoretical elaboration.¹⁶ Indeed, global labour historians have systematically expanded the chronology of labour history back to 1500 and have suggested the opportunity to include structurally ancient and medieval labour historians in the conversation.¹⁷ Moreover, they have pointed to the need to reconceptualise the working class as such, beyond its standard conflation with wage labour. Concepts like ‘subaltern workers’ and ‘labouring poor’ have thus been proposed to include the multifaceted worlds of (free and unfree) labour.¹⁸

New research networks and collaborations

The emergence of global labour history has also been linked with a renewed impulse to build infrastructures and networks among labour historians around the world. The International Institute of Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, has been, and remains, a fundamental hub of the Global Labour History Network (GLHN), now together with Re:work in Berlin, Germany. The Labour Network of the European Social Sciences History Conference (ESSHC) has provided and continues to provide a key platform for the development of these trends. However, the new life of labour history has generated the need for much more diffused networks. Many national associations have been formed, including the Association of Indian Labour Historians (AILH), the working group *Mundos do Trabalho* within the Brazilian *Associação Nacional de História* (ANPUH), the more recent *Società Italiana di Storia del Lavoro* (SISLav) in Italy and *Association française pour l’histoire des mondes du travail* (AFHMT), in France. New infrastructures have also emerged that connect scholars beyond national borders, most importantly the European Labour History Network (ELHN) and the GLHN. International conferences on global labour history have been held in Brazil, India, Pakistan, Senegal and South Korea. Additionally, old networks have re-emerged. In 2016, after an eleven-year-long pause, the labour history research and archival centres of the Nordic countries once again joined forces to organise a Nordic labour history conference.

Within all these initiatives, the issue of free and unfree labour plays a key role, both as a specific topic and as a perspective to look at labour history at large. A lively ‘Free and Unfree Labour’ working group exists within the ELHN, including about seventy scholars based in Europe and beyond, and addressing related topics from antiquity to the present across all continents.¹⁹ The group has convened several panels in major European conferences – including the session ‘Nordic States and Free/Unfree Labour’, held at the XIV Nordic Labour History Conference in Reykjavik in 2016 – and is increasingly involved in networks with scholars outside Europe. Its members are also actively involved in conferences worldwide, as in the case of a double session on free and unfree labour recently held in La Paz, Bolivia, within the Latin American and Caribbean Conference *Trabajo y Trabajadores: Pasado y*

Presente 1500–2010.

Furthermore, the working group has inspired new research collaborations. One such example is the interdisciplinary research initiation project '*Fritt och ofritt arbete: historiska och samtida perspektiv*' ('*Free and unfree labour: historical and contemporary perspectives*') at Stockholm University, Sweden, which seeks to develop and strengthen research collaboration across the university faculties within the field of free/unfree labour and as part of this seek funding from external funding agencies for joint projects.²⁰

The state and unfree labour

While the research initiation project mentioned above is the first of its kind, it must be noted that unfree labour of various degrees has been the empirical focus of numerous research projects in Sweden for quite some time.²¹ Much of the previous literature within this field has revolved around the role of the state in constructing (including defining), supporting, recruiting and managing unfree labour relations. The role of the state was also an area of commonality for the three sessions dealing with free/unfree labour at the Nordic Labour History Conference in 2016.

Therefore, the role of the state is also a key aspect in the four papers of this special issue of *Arbetarhistoria*, of which earlier versions were presented and discussed at the conference. Together, these papers address different kinds of unfree labour relations in preindustrial Denmark, Norway and Iceland, with external outlook to other nations, in particular, Sweden.²² In the first article '*Straffearbejdere i Danmark–Norge, 1600–1850*' (Convict Labourers in Denmark-Norway, 1600–1850), Johan Lund Heinsen explores the convict labour system in the Union of Denmark-Norway and the people who were subject to it. Before the introduction of the modern prison system in the Nordic countries, it was a common practice that people who committed crimes were sentenced to hard labour. Penalties of this kind had, on one hand, punitive and repressive purposes and, on the other hand, economic purposes – for the state. The latter is true because it offered a solution to the labour shortage that arose as a result of the state's expansion within and outside the country's borders. This labour shortage included, not the least, laborers for and within the armed forces. According to Lund, the coerced labour of prisoners was, in fact, an integral part of the state's military labour force.

Yet another example of how unfree labour was integrated into a state's labour force is accounted for in the paper by Finn Erhard Johannessen; '*Pliktarbeid i Norge ca. 1600–1860*' ('Duty labour in Norway, approx. 1600–1860'). In preindustrial Norway, conscript soldiers amongst the peasantry were given various non-military tasks, including the transport of freight and passengers, roadwork and post delivery. It is the latter, the delivery of post, that is at the centre of Johannessen's article, in which he investigates the conditions, developments and challenges of this coerced labour system of 'postal farmers' over a period of just above 250 years. The elimination of the system is explained based on the link between military personnel needs and the expansion of postal services in the mid-1800s.

Hanne Østhus' article also centres on the so-called duty labour system (in Norwegian and Swedish: *tjensteplikt/tjänsteplikt*). In 'Tvunget til tjeneste?' (Forced into farm service?), Østhus explores the duty labour system in Denmark-Norway during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Working as a domestic servant at a farm or a croft – in exchange for food and shelter and modest financial compensation – was very common amongst young unmarried women and men in preindustrial Europe. In the case of Denmark-Norway, however, the large supply of domestic workers was largely due to legislation which compelled large sections of the population to take on this kind of work or risk being sent to a house of correction, 'tukthus' (a type of disciplinary and punitive workplace that was common in Northern Europe at this time). Consequently, the labour relationship of farm service was characterised by coercion and the threat of repression.

In the three cases explored in the contributions mentioned above, the state played a key role in creating a supply of unfree workers through the 'labour duty' system. This aspect is also touched upon in the fourth and final paper of this special issue, Vilhelm Vilhelmson's 'Ett normalt undantag' ('A normal exception'). Here, the contemporaneous labour duty system constitutes an important contextual factor, as well as the opposite, casual workforce system, whose legislation and practices are explored in the article. Casual labour was prohibited in Iceland from the 1780s until the second half of the 1800s, as it was considered a social problem – and demoralising. While this ban was in place, there was also a very high demand for seasonal workers, not the least in the agricultural and fishing industries. This led to recurring violations of the law. According to Vilhelmson, the prohibited casual labour even became a cultural norm within some parts of the labour market and may, hence, be understood as a 'normal exception'. He hereby also shows how the labour duty system to some extent was maintained by the fact that the labour market's needs for seasonal workers could be met through the illegal casual workforce. This, in turn, illustrates the often complex relationship between free and unfree labour as well as the new insights that can be generated by studying how these two forms of labour relate.

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We hope that this special issue will create interest in matters of free and unfree labour – in history and the present day – and inspire students and scholars to further research within the field.

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² Ikea, 'Utredning om IKEA koncernens inkösrutiner i före detta Östtyskland (DDR) är nu slutförd', Nov. 16, 2012, http://www.ikea.com/se/sv/about_ikea/newsitem/2012_IKEA_kommenterar_ddr_undersokning (retrieved April 10, 2017). See also e.g. Tobias Wunschik, *Knastware für den Klassenfeind:*

Häftlingsarbeit in der DDR, der Ost-West-Handel und die Staatssicherheit (1970–1989), Göttingen 2014.

³ On prison labour historically and globally, see Christian G. De Vito and Alexander C. Lichtenstein (Eds.), *Global Convict Labour*, Leiden 2015. For Sweden, see e.g. Roddy Nilsson, *En välbyggd maskin, en mardröm för själen: det svenska fängelsesystemet under 1800-talet*, Lund 1999, pp. 295–304. See also Johan Lund Heinsen's contribution in this issue of *Arbetshistoria* and e.g. Roddy Nilsson, *En välbyggd maskin, en mardröm för själen: det svenska fängelsesystemet under 1800-talet*, Lund 1999, pp. 295–304.

⁴ See e.g. Marcel van der Linden, *Dissecting Coerced Labour*, in Marcel van der Linden and Magaly Rodriguez Garcia (Eds.), *On Coerced Labor: Work and Compulsion after Chattel Slavery*, Leiden 2016. See also the editors' introduction in the same book.

⁵ Charles Region Woolfson, Christer Thörnqvist and Petra Herzfeld Olsson, *Forced Labour in Sweden? The Case of Migrant Berry Pickers. A Report to the Council of Baltic Sea States Task Force on Trafficking in Human Beings: Forced Labour Exploitation and Counter Trafficking in the Baltic Sea*. Linköping 2011. See also Madeleine Eriksson and Aina Tollefsen, 'New Figurations of Labor in Gendered Global Circuits: Migrant Workers in the Forest Berry Industry in Norrland, Sweden', in Stine Thidemann Faber and Helene Pristed Nielsen (Eds.), *Remapping Gender, Place and Mobility: Global Confluences and Local Particularities in Nordic Peripheries*, Farnham, Surrey, 2015, pp. 127–142; Walter Kegö and Erik Leijonmarck, *Slavarbete i vår tid: utnyttjande av estnisk och lettisk arbetskraft i Sverige*, Stockholm 2010.

⁶ For a critical assessment of international regulations, see Magalay Rodriguez Garcia, 'On the Legal Boundaries of Coerced Labor', Marcel van der Linden and Magaly Rodriguez Garcia (Eds.) *On Coerced Labor: Work and Compulsion after Chattel Slavery*, Leiden 2016.

⁷ International Labour Organization (ILO), Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention, 1930, http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:P029 (retrieved April 28, 2017). Sweden ratified the protocol on May 4, 2017. Sveriges Riksdag, '2014 års protokoll och rekommendation till ILO:s konvention om tvångsarbete' https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/arende/betankande/2014-ars-protokoll-och-rekommendation-till-ilos_H401AU12 (retrieved May 5, 2017).

⁸ Marcel van der Linden and Magaly Rodriguez Garcia, 'Introduction', In Marcel van der Linden and Magaly Rodriguez Garcia (Eds.), *On Coerced Labor: Work and Compulsion after Chattel Slavery*, Leiden 2016, p. 1.

⁹ See e.g. Mary Hilson, Silke Neunsinger, Iben Vyff and Ragnheidur Kristjánsdóttir, 'Labour, Unions and Politics in the Nordic Countries, c. 1700–2000', In Mary Hilson, Silke Neunsinger and Iben Vyff (Eds.) *Labour, Unions and Politics under the North Star: The Nordic Countries, 1700–2000*, New York and Oxford, 2017.

¹⁰ See for example: Gwyn Campbell/Alessandro Stanziani (Eds.), *Bonded Labour and Debt in the Indian Ocean World*, London, Pickering and Chatto, 2013; Arjan Zuiderhoek, 'Workers of the Ancient World: Analysing Labour in Classical Antiquity', *Workers of the World*, 1, 3, 2013, pp. 32–48; Alessandro Stanziani, *Bondage. Labor and Rights in Eurasia from the Sixteenth to the Early Twentieth Centuries*, New York/Oxford 2014; Piotr Steinkeller/Michael Hudson (Eds.), *Labor in the Ancient World*, Islet Verlag, Dresden, 2015; Tom Brass, *Labor Regime Change in the Twenty-First Century. Unfreedom, Capitalism, and Primitive Accumulation*, Chicago 2013.

¹¹ See especially Tom Brass, 'Introduction: Free and Unfree Labour. The Debate Continues', in: Tom Brass and Marcel van der Linden, *Free and Unfree Labour: The Debate Continues*, Bern et al., Peter Lang, 1997, pp. 11–42. The first study on the relationship between slavery and capitalism was: Eric Williams, *Capitalism & Slavery*, Chapel Hill 1944.

¹² See especially: Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays toward a Global Labor History*, Leiden/Boston 2008.

¹³ Brass and van der Linden, 1997.

¹⁴ Robert J. Steinfield/Stanley L. Engerman, 'Labor – free and coerced? A historical reassessment of differences and similarities', in Brass/van der Linden, *Free and Unfree Labour*, pp. 107–126, here pp. 107; 114.

¹⁵ Christian G. De Vito, Juliane Schiel and Matthias van Rossum, 'Free and Unfree Labour: Labour History Revisited', forthcoming.

¹⁶ Key publications include: Jan Lucassen (ed.), *Global Labour History: A State of the Art*, Bern et al., P. Lang, 2008; van der Linden, *Workers of the World*; Marcel van der Linden/Leo Lucassen (eds.), *Working on Labor: Essays in Honor of Jan Lucassen*, Leiden/Boston, Brill, 2012; Andreas Eckert (ed.), *Global Histories of Work*, Berlin/Boston, De Gruyter, 2016.

¹⁷ For an overview: Christian G. De Vito, 'New Perspectives on Global Labour History. Introduction', *Workers of the World*, 1, 3 (May 2013), pp. 7–29.

¹⁸ For the most recent contribution to this debate: Marcel van der Linden and Karl Heinz Roth (eds.), *Beyond Marx. Theorising the Global Labour Relations of the Twenty First Century*, Chicago, Haymarket, 2014.

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²⁰ The project also strives to strengthen this field of research on the national level and has, therefore, also organised conference sessions on free/unfree labour at the Swedish History Conference (May 2017) and the Swedish Economic History Conference (October 2017). The project is led by economic historian Yvonne Svanström and is funded by the Academic Area of Human Science at Stockholm University, as part of its **strategic support of cross-faculty research**.

²¹ For some, amongst many examples, see: Johan Edman, 'Lösdrivarlagen och den samhällsfarliga lättjan' in Hans Swärd and Marie-Anne Egerö (Eds.), *Villkorandets politik: Fattigdomens premisser och samhällets åtgärder – då och nu*, Malmö 2008; Denis Frank, *Staten, företagen och arbetskraftsinvandringen: en studie av invandringsspolitiken i Sverige och rekryteringen av utländska arbetare 1960–1972*, Växjö 2005; Görel Granström, *Värnpliktsvägran: en rättshistorisk studie av samvetsfrihetens gränser i den rättspolitiska debatten 1898–1925*. Uppsala 2002; Börje Harnesk, *Legofolk: drängar, pigor och bönder i 1700-och 1800-talens Sverige*, Umeå, 1990; Theresa Johnsson, *Vårt fredliga samhälle: 'lösdriveri' och försvarslöshet i Sverige under 1830-talet*, Uppsala 2016; Roddy Nilsson, *En välbyggd maskin, en mardröm för själen: det svenska fängelsesystemet under 1800-talet*, Lund 1999; Birgit Petersson, 'Den farliga underklassen': studier i fattigdom och brottslighet i 1800-talens Sverige, Umeå 1983; Yvonne Svanström, 'Prostitution as Vagrancy. Sweden 1923–1964', *Scandinavian Journal of Criminology and Crime Prevention*, 7:2 2006. For currently ongoing research within this field, see for example Gustav Nyberg's dissertation project on the pre-union struggle of the Swedish *statare* (contract workers in agriculture).

²² In this context, we would like to take the opportunity to thank Carolina Uppenberg for constructive comments of the paper by Hanne Østhus, Frank Meyer and Finn Erhard Johannessen for Norwegian proofreading, and Anette Eklund Hansen for Danish proofreading.