

BENEDETTA RINALDI FERRI*

ALESSANDRO STANZIANI,
LES MÉTAMORPHOSES DU TRAVAIL CONTRAINT.
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Is Capitalism compatible with slavery, servitude, and, to a broader extent, with forced labour? Is it true that it arose out of the cinders of a “world of coercion” and servile statuses – the so called *Ancien Régime* – preparing the stage for wage labour, formal equality and free negotiations? By addressing these issues, Alessandro Stanziani provides us with a framework to understand labour history in early capitalist regimes (18th-19th). The leading assumption of the book is that early Capitalism was somewhat comfortable with forced or compulsory labour, contrary to a traditional thesis – generally referred by Stanziani to Smith, Marx, and Weber – linking the emergence of wage labour and the generalization of labour contract to the rise of capitalist economies (pp. 7-8, 306-307). The author suggests that “Capitalism does not define itself by the advent of wage labour,” but “through the coexistence of free labour and forced labour – being perfectly at ease with the latter – with multiple gradations between the two”¹ (p. 7). Such a position entails a number of historiographical consequences, the first

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¹ Translated by the author. In French: “Le capitalisme ne se définit donc pas par l’avènement du travail salarié – la privatisation des terres communes entraînant la prolétarianisation des paysans, thèse commune aux libéraux et aux marxistes – mais plutôt par la coexistence du travail libre et du travail forcé – dont il s’accommode parfaitement – avec de multiples gradations entre les deux”.

being, of course, a deeper understanding of the very interplay between free and unfree labour in late-modern regimes.

Stanziani frames his research in a global context, starting from a biographical-literary event, that is the birth of Joseph Conrad (1857) and his traveling life, from the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean, till the “Heart of Darkness” (Congo). As the author immediately clarifies, though, the book does not recount the history of the Polish writer, “but that of labourers and servants whom he mixed with”² (p. 7): from the peasants of the Russian Empire to the wage labourers and the seamen who ploughed the oceans between the 18th and the 19th century.

The first chapter of the book, significantly titled *Le miroir russe* (Russian Mirror), addresses the case of Russian serfs between the second half of the 18th century and the abolition of serfdom of 1861. The author provides an exhaustive analysis of the emancipatory strategies enacted by landlords, serfs and public authorities – e.g. military conscription, which entailed a complete liberation of the enrolled soldier. The Russian dynamics are framed in a broad European perspective: it is in Russia that the Bentham brothers, the liberal Jeremy and his brother Samuel, conceived the *Panopticon*, that is the project of a prison designed to deal with the lack of discipline of some English workers which Samuel Bentham called to work on the properties of a Russian prince, Grigori Potemkine, in Kritchev. Moreover, it is through Russia that Stanziani can seize the role of labour coercion in global market dynamics. Because of the increase in wheat demand, both international and domestic, Russian landowners tried to increase their productivity with a surplus of coercion, requiring heavier performances on their serfs. The result was a consistent efficiency gain, not a loss.

With a slightly longer chronology (18th-19th century), the second chapter covers an intrinsic global category of labourers: the sailors of British Navy, enrolled through the press system, and the French *marins*, who in contrast to their English counterparts, enjoyed some welfare benefits. The growth of national fleets and maritime routes between the 18th and the 19th century enables the author to question the status of sailors

² From French: “Ce livre ne raconte pas l’histoire de Conrad – d’innombrables ouvrages sont disponibles sur sa vie – mais celles des travailleurs et des asservis qu’il a côtoyés”.

on board, depending upon their origin, and the legal settlements applied to them. Towards the end of the 19th century, the more liberties national sailors gained, the more governments tended to displace “the exercise of coercion towards the global market of sailors”³ (p. 96), that is colonies and foreign harbors.

The third chapter underlines the prominent role of constraint in the making of English and French labour markets. Going back chronologically, the analysis starts in England, from the *Master and Servant Acts* and the *poor laws* (14th-16th century) – the very cornerstones of labour relationships in the United Kingdom until the second half of the 19th century – ending with French legal evolution of labour regimes (18th-19th century).

These subjects are well known by historians. The novel argument of the book is their understanding in the long run and in a wider geography. Stanziani outlines that, by the end of the 19th century, improvements of working conditions in European countries had no equivalent in colonial world. Actually, they could even prompt a deterioration in the latter.

Chapters from four to seven introduce the issue. Significant attention is devoted to the French case: the Mascareignes and, for the early beginnings of the 20th century, French Equatorial Africa (AEF). By the second half of the 19th century, European countries faced the rise of abolitionist movements. However, the new conscience extended to African and Asian dominions in very ambivalent ways. In 1887 the *Code de l'Indigénat* for AEF, for instance, established penal sanctions for the breach of a labour contract by the worker and for vagrancy, a criminal notion applied to unemployment. A somewhat similar dynamic was observed in the United States, between white and black workers from the abolition of American slavery in 1865 onwards.

The sixth chapter simultaneously addresses the abolition of serfdom in Russia (1861) and that of slavery in American plantations (1865). Stanziani suggests that American abolition had a somehow paradoxical impact on the global market of cotton, and thus on labour relationships, especially amid emerging producers: Turkestan, for

³ From French: “Le passage de la dépendance extrême, proche de l’esclavage, à la sécurité sociale se fait en déplaçant l’exercice de la coercition vers le marché global des marins”.

instance, Egypt, which started to import Sub-Saharan slaves and Circassian from the Russian Empire, India – where the unabolished *Masters and Servants Acts* were applied with increasing rigour. A global framework is about to surface. “The end of serfdom in Russia and that of slavery in the United States,” Stanziani concludes, “prompts a global process of transformation which is definitely to shape a fundamental asymmetry concerning rights and labour between the West on the one hand and its colonies and the USSR on the other”⁴ (p. 251).

Indeed, *Les métamorphoses du travail contraint* is not a book on compulsory labour nor on its legal structures, but it focuses rather on its dynamics embracing a large sample of labour or exploitative relationships – serfdom, slavery, indenture, *engagisme*, *domesticité*, maritime work, etc. – without applying rigid distinctions between these categories. As Maria Luisa Pesante pointed out: “we should not translate the *travail contraint* of Stanziani with compulsory labour, but, as he made clear himself, with the more appropriate *constraint to work*.”⁵ Stanziani analyses constraint from a historical-economic perspective. While his global approach necessarily leads to some generalisations, it also encourages verification and in-depth analysis by legal historians and comparative jurists.

⁴ From French: “Pour autant, après les abolitions en France et au Royaume-Uni et la dislocation des empires centraux en Europe, la fin du servage en Russie et de l’esclavage aux États-Unis déclenche un processus global de transformation qui, lui, créera une asymétrie fondamentale en matière de droits et de travail entre “l’Occident”, d’une part, ses colonies et l’URSS d’autre part”.

⁵ Società Italiana di Storia del Lavoro: Discussioni 6 <storialavoro.it>.
