This article presents an analysis of slave labour (as it is known in Brazil) among sugar cane workers within a globalising production network. It employs the Global Production Network (GPN) framework to argue that the dynamics of production networks are fundamental to the reproduction of unfree and degrading labour in this case. First, the power exercised by buyers is a key aspect of processes resulting in slave labour. Conversely, efforts to combat slave labour have been strengthened by acknowledging and working through this power. Second, the state exercises governance within the production network rather than only providing its institutional context. Beyond these dynamics, however, wider processes are involved in making labour available on particular terms and conditions. Third, then, processes of racialisation facilitate the imposition of restrictions on workers' mobility, degrading conditions and intensification of work. Labour is, in other words, devalued. This implies that the ways in which competing judgments over value are resolved merit as much attention in GPN analysis as is currently given to the creation, enhancement and capture of value.
governance dynamics within this network, considering the central-
ity of the state as an actor within it. This section also considers the
processes through which labour is devalued within this production
network. Finally, it explores how efforts to combat slave labour in
Brazil have been strengthened through their impact on production
network dynamics. Section 6 offers concluding thoughts.

2. Unfree labour and capital

The task of analysing unfree labour is necessarily entangled
with its definition. Debates over whether and how to draw a line
between free and unfree labour are thus longstanding. Here I com-
ment on how the topic has been treated in different schools of
thought, emphasising Marxian analysis, and then link this to GPNs.

Some of the most recent work on this topic comes from the
wave of literature on ‘new slavery,’ marked by the 1999 publica-
tion of Disposable People by Bales. Bales’ work has brought atten-
tion to the issue and influenced subsequent academic and policy
work. It has therefore generated substantial criticism, for: avoiding
fundamental questions about capitalism; failing to adequately
acknowledge the role of the state in constraining the mobility
and agency of workers; and denying the agency of migrant and
other workers (Anderson, 2008; O’Connell Davidson, 2010). An as-
pption of Bales’ work which I wish to challenge more forcefully in
this article is the assertion that ‘in the new slavery race means lit-
tle’ (1999, p. 10) and workers’ ‘caste or religion simply reflects their
vulnerability; it doesn’t cause it … the key difference is not racial,
but economic’ (1999, p. 11).

Quantitative analytical tools have been used in some studies of
forced labour (e.g., Busse and Braun, 2002; Belser, 2005; ILO, 2009).
But wider calls to ‘bring in the economists and business analysts’
(Bales, 2005, p. 108) may be misguided. Economic theory is ill
equipped to deal with unfree labour due to its epistemological
of the few serious attempts to address the persistence of unfree la-
bour within neoclassical economics come from the New Institu-
tional Economics school (e.g., Genicot, 2002; Basu, 2005). These,
however, tend to view unfree labour as indicating abnormality or
complexity in the labour market which differentiates it from ‘nor-
mal’ markets. The concept of a normal market as characterised by
free choice rather than power asymmetry and exploitation is thus
preserved.

The central problematic within Marxian approaches is how to
reconcile the apparent persistence of unfree labour in a world
increasingly governed by the rules of capitalism – when the latter
is understood as largely defined by free labour. Marxian political
economy has therefore, in contrast to mainstream economics, ana-
lysed contemporary forms of unfree labour more substantially (Da
Corta, 2008). While labour geography has been critiqued for a lack
of attention to unfree labour (Strauss, 2012) there is some impor-
tant work by geographers on contemporary forms of unfree labour,
often overlapping with and drawing upon Marxian political eco-
nomy (e.g., Manzo, 2005; Rogaly, 2008).

Marx’s concept of free labour involves a double freedom. The
first, forceful separation from the means of production, is not a
freedom at all but actually a compulsion. The second is the free-
dom to choose among potential buyers of one’s labour power. So
the choice is always a partial freedom, structured by compulsion.
This apparent freedom serves to mask the underlying compulsion,
a compulsion resulting from being ‘freed’ from – losing access to –
the means of production.

Drawing on Marxian work, I characterise unfree labour relations
as those where compulsion goes beyond separation from the
means of production to significantly restrict either workers’ choice
about whether to work (e.g., if they are legally compelled to work)

or their economic mobility (e.g., if they cannot change employers).
This is in line with Brass’ definition of unfree labour which centres
on the inability of workers to personally commodify their labour
power (1999, p. 28). Applying such a category is always debatable
(see O’Connell Davidson, 2010; Lerche, 2007; Rogaly, 2008; Guérin
et al., 2009). I explore the conceptualisation of slave labour (and its
relation to forced1 or unfree labour) in this regard more fully else-
where (Author, forthcoming). Below, I show that the cases of slave
labour in sugar cane, as defined by labour inspectros, do involve un-
free labour relations as well as degrading conditions.

Perhaps the most prevalent way within Marxian thought to re-
solve the contradiction of unfree labour’s persistence has been
through the notion of primitive accumulation. Marx saw the ‘pre-
history’ of capitalism involving the emancipation of ‘slaves, serfs
and bondsmen’ along with their expropriation from the means of
production (i.e., double freedom). Analysed by Marx in a particular
historical circumstance (1996, pp. 704–707), many see this as an
ongoing process in which capitalism continues to expand by sub-
jecting new population groups to expropriation and unfree labour
as an initial stage of proletarianisation (see, for example: Black-
burn, 1997).

Extended primitive accumulation has been applied to explain
slave labour in the Brazilian context. De Souza Martins (2002), for example, addresses the history of the agrarian question
(from the 1850 land bill through the ‘opening and closing’ of the
Amazonian frontier) as a series of measures meant to ‘stimulate
a process of primitive accumulation.’ This is associated with
diverse systems of unfree labour (e.g., the colonato system,
labour-rent, and debt bondage) differing by region, time period,
and product. Sakamoto, following Luxemburg and De Souza
Martins, makes a case for understanding slave labour as extended
primitive accumulation due to its association with capitalist
expansion into the Amazon (Sakamoto 2007a).2 Finally, de Moraes
 cane workers in Brazil have been ‘expelled’ from the land in
processes of primitive accumulation.

The prevailing understanding of extended primitive accumula-
tion is nonetheless that non-capitalist relations are eradicated in
the process of their use by capital. As most powerfully pointed
out by Brass (1999), however, there are numerous instances in
which unfree labour relations appear to be reproduced through
being linked to capital, and in ways that are productive for the
latter. Brass’ elaboration of deproletarianisation was set against the
semi-feudalist thesis which (seemed to) suggest that semi-feudal-
ism would inevitably give way to capitalism and thus to free wage
labour. By contrast, Brass demonstrates that capitalist class strug-
gle may result in ‘workforce restructuring by means of introduc-
ing or reintroducing unfree relations’ (1997, p. 71). In this process of
deproletarianisation, workers face a ‘double dispossession.’ They
are not only ‘freed’ from the means of production, but further freed of
the ‘means of commodifying labour power itself’ (1997, p. 61) so
that this labour is either ‘de commodified’ (in the case of wage
workers) or (in the case of peasants) ‘re commodified by someone
other than its owner’ (1999, p. 4). In addition to being introduced as
part of class struggle (or eradicated by capitalism), existing forms of unfree labour may instead be transformed by the expan-
sion of capitalist relations, as shown by the literature on ‘neo-
bondage’ (e.g., Breman, 1996; De Neve, 1999; Guérin et al., 2009).

According to Miles (1987), primitive accumulation is only one

1 Forced labour has been defined in ILO Convention No. 29 (1930), subject to
further interpretation. (Belser 2005, pp. 2–3). Both in the UN Protocol on the issue and
in the Brazilian context, trafficking often highlights the abuse of migrants’ vulnera-
bility but also (somewhat problematically) emphasises sexual exploitation.

2 He further notes that capitalism might expand to new ‘situations’ as well as new
regions.
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