



Fuelling global production networks with *slave labour*?: Migrant sugar cane workers in the Brazilian ethanol GPN

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 20 July 2012

Keywords:

Global Production Networks
Forced labour
Contemporary slavery
Unfree labour
Degrading work
Bio-fuels

ABSTRACT

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.

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1. Introduction

This article presents an analysis of *slave labour* among sugar cane workers within a (globalising) production network. By slave labour, I refer to cases in which labour inspectors in Brazil judged conditions to be degrading and employment relations to involve a significant element of unfreedom. Subjecting these judgments to scrutiny for a number of cases, I find that these were in fact characterised by unfree labour relations.

With an estimated 12.3 million workers in some form of forced labour worldwide (ILO, 2005), many consider efforts to combat slave labour in Brazil as a model for other countries seeking to tackle the problem (Costa, 2009). In recent years, those liberated from slave labour (i.e., removed from their places of employment as a result of labour inspections) have increasingly been sugar cane workers. In 2007, there were 2947 sugar cane workers liberated from slave labour in Brazil (and 2553 in 2008). This represented about half of the total number of workers liberated (Thenório, 2008; Reimberg, 2009).

During this period, there was healthy growth in what has been termed the Sugar Cane Agro-Industrial Complex or CAC (Alves, 2007). This was driven largely by ethanol, as discussed in Section 5.1. I therefore focus on the ethanol production network within the broader CAC. The existence of slave labour in this

scenario of growth is problematic. To understand why slave labour exists, the relations among actors involved in production must be examined. This article thus employs the Global Production Network (GPN) framework to argue that the dynamics of production networks are fundamental to the reproduction of slave 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 is a central actor within this production network rather than just providing an institutional context for it (Bridge, 2008; Rutherford and Holmes, 2008) through policy setting. The dynamics among firms, the state and other non-state actors, however, does not explain the wider processes through which labour is made 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, de-valued.

Section 2 offers a brief review of approaches to analysing unfree labour, particularly in relation to capitalism. Some comments on how the GPN approach can contribute to better understanding the role of slave labour within contemporary forms of capitalist production follow. Section 3 then outlines the case study methodology. Section 4 analyses the concept of slave labour in the Brazilian context and how it relates to the concept of 'unfree labour.' It also explains the place of this labour within the CAC and the ethanol production network. Section 5 analyses the

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governance dynamics within this network, considering the centrality 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 comment 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 publication of *Disposable People* by Bales. Bales' work has brought attention 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 aspect of Bales' work which I wish to challenge more forcefully in this article is the assertion that 'in the new slavery race means little' (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 foundations (Brass, 1999, pp. 146–147; Hart, 1986, p. 186). Some of the few serious attempts to address the persistence of unfree labour within neoclassical economics come from the New Institutional 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 'normal' 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, analysed contemporary forms of unfree labour more substantially (Da Costa, 2008). While labour geography has been critiqued for a lack of attention to unfree labour (Strauss, 2012) there is some important work by geographers on contemporary forms of unfree labour, often overlapping with and drawing upon Marxian political economy (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 freedom 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 elsewhere (Author, forthcoming). Below, I show that the cases of slave labour in sugar cane, as defined by labour inspectors, do involve unfree labour relations as well as degrading conditions.

Perhaps the most prevalent way within Marxian thought to resolve 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 subjecting new population groups to expropriation and unfree labour as an initial stage of proletarianisation (see, for example: Blackburn, 1997).

Extended primitive accumulation has been applied to explaining 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 Silva (1999) and Alves (2007, pp. 47–48) argue that migrant sugar cane workers in Brazil have been 'expelled' from the land in processes of primitive accumulation.

The prevailing understanding of extended primitive accumulation 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-feudalism would inevitably give way to capitalism and thus to free wage labour. By contrast, Brass demonstrates that capitalist class struggle may result in 'workforce restructuring by means of introducing 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 'decommodified' (in the case of wage workers) or (in the case of peasants) 'recommodified 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 expansion of capitalist relations, as shown by the literature on 'neobondage' (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' vulnerability 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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