



BRILL

JOURNAL OF GLOBAL SLAVERY 2 (2017) 185–194

Journal of  
Global Slavery  
brill.com/jgs

# Freedom under Scrutiny

## *Epilogue*

*Benedetta Rossi*

University of Birmingham, UK

*b.rossi@bham.ac.uk*

The objective of this special issue is to decenter discussions around freedom by focusing on “freedom from below, i.e. from the perspective of those who have lost their freedom and struggled ... to regain it.”<sup>1</sup> It brings together seven contributions that portray the struggles of enslaved and unfree persons in different places and moments in time. Together, these articles show that the strugglers do not share the same perspectives, aspirations, and strategies. Responses to oppression are fragmented and diverse. They range from accepting unfreedom while negotiating for better treatment; to trying to move away from sites of unfreedom and seeking opportunities elsewhere; to openly voicing resistance. Perhaps paradoxically, what brings these articles together is the spread of an abolitionist discourse that made available a particular way of imagining and pursuing freedom. Abolitionist freedom—the freedom that Alice Bellagamba sets out to deconstruct—runs across all of the contributions and exposes the singularity of myriads of individual projects of freedom “from below.”

That the aspirations of dominated and unfree persons do not coalesce into a unified, visible, and public political agenda is a corollary of their powerlessness. Their visions of freedom, whatever they may be, do not shape policy. John Christman is correct when he points out that “standard notions of freedom in the liberal democratic tradition have been defined to describe the condition of those who enjoy it, and have not paid sufficient attention to the aspirations of those to whom it is denied.”<sup>2</sup> This, however, is not by chance. If a positive

---

1 Quote from the original call for papers for the international workshop *Freedom: Bondage, Future and Selves in Central Asia, the Middle East and Africa*, organized by Alice Bellagamba on 17–18 Sept. 2015 at the University of Milan-Bicocca.

2 John Christman, “Analyzing Freedom from the Shadows of Slavery,” in Alice Bellagamba, ed., “Freedom from Below: Enslavement, Bondage and Emancipation in Comparative Perspective,” special issue of the *Journal of Global Slavery* 2, no. 1 (Apr. 2017): 164.

account of freedom were to reveal the aspirations of the unfree, then what? Would their aspirations be prioritized over the interests of those who benefit from their exploitation? Who would be responsible for enabling the realization of the aspirations of the oppressed?

Those who benefit from the oppression, vulnerability, or subservience of others are not only small groups of slavers lurking in the shadows of illegality. Global capitalism, with all its advantages for consumers worldwide (such as the affordability of its products), yields a continuous demand for exploitable workers. Employers threatened by competition cut costs by employing vulnerable workers who accept low wages and poor working conditions. Governments, sensitive to the priorities of national economic elites and voting working classes, surely *do not* act as champions of the rights of immigrant workers.

Unsurprisingly, the political language of slavery and freedom reflects these hierarchies. Abolitionist concepts of freedom have always been compatible with the interests of the political and economic elites. The most marginalized persons—those enslaved or facing the threat of enslavement—sometimes seek the support of abolitionist nations and institutions. A precondition for the provision of such support is that the vulnerable subscribe to dominant views of freedom.

### Freedom, Language, and Power

The unfree subjects described in contributions to this special issue are undeniably trying to improve their circumstances, but they are often concerned more with safety from violence and economic stability than with “freedom.” It may be possible to argue that achieving safety or wealth corresponds to being or becoming free. But this conclusion begs the question of what “becoming free” means in particular linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic contexts. Alice Belagamba and Elena Smolarz, whose articles explore vernacular notions of freedom, highlight semantic variation: notions of liberty vary across and within cultures. More importantly, unfree subjects do not mobilize autonomously behind shared agendas informed by concepts of liberty that they have defined. Doing so would require questioning the categories that classify them as slaves, slave descendants, clients, or refugees; dominated individuals “cannot constitute themselves as a separate group, mobilize themselves, or mobilize their potential power unless they question the categories of perception of the social order.”<sup>3</sup>

---

3 Pierre Bourdieu, “Description and Prescription: The Conditions of Possibility and the Limits

As clearly demonstrated by Benjamin Lawrance's article, vulnerable individuals are forced by their own powerlessness to reproduce dominant definitions and technologies of freedom "from above." In order to retain a modicum of control over their lives they must produce "unfreedom papers," that is, documents recognized as proof of unfreedom by institutions that set the standards of freedom and unfreedom. Access to the security provided by the dominant political apparatus is granted only to those who accept categories that define them as unfree and simultaneously characterize the apparatus as liberating. In this process, those (self-)designated as liberators accrue moral capital.<sup>4</sup>

There is no guarantee that abolitionist institutions will "liberate" those who have lost, or risk losing, their freedom. But they make available particular options to persons and groups willing to accept their rationales. In these rationales, slavery and freedom are simultaneously descriptive and prescriptive terms.<sup>5</sup> When invoked, they make things happen: they legitimize the moral superiority of those who can act as "liberators" and impose the rescue of those who qualify as "slaves." The authors of what we call our sources use these terms knowingly: activists know that invoking "slavery" has high media shock potential; vulnerable persons, such as Lawrance's African refugees, know that demonstrating their unfreedom in particular ways will entitle them to specific forms of support. Thus claims about slavery and freedom can be seen as formulae that—when uttered in compliance with the required formalities by persons seen as eligible for support—will yield the desired responses by agents acting as liberators.

George Michael La Rue and Elena Smolarz reflect critically on the positionality of the authors of the sources they examine. Their papers illustrate the conventions followed by different types of sources, be they official policy documents, autobiographic accounts, or missionary reports. Smolarz discusses, too, the notions of freedom that were in the minds of those who produced these texts. She shows that we ought to think of these authors not only as protagonists—captives or liberators—of the stories they tell, but also as exegetes. When authors choose to use the terms "slavery" or "freedom," they are

---

of Political Effectiveness," in Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, edited and introduced by John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 127–136, here 131.

4 Christopher Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

5 For an analysis of the relation between description and prescription, see Bourdieu, "Description and Prescription."

expressing a judgment that is always and inevitably perspectival and situated.<sup>6</sup> Their linguistic choices make sense only in relation to their political projects.<sup>7</sup> Texts on slavery and freedom do not simply describe what happens; they call for action. The question, then, is *who calls for action*, what kind of action, why, in what circumstances, and with what consequences for the powerful and the weak.

For about two centuries in Western Europe, naming a practice “slavery” has been tantamount to calling for its repression. The mission to end slavery justified the occupation of the entire African continent. It legitimized the imperial expansion of European empires and the political projects of “enlightened” groups. “The leading intellectuals who did adopt an antislavery posture,” explains Ehud Toledano, “were doing so as part of broader modernist narratives that evolved in the Ottoman capital.”<sup>8</sup> Self-identification as abolitionist was a claim to moral superiority and political legitimacy. The harbingers of freedom are *ipso facto* purveyors of civilization against the “barbarism” of those who practice, or tolerate, “slavery.”

To be sure, there are alternative understandings of freedom and unfreedom. Bellagamba’s article vividly illustrates discourses of freedom in the Kolda region of Senegal, where different Fulfulde notions of freedom co-exist: freedom (*ndimaaku*) as the innate dignity and authority of the elites; freedom (*hehtaare*) as the tranquility that derives from economic autonomy and ability to support oneself and one’s family; and freedom (*hebtugol hoore mun*) as political emancipation from slavery and oppression. Different actors mobilize distinct notions in different circumstances. But Bellagamba does not tell us which notion was used by (ex-)slaves who tried to convince colonial administrators to protect them from the continuing exactions of their masters. Perhaps they used the French word *esclavage* or the vernacular term semantically closest to the French colonial notion of slavery. In any case, they would have used a concept that would trigger the anti-slavery policies of the colonial apparatus and turn abolitionism to their advantage. Like the “unfreedom

6 Michael Lambek, “Introduction,” in Michael Lambek, ed., *Ordinary Ethics: Anthropology, Language, and Action* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 26.

7 I am inspired, here, by the theory of historical exegesis developed by Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias, for example in his *Arabic Medieval Inscriptions from the Republic of Mali* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), lxxi.

8 Ehud R. Toledano, “Enslavement and Freedom in Transition: MENA Societies from Empires to National States,” in Alice Bellagamba, ed., “Freedom from Below: Enslavement, Bondage and Emancipation in Comparative Perspective,” special issue of the *Journal of Global Slavery* 2, no. 1 (Apr. 2017): 111–112.

papers” of Lawrance’s refugees, such strategies endorsed the colonial power to liberate, and afforded some protection to those seeking liberation in these terms.

Oppressed people everywhere are forced to use the representations of dominant classes when they hope to receive support from the latter. In this regard, abolitionism is not unique. In the Kolda region an ex-slave seeking a former master’s patronage would have refrained from accusing his ex-master of being a “slaver,” appealing instead to his generosity as a *dimo* (nobleman) endowed with *ndimaaku* and obliged by the principle of *noblesse oblige*. By mobilizing this alternative discourse—a discourse that confers shame on slaves and honor on slave owners—the *macchudo* or *jÿyaado* (slave, slave descendant) hopes to reap the benefits of subservience in local hierarchies. By adopting the definitions produced by the owners of symbolic capital—that is, those who have the power to name and represent the world<sup>9</sup>—dominated groups reproduce hierarchies: colonial ones, rooted in the abolitionists’ purported higher civilization; or local ones, rooted in the ideas of honor and nobility of the elites.

Similarly, Ali, a Pakistani kiln worker interviewed by Antonio De Lauri, describes his acceptance of the humiliating dependence that ties him to his employer: “I have my job but I don’t earn enough money because I have to pay back the *peshgi* [debt] I requested three years ago. I would like to pay this money back but I can’t. Mr Sami [the owner of the kiln] is free to tell me ‘Ok Ali, you can go’ [Ali laughs], but he will not do it. He is Free. I’m not.”<sup>10</sup> By choosing to continue working for his employer, Ali accepts the terms of the relation. If Ali wished to convince an anti-slavery NGO to champion his cause, he would have to demonstrate that his circumstances meet their required standards of proof. He would have to re-imagine his circumstances in terms commensurable with the discourses of those capable to act as liberators. This would contribute to the entrenchment of a particular vision of freedom, one which supports hierarchies other than the ones that structure relations in the brick kilns. But Ali may see this strategy as too risky; he may doubt his own ability to convince international NGOs (his case may be turned down, like the cases of many of

9 Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 75.

10 Conversation with Ali, 2 November 2015, Rawalpindi, Pakistan, cited in Antonio De Lauri, “The Absence of Freedom: Debt, Bondage and Desire among Pakistani Brick Kiln Workers,” in Alice Bellagamba, ed., “Freedom from Below: Enslavement, Bondage and Emancipation in Comparative Perspective,” special issue of the *Journal of Global Slavery* 2, no. 1 (Apr. 2017): 133.

the refugees described by Lawrance); he may deem his employer too powerful or himself too vulnerable (his employer could take revenge on him or others related to him).

Historically, the “freedom” of imperial abolitionism was added onto the pre-existing discursive repertoire of conquered regions and societies. To be sure, abolitionism did not always bring actual “freedom” to those who lacked it. European imperialists introduced forced labor at the same time that they denounced indigenous “slavery.” Like their Russian counterparts studied by Smolarz, they used different words for the unfreedoms *they* introduced and for local forms of unfreedom, which they characterized as intolerable. The semantic space was fragmented into unfreedoms that were justified in the name of progress, morality, nature, or religion; and indigenous “slavery” was equated with barbarism. A corollary of this is that abolitionism did not end slavery. What, then, did it achieve?

Whatever else it does, abolitionism legitimizes the abolitionist’s claim to moral superiority. The legitimacy of interventions carried out in the name of antislavery is so strong that they are often spared from criticism.<sup>11</sup> An anti-abolitionist stance could turn out to defend the legitimacy of slavery. This is an uncommon position today, but it is not inexistent. For example, in contexts marked by political and legal pluralism, ideologies of honor that confer dignity to slave-owning elites have survived, rejecting the normative penetration of colonial discourses of slavery and freedom. Rationales that see slavery as legitimate continue to reproduce at the margins of the modern state, and survive only inasmuch as they fall below the radar of international neo-abolitionism.<sup>12</sup>

Today we find, too, views that openly declare the legitimacy of slavery, such as those of Islamic State and Boko Haram, which have taken a position of open antagonism *vis à vis* the Western state and its *Weltanschauung* (see Toledano, in this issue). From the perspective of recognized nations, these movements’ positions are incompatible with political legitimacy. They are not only antagonized; they are cast outside the political field. The language used is instructive, as such movements are given a label that denies any form of dialogue or negotiation: “terror.”

---

11 For a parallel argument on the helping professions, see M. Edelman, “The Political Language of the Helping Professions,” *Politics & Society* 4, no. 3 (1974): 295–310.

12 Benedetta Rossi, “African Post-Slavery: A History of the Future,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 48, no. 2 (2015): 303–324.

### The Roots of Unfreedom

The articles in this issue reveal the co-existence of a multiplicity of views of freedom alongside Freedom with a capital “F.” Bellagamba invites us to problematize the latter. Some papers provide glimpses of what happens in spaces where people struggle with unfreedom and try to protect their marginal freedoms: freedoms with a small “f,” freedoms to retain particular capabilities that they value. Such glimpses make us think of Christman’s suggestion that we explore the positive meanings of freedom and find policy solutions that enable the oppressed to pursue “lives that they see as minimally dignified, worthy, and fulfilling.” Such lives should be based on a person’s own “authentic practical identity,” that is, an identity based on “values that are her own as opposed to being inculcated into her by alienating and oppressive social conditions or persons.”<sup>13</sup> This inspiring suggestion raises two sets of issues.

The first set of issues concerns the limits of positive freedom. The fulfilment of an oppressed person’s “authentic practical identity” may involve conditions that could be seen as oppressive for others. For example, in a recent issue of the IS magazine *Dabiq*, the anonymous author defends what he sees as the right of Muslim men to be spared from the temptation to commit the sin of fornication (*zina*) by having access to legitimate sexual relations with an enslaved concubine. The article decries the abolition of slavery as

leading to an increase in *fanishah* (adultery, fornication, etc.) because the *shar’i* alternative to marriage is not available, so a man who cannot afford marriage to a free woman finds himself surrounded by temptation toward sin. In addition, many Muslim families who have hired maids to work at their homes, face the *fitnah* of prohibited *khalwah* (seclusion) and resultant *zina* occurring between the man and the maid, whereas if she were his concubine, this relationship would be legal. This again is from the consequences of abandoning jihad ...<sup>14</sup>

It is not unconceivable that a Muslim migrant who faces oppression in his work would feel that he requires access to a slave concubine in order to pursue a life that he values as free from sin. It is not unconceivable, either, that some women socialized in this particular interpretation of Islam may willingly accept, or even pursue, roles that others would characterize as positions of extreme sub-

---

13 Christman, “Analyzing Freedom,” 182, 180.

14 Anonymous author, “The Revival of Slavery Before the Hour,” *Dabiq* 4 (1435 anno Hijra): 17.

ordination. Pierre Bourdieu did not hesitate to characterize such circumstances as examples of a “tacit agreement between the most inhuman [...] conditions and men [sic] who have been prepared to accept them by inhuman living conditions.”<sup>15</sup> Is Bourdieu disrespecting the authenticity of these persons’ choices by describing them as the outcome of false consciousness? *Who* should set the boundaries of “positive freedom?”

This last question leads to what I see as the second issue raised by Christman’s article: its inattention to the political and economic factors that actively support the resilience of unfreedom. These factors are rooted in the global economic system. Even though, with the exception of De Lauri’s contribution, this special issue does not discuss economic dynamics, the articles are set in contexts marked by the spread of global capitalism. Like the spread of abolitionism, the spread of capitalist logics and behaviors on a global scale constitutes a unifying thread across the articles. Globalized capitalism integrates the logics of economic actors susceptible to the same incentives and deterrents. As Tom Brass has shown, as competition on a global scale drives down profit margins, capitalist producers must cut costs by outsourcing, introducing labor-saving technologies, and relying on the employment of unfree workers. Employing cheap and easily controllable workers is a strategy to maximize profit or avoid business failure.<sup>16</sup>

Through its ability to influence politics, capital can and does control the supply of unfree workers:<sup>17</sup> liberalization and privatization policies that impose the closure of underperforming public businesses result in a mass of unemployed workers who may at some point accept unfree labor conditions, or force their relatives to accept them. In turn, a large supply of unfree workers limits the capacity of free workers to resist exploitation and negotiate working conditions. A well-documented example of this type of process is the implantation of liberalization and structural adjustment policies in Africa, which resulted in privatization and rises in unemployment. International governmental organizations, *which in their other incarnations fight against slavery and unfreedom*, also support structural adjustment programs through which workers made

15 Pierre Bourdieu, “Men and Machines,” in A. Cicourel and K. Knorr-Cetina, eds., *Advances in Social Theory and Methodology: Toward and Integration of Micro and Macro-Sociologies* (London: Routledge, 1981), 305–315, here 314.

16 Tom Brass, *Labor Regime Change in the Twenty-First Century: Unfreedom, Capitalism, and Primitive Accumulation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013).

17 I follow Tom Brass’s definition of “capital” as the sum of capitalist businesses all equally sensitive to the same incentives: rises in competition requiring cost reductions if a potentially fatal loss of profits is to be avoided.

redundant slide into the conveniently apolitically-named “informal economy.” In this limbic state—limbic because construed as such by policy think tanks and IGOS<sup>18</sup>—vulnerable persons may find themselves forced to incur debt and accept unfree labor conditions.

Many unfree workers today are foreign immigrants. Christman cites sources which estimate that “over 185 million people live outside of their country of birth, 2.9% of the global population. Of this number, more than 17 million are refugees and 22 million internally displaced people. [...] Estimates of the number of individuals forced into labor through trafficking and related means vary from 800,000 to 4 million per year globally.”<sup>19</sup> These immigrants’ inability to resist unfree employment conditions undercuts the ability of free national workers to negotiate with their employers. This yields xenophobia and racism against foreign workers: national workers and trade unions perceive immigrants as competitors whose presence depresses wages and working conditions.

I readily endorse Christman’s support for policies that would ease the conditions of immigrant workers and enable them to live dignified lives that they value. However, the same processes that entrench xenophobia in the host countries are likely to produce intolerance for behaviors perceived as “authentic” by the immigrant, but as “alien” by locals. Intolerance leads to scapegoating: impoverished immigrants are blamed as “naturally” inclined to accepting working conditions that are unsafe, “uncivilized,” or “immoral.” Although these working conditions are *imposed* on vulnerable workers lacking better options, they produce popular representations of migrants as dangerous hordes that threaten national security and the livelihoods of national wage-workers. At a political level, these dynamics divide workers and turn them against each other, decreasing their ability to unite and resist against common exploitation.

Positive conceptions of freedom do not address the root causes of unfreedom. Unfreedom is not an independent variable that can be tackled without considering the interests that promote its reproduction: the vulnerable immigrants discussed by Christman are *made* vulnerable by processes deeply entrenched in the functioning of liberal economies and societies, processes that I have only been able to touch upon briefly in this epilogue. Christman’s suggestions would seem to depend for their potential realization on interven-

---

18 Benedetta Rossi, “Tubali’s Trip: Rethinking Informality in the Study of West African Labour Migrations,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 48, no. 2 (2014): 77–100.

19 Christman, “Analyzing Freedom,” 170.

tion by a benign liberal state. But such a state, tied as it is to the support of capitalist actors, will not undermine the latter's position to the advantage of foreign immigrants.<sup>20</sup>

### Conclusion

As students of slavery and abolitionism know well, the passing of emancipatory legislation did not automatically result in concrete opportunities for ex-slaves and unfree workers in the past. It is unlikely that it would do so today. Human rights frameworks privilege reference to non-class-based identities (e.g. refugees, informal workers) that do not threaten the economic interests of dominant classes. We need to ask questions about who extracts labor from whom, what is the nature of production and employment relations, how property relations are maintained, and who profits from existing circumstances. Unless these questions are addressed, unfreedom will not vanish.

"Freedom" has functioned as a prescriptive concept whose mobilization has resulted in the moral aggrandizement of those recognized as "liberators" and in the legitimation of their interventions. A myriad other notions of "freedom from below" populate everyday life in different places. But those who experience unfreedom adopt dominant categories and try to turn them to their advantage when they lack alternative options. In doing so, they reinforce hierarchies that should be scrutinized. Who can act as liberator and with what consequences for power? What are the options accessible to the "enslaved" and "unfree?" What are the political and economic causes of vulnerability and unfreedom? How and at what cost—and particularly at what cost *to whom*—could vulnerability and unfreedom be reduced? A defense of positive *freedom*s should start from an inquiry into the discourse of *Freedom*, the hierarchies that it entrenches, and the ones that it conceals.

---

20 Brass, *Labor Regime Change*, 249.