A Cartography of Invisible Lives

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Abstract

Slave trade and slavery can be looked at as the first instance of the organization on a global scale of a mobile, racialized and gendered workforce that disrupted social and cultural categories of "free" and "unfree" labor, gender, sexuality and race. Looking at the long history of the entanglement between free and bonded labour renews our understanding of why trafficking human bodies and enslavement coexist alongside the post-Fordist organization of international divisions of labor.

Hidden Narratives and Maps

Anticolonial then postcolonial studies have long shown that behind the scenes of official history and geography stood a series of hidden, marginalized, and forgotten narratives and maps of precarious, disposable lives. Minorities, colonized, subaltern and oppressed groups have always sought to rewrite national histories, to bring to light mappings of other territories and itineraries than those of colonialism, imperialism, wars, or the creation of national borders. Among these rewritings and re-drawings, the routes of colonial slave trade and slavery have revealed a more complex history than just the familiar "triangular commerce" which showed ships leaving Europe for the western coasts of Africa, bringing aboard hundreds of captive Africans to sell them as slaves in the colonies of the Americas, and coming back with spices, sugar, tobacco, cotton and rum. New mappings show the integration of entire hinterlands in the economy of slavery, supplying goods on slave ships for the crews, as money of exchange for human trafficking and for the enslaved – wheat, wine, arms, textiles, and china in Europe; corn, cassava and water in Africa. The maps also show the hundreds of fortresses built by Europeans along the western coast of Africa, the barracks for the captives, the plantations around the barracks in which captives were forced to cultivate food both for the fortress' soldiers and for the slave ships, the African cities that operated as refuges against mass kidnappings, the African kingdoms that traded with the Europeans and those who resisted – the itineraries of maroons, rebels, pirates, of insurrections and revolts, of shipwrecks. These are overlapping and entangled maps and stories that belie a simple narrative of good and evil. They have also shown the importance of maritime history, of looking at oceans and seas as sites where the history of labor, of the international division of labor, and of resistance to the brutality and cruelty of exploitation, can be studied.

In this short essay, I want to underline the necessity to look at colonial slavery as a history of utmost importance to understand the emergence of capitalism and the world we live in today; notably the racialized and gendered international division of labor. In recent years, studies of slavery have undergone a considerable renewal. In the late 1980s the turn to a cultural history

of slavery opened new areas of research: memories, songs, writings, and knowledge of the enslaved; the representations of Blacks in Western art; the interaction between sexuality, gender and race in the fabrication of consent to slavery, in the history of abolitionism and the Haitian Revolution, and in the role of the slave ship. In recent years, the increasing number of trafficked women and men and the new forms of enslavement (according to the United Nations, 27 millions people are enslaved today) have led to a reappraisal of the importance of bonded labor in modes of production and to question anew the narrative about the backwardness of slave owners, the classic opposition between slaves' owners and industrialists.

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"Without slavery you have no cotton; without cotton you have no modern industry. It is slavery that has given the colonies their value; it is the colonies that have created world trade, and it is world trade that is the pre-condition of large-scale industry. Thus slavery is an economic category of the greatest importance", wrote Karl Marx (n.d. pp.94-95). This "category of greatest importance" led to the fabrication of a mobile, precarious, racialized and gendered workforce for the first time on a global scale. It required the deportation of millions of Africans between the 15th and 19th centuries. It was followed by the organized mobility of millions of Indians, Chinese, and hundred of thousands of Malagasy and Africans, as well as Vietnamese, Malaysian, Kanaks and other colonized people transported from one European colony to the other, between the mid-19th and mid-20th centuries. Thus we may think of contemporary forms of trafficking and mobile workforces as new configurations of the long history of precarious labor. In other words, there is a long history of the moving around of millions of women and men to serve the needs of Capital. Though there are always new configurations and new laws on mobility and working conditions, the same pattern emerges – workers have been moved around to answer the needs of mercantilism, capitalism, imperialism and of current globalization. Hence, the history of slave trade and slavery belongs to the history of labour. As such, it questions a history of labor too exclusively tied to the industrial revolution in Europe, it signals that the working class was, from its beginning, multiracial. It shows an entanglement of temporalities and conditions where bonded labor can coexist with "free" labor. The figure of the enslaved as an actor in this history questions the narrative of free labor and of linear progress. Further, it allows a new reading of the current data on enslavement – not as signs of backwardness and lack of modernity – but as inevitable forms of production. Today, the figure of the enslaved embodies the condition of the exploited body, a transnational figure with Chinese, Peruvian, American, or Malian papers.

When colonial slavery is exclusively associated with memory and identity this dimension disappears. Though the turn to memory as a counter-narrative of resistance and suffering to an abstract official narrative has been legitimate and has constituted a terrain for alternative formations, memory has also marginalized the political and economic dimension of colonial slavery. The focus on legacies of trauma should not mask the relation of slavery with the constitution of the first European colonial empires and their criminal history of dispossession, spoliation, destruction of the environment, wars and massive deportation. In other words, what had been made invisible – the reality of trafficked bodies for the need of Capital – is made visible. A cartography of invisible lives reminds us of the modernity of colonial slavery and of post-slavery organized mobile workforces and forms of forced labor.

Slave Trade, Mobility and Immobility

Building their first colonial empires, European powers were confronted with a difficulty: finding ways to both immobilize and to move around workforces; immobilizing their workforce at home (with laws against vagrancy), and organize a massive movement to transport enslaved bodies to their colonies. And once transported to the colonies the enslaved, who had been moved from one continent to another, needed to immobilized. Laws forbade the slaves' mobility and violation of that rule was severely punishment. Slaves had to carry permits issued by their masters to leave a plantation. Only slave owners could decide to move slaves from one plantation to another, to send them to the city, to rent their labor. Freedom to move without permits and to have a life outside the control of the master were always sites of struggle. Yann Moulier-Boutang (1990) has written eloquently about a system that required laws and police to ground workers in Europe, to deport women and men as enslaved beings to the colonies, and to ground them to the plantation and to their status. The connection between enslavement in the colonies and repression, discipline and punishment in Europe, has been traced by Sylvia Federici (2004) who has connected the enclosures and the repression of women's knowledge in Europe (the war against the "witches") and the slave trade. In other words, the massive and industrialized organization of a mobile workforce on a global scale to serve the needs of an economy had vast repercussions on freedom, labor, gender and race. The slave ship and the maritime industry played a central role. For ships to be built, hundreds of trees had to be cut which led to laws about the management of forests in 17th century Europe, while the carrying of the precious cargo of human captives led to progress in maritime industry and science. Technique, science, commerce, banking, insurance became entangled with the trade in African human flesh.

In the colonies, Europeans paid careful attention to the architecture of the plantation to make it efficient and less costly. It was soon a model for the rationalized management of work, cruelty and deprivation of freedom. European powers had first tried to impose forced labor on indigenous populations, but they died by the millions from disease, the brutal repression of resistance, and of terrible working conditions. Then the Europeans brought across "36 months" indentured Europeans – so called because they had to work 36 months to pay their transport to the colony and back – but they too often died of tropical diseases. The European plantation owners finally turned to the African slave trade. This was the first instance of a massive organized traffic in human beings for the goal of enriching Europe during its nascent industrialization in the 18th century.

The massive transportation of enslaved Africans went along with a vast transfer of plants, animals, and knowledge (African, Caribbean, European, American). It is a long history: four centuries of treaties and wars between European powers, of colonization and wars of extinction against native populations, and of perfecting the cultivation of coffee, tobacco, sugar and cotton – both in terms of finding the best plants and of brutally exploiting the bonded workforce. It was a turning point in environmental history: imposition of monocultures, deforestation, circulation of diseases, famines. Seas and oceans were spaces of circulation and connection in this history, and dystopian spaces of liquid cemeteries – thousands of slaves throwing themselves in the waters to escape enslavement, their bodies thrown to the sharks that always followed the slave ships.

In this long history, there is a date barely associated with colonial slavery, but nonetheless of importance, the Treaty of Utrecht (1713-1715). It has been commemorated as announcing the birth of Europe as a political and cultural idea expressed in a Treaty signed by many

European powers; the first event in which diplomats played an important role.[1] Signed between western European powers to put an end to the Seven Year war, the treaties spoke, for the first time, of an "idea of Europe" and connected European wealth with slave trade, slavery and free trade. The work of two European thinkers were seminal in its wording, Charles d'Avenant and the Abbé de Saint Pierre. In 1697, d'Avenant argued that "In a trading nation, the bent of all the laws should tend to the encouragement of commerce, and all measures should be there taken, with a due regard to its interest and advancement". He goes on to state that the two pillars of free trade were the plantation in the Western colonies and free trade in the Eastern trading posts:

> The wealth England had once, did arise chiefly from two articles: 1st, Our plantation trade. 2ndly, Our East-India traffic. The plantation trade gives employment to many thousand artificers here at home, and takes off a great quantity of our inferior manufactures. The returns of all which are made in tobacco, cotton, ginger, sugars, indigo, etc. by which we were not only supplied for our own consumption, but we had formerly wherewithal to send to France, Flanders, Hamburgh (sic) the East Country and Holland, besides what we shipped for Spain and the Streights, etc. (D'Avenant, 1697).

Industry, work, free trade and bonded labor were connected in his analysis of wealth accumulation. D'Avenant demonstrated that slavery connected East and West, his list of cities and states drawing a global cartography of interests. In his *Project for Perpetual Peace in Europe* first published in 1712, Abbé de Saint-Pierre argued for a confederation resulting from a contract and a balance of power among European rival powers would allow the "Powers of Europe to form a sort of system among themselves, which unites them by a single religion, the same international law, morals, literature, commerce and a sort of equilibrium."[2]

The Treaty spoke of the necessity of establishing peace "for the perpetual tranquillity (*sic*) of the whole Christian world", the need for "an universal perpetual peace" and for "securing the tranquillity of Europe by a balance of power." It was a truly political program with geopolitical consequences. It gave Europe the power to decide over international affairs in order to preserve a peace it had unilaterally decided would be universal. It asked European powers to forget the wrongs and damages that they had inflicted upon each other. Forgetting crimes at home served two goals: preserving European unity against common external enemies and turning a blind eye to crimes committed outside of Europe by a European power. Though Europe remained divided and powers continued to wage wars against each other, its formal unity meant that European powers agreed that each could freely dispose of the spoils of colonial conquest. The fiction of European unity was important to maintain hegemony abroad. So despite rivalry and wars, European powers could also find common grounds. The new global order involved deporting African peoples, the pacification of First Nations, and working out internal European competition for the larger objective of preserving European global interests.

The Treaty gave the *asiento* to England (the monopole of slave trade with the Spanish colonies) opening the way for the country to become the 18th century's global maritime power and the first slave trader. More generally, it gave a boost to the European slave trade:

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[1] See the festivities organized by the city of Utrecht in 2013, www.utrecht.org.

[2] On l'Abbé de Saint-Pierre and his influence from Rousseau to Kant, see Frey (2012), Spector (2008 ; 2011), and Riley (1974).

whereas between 1630 and 1640, 20-30,000 Africans were taken per year as slaves to European colonies, between 1740 to 1840, the number increased to 70-90,000 per year. During the European 18th century inaugurated by the Treaty of Utrecht, 60% of the total captive Africans were deported. The connection between the demand for goods, valuable woods, precious stones, extraction of minerals, the construction of palaces or fortresses and the necessity to enslave, was not specific to colonial slavery; however, what colonial slavery introduced was the idea that wealth rested on the capacity to move a workforce around, thus making it disposable.

Slave trade and slavery were the conditions for ensuring that Europeans had access to sugar, cotton, tobacco and other goods. Gradually becoming addicted to these goods whose conditions of production were hidden, Europeans acquired the identity of "consumers" who had "rights" – the foremost right being access to these goods regardless of where they came from or who had produced them. This was an essential component of the manufacture of consent to a racialized international division of labor.

Whiteness and Blackness

Colonial slavery also contributed to the fabrication of "whiteness" in Europe. The construction of "whites" and "blacks" and of anti-Black racism are anchored in colonial slavery. In the 18th century Europe had its own racialized minorities but the slave trade gave new meaning to racial hierarchies. In the case of France, the decrees taken to regulate the presence of persons of African origin in France bring light to the history of whiteness. On 13 July 1315, the King of France declared that 'the soil of France frees the slave that touches it' ('*le sol de France affranchit l'esclave qui le touche*'). France became a land of *free men* (not yet "Whites"). In the colonies, the *Code Noir* of 1685 (Niort, 2012) set a series of provisions to govern the lives of the enslaved. Poor French settlers brought across to colonial outposts as indentured workers gradually became "whites" with the consolidation of slavery. However, the Code did not address the question of the presence of Blacks in France, whether enslaved or free (Niort, 2012).

Persons of African origin had long been arriving in Europe not only as slaves, but also as ambassadors, diplomats, merchants, soldiers, musicians and craftsmen. As soon as Europe organized the slave trade there were also enslaved Africans on the continent. In the 16th century Lisbon was considered to be a black city because of its number of Africans. In France, at the beginning of the 17th century, between 5000 and 7000 persons of African origin were living in France, mostly in Paris, occupying various positions as slaves, domestics, workers, craftsmen, tailors, seamstresses, musicians, and so on. In 1694, aware of the fact that slaves brought by their masters to France used the 1315 law to demand their freedom (and some won their cases), the royal power issued the first limitations on the entry of slaves. In October 1716 new provisions more severely limited the entry of slaves to France, and for the first time marriage between Blacks and Whites was forbidden – it was already forbidden by the *Code Noir* in the colonies. A slow shift made being Black and being enslaved synonymous. In August 1777, the monarchy created the *Police des Noirs* and forbade the entry of any Black, free or enslaved person in France. The mission of the *Police des Noirs* was to arrest Blacks and to verify their status (free or unfree) – a policy of racial profiling. Abuses were frequent: free Blacks or *métis* had to carry a permit, if they were arrested without it, they were imprisoned in barracks which were set up in every French port until they were expelled to a colony - without regard to their preferred destination. On 5 April 1778, marriage between Blacks and Whites was again rigorously forbidden. Color had become a fundamental marker (Niort, 2012). The French Revolution abolished these

provisions, but they were re-established by Napoleon in March 1802 along with slavery. They were finally abolished in 1848. In other words, slavery linked the color of skin to either free or bonded labor; race and slavery were closely intertwined. Freedom was associated with whiteness, servitude with blackness.

The lived experience of being black became entangled with race as the mobile workforce was racialised. Even slaves who had won their freedom and owned slaves themselves, remained submitted to racial hierarchy. They were never the equal of white men. The mobile workforce was also gendered. The ratio of transported enslaved Africans was two thirds men and one third women. In other words, between 3 to 5 million African women were taken to the Americas and the Caribbean. Being black, slave and female weighted heavily on women. They received the same punishments as men, were worked as hard, and were at the disposal of white men's sexual predation. They were said to be bad mothers and ugly. They served as nannies to generations of white children who later did not think twice about expressing contempt and horror for the black body even though they had been fed and nourished by a black woman. White women and men who lived in proximity, if not in intimacy with black women and men, never hesitated to use brutality and cruelty.

Race contaminated Western democracy and thought. "Behind the scenes" of the discourse of universal rights a perverse set of norms regulated the relations between Whites and Blacks.

Indentured Work and Migrations

The abolition of slavery in the European colonies by the mid-19th century opened the way to new forms of moving this mobile, racialized and gendered workforce. New colonial empires required men to work in the mines, the plantations, to construct railways and roads, to work on boats and in factories. The desire for new goods was transforming social and cultural life in Europe. There was also a need to organize the movement of millions of Europeans who wanted to flee poverty, famines, pogroms, or antisemitism. At the same time the nascent working-class, which was testing its power to disrupt the new social order, needed to be severely repressed. Thus, the global circulation of ideas, knowledge, careers and people entered a new age. Officers, soldiers, scientists and engineers roamed the empires. Officers tested forms of repression in the colonies before importing them to crush the working-class strikes, revolts and insurrections, or vice-versa. Dangerous classes were sent to new colonized territories – Australia, South Africa, India, Southeast Asia, New Zealand, etc. And to North America, whose government had declared its 'wild West' open to colonization – trampling on treaties signed with Indigenous American nations, or sending its armies to wage wars and crush resistance.

Between 1840 and 1940, around 58 million Europeans left their continent for north and south America, the colonies of the Pacific, or Africa. It took only a few decades to transform colonies into lands of "free and white men" who had all the rights against the "black and enslaved men." By 1913, Canada was 98% white, Australia 98%, and New-Zealand 95% (Schwarz, 2011). The new colonial credo was borrowed from the Bible "Be fecund, multiply, fill the earth and submit the land."[3] Though many of the settlers were poor or convicts when they left their countries, and although they faced hardship while being transported to their new land, when they arrived they acquired the privileged status of being "White." They received land which had been stolen from indigenous peoples, rights of

[3] Genesis, 1:28.

private property, and civic rights. Poverty did not disappear but they discovered an identity, being White.

Meanwhile, the British and French empires moved colonized peoples from one colony to another according to need. They signed treaties to organize the departure of indentured workers. Thirty million Indians (the "coolies" of the Caribbean or "Malbars" of the Indian Ocean colonies), 51 million Chinese, hundreds of thousands of Mozambican, Malagasy, and others were taken – in conditions close to the captives of the slave trade – to European colonies. Though data vary among historians, they remain within this range. Twenty-nine million Indians and 19 million Chinese were taken to Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean and the south Pacific; 30 million Chinese to Manchuria and Siberia (McKeown, 2004). The ratio of men to women was similar to the slave trade: two-thirds men, one-third women. New racial categories were invented. These forced migrations were accompanied by other forms of migration – of people fleeing famines, economies disturbed by the new imperialisms, loss of land and rights.

In summary, from the 15th to the 20th century European empires organized a vast global movement of non-consenting people across and between continents to work in their colonies. Looking at this long history, even though it was not a uniform history and a diversity of interests were at play, we can draw a cartography of invisible lives. Invisible because too often their role in the accumulation of wealth has been hidden, because so many died without a sepulture, their lives barely inscribed in administrative ledgers, their real names erased by officers and replaced by Europeanized names, forbidden to perform their rituals, their culture and languages ignored. In the 20th century, a sustained effort by descendants of slaves, indentured workers, and migrants has brought back their memories – a lot remains to be done.

What is remarkable is that the organization of a mobile, gendered and racialized workforce continues to operate. Neoliberalism needs to be able to move both labourers and highly skilled workers. On ships, on oil fields, in science laboratories or advanced computer work, both categories are needed: the scientist, engineer or technician *and* the domestic worker, the nanny for the children, the gardeners, the cooks. The later often migrants in precarious living situations while doing the invisible work that makes life for the highly educated easy and comfortable.

Indeed, with current globalization new forms of mobility have emerged. Capital needs a precarious working-class and the possibility of moving it around. It would be wrong to think that the repressive laws of Nation-States against the organized (or illegal) mobility of labourers work against this need. Indeed, as Sassia Sasken has shown, the two work together: the need for repressive laws and the need for mobility.

Crossed Memories and Histories

There is no longer an amnesia or a conspiracy to silence colonial history and its aftermaths. Rather, there is an incomprehension of the ways in which the itineraries of the mobile, racialized and gendered workforce has crossed, and continues to cross, the history of labor in the West, and the ways in which these networks are part and parcel of the history of the international division of labor and the history of wealth accumulation. These crisscrossed moments show a periodic devaluation of human life, of lives made disposable, intrinsically expansive, not worth their own reproduction.

Behind the scenes of a linear narrative about progress and rights, other memories and histories reveal the brutality of colonial, imperialist and current forms of exploitation in which oceans and seas have played an important role. They also reveal that the notion of "free" labor often masks the existence of forms of "unfree" labor.

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