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978-0-521-58900-0 - “Peripheral” Labour?: Studies in the History of Partial Proletarianization

Edited by Shahid Amin and Marcel van der Linden

Excerpt

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Introduction

The proletarians have lost their innocence. A conservative sociologist once described wage labourers as follows:

The worker is *personally free*, i.e. his physical and spiritual-moral powers are completely at his own disposal. [. . .] He *has no property*, i.e. he has no exclusive material power over capital as a secure basis with relative permanency. [. . .] He has neither a stock of consumer goods that enable him to live, nor permanent interests of capital. [. . .] He lives in economic circumstances in which means of subsistence can be obtained only through *economic returns*. [. . .] He is forced to offer personal capacities with an economic exchange value in return for means of subsistence.¹

The fact that this description – disregarding its formulation – is almost identical to the classical Marxist definition indicates a broad consensus regarding the characteristics of proletarians among intellectuals in the first half of the twentieth century. Implicitly, proletarians were considered to be male, were perceived in isolation from their families or households, and were associated with a “pure” social category: while personally free and without property, they were compelled to sell their individual capacities or skills for money. These proletarians were viewed not as abstract theoretical constructs, but (at least in the advanced countries and in the societies of “really existing socialism”) as concrete living people whose number was increasing rapidly by any standard. While some historians and social scientists may have suspected that workers could also be females, might live in families or households that combined several “coping strategies”, and sometimes had their freedom severely restricted by debts or other impediments, etc., these insights did not play a significant theoretical role.

Social historians have long been accessories to this misleading conceptualization. Implicitly or sometimes even explicitly, historians have propagated the idea that labour movements (believed to consist of trade unions and workers’ parties) were mainly supported by “genuine” proletarians who were preceded (diachronically) or surrounded (synchronically) by “improper” quasi-workers: labour aristocrats, lumpen-proletarians, and the like. These stereotypes appear in writings by the US-American Wisconsin School (John R. Commons, Selig Perlman, Philip Taft), the Webbs in Britain, Franz Mehring, Eduard Bernstein and Gustav Mayer in Germany, and Edouard Dolléans in France. As Eric Hobsbawm observed: “classical labour movement history tended to

¹ Goetz Briefs, “Das gewerbliche Proletariat”, in *Grundriss der Sozialökonomik*, Part IX (Tübingen, 1926), pp. 142–240, 149. The *Grundriss der Sozialökonomik* was the Weimar Republic’s standard sociological reference work and included the original edition of Max Weber’s *Economy and Society*.

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produce both a model and an accepted version of history, national as well as international, which ranged from an informal but not very flexible to a formal and highly inflexible orthodoxy".² E.P. Thompson became one of the first historians to develop a new approach when he stressed the social variety and heterogeneity of the working class in early nineteenth-century England.³

About twenty-five or thirty years ago, the old stereotypes created serious problems for the incipient interest among Western scholars in the social history of the so-called "Third World". Robin Cohen, one of the most important protagonists of African and Caribbean labour history, has rightly observed that a restrictive definition of the workers ignores the widespread presence of ambivalent class positions: "There is [. . .] a large group of the population which is simultaneously and ambiguously 'semiproletariat' and 'semipeasant' [. . .]. Equally, within the *favelas* and shantytowns, large numbers of individuals who are sometimes described as 'unemployed' or as 'sub-' or 'lumpenproletariat' are in fact intermittently employed performing services or in small workshops employing a handful of workers and apprentices. In the case of this group, the ambiguity arises from the fact that it comprises people who can at the same time be considered self-employed or employees."⁴

In the urban sphere, anthropological and historical studies started to reveal a wide range of so-called "marginals". Surveying the research, Peter Worsley, for instance, identifies not only industrial workers, but also workers in sweatshops, putting-out work in the home, self-employed artisans, domestic enterprises using family labour, street vendors, pedlars, hucksters, domestic servants, casual wage labourers (car-washers, etc.), refuse-collectors and beggars.⁵ All these categories are fluid: households may combine several of the activities listed and may alternate between coping strategies.

Studies of the rural world also revealed an increasingly complex picture. As early as the 1960s, Eric Wolf described some of the numerous economic and social variations characteristic of agricultural life in his seminal little book on *Peasants*.⁶ Later studies have added an array of other types of labour relations. The reconstruction of forms of agrestic servitude and the inadequacy of terms such as debt bondage were particularly important in providing a satisfactory explanation for the

² "Labour History and Ideology" (1974), in E.J. Hobsbawm, *Worlds of Labour. Further Studies in the History of Labour* (London, 1984), pp. 1–14, 4.

³ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963).

⁴ Robin Cohen, "Workers in Developing Societies", in Hamza Alavi and Teodor Shanin (eds), *Sociology of "Developing Societies"* (London, 1982), pp. 279–286, 279–280.

⁵ Peter Worsley, *The Three Worlds. Culture and World Development* (London, 1984), pp. 194–202.

⁶ Eric Wolf, *Peasants* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1966).

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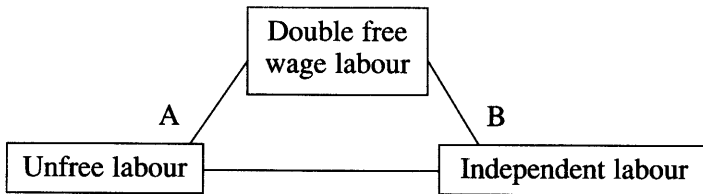
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phenomenon of bonded labour.⁷ Gyan Prakash's article in this volume is a forceful reminder that classificatory systems are fine as long as they do not impede the actual task of comparison by a preoccupation with identical sets of phenomena. Prakash's interpretation of the history of agrestic servitude from the North Indian state of Bihar calls for an "undoing of the discourse of freedom". As he notes: "if servitude was the form that the capital-labour relationship was compelled to assume in the process of its universalization, then colonial servitude must be included in the account of free labour."

Gradually, it has become clear that pure "free wage labour" in the double Marxian sense⁸ is an ideal type, the conceptual nucleus of far more complicated historical realities. Pure free wage labour – i.e. the exchange of labour power for money implying "no other relations of dependence than those which result from its own nature"⁹ – forms a kind of analytical core surrounded by numerous rings of labour relations that we would like to call intermediary. We might construct a triangle with three "poles": pure free wage labour, unfree labour and independent labour (self-employment).



Here we are especially interested in the "grey zones" A and B surrounding double free wage labour. The number of variations within these zones is probably infinite. On line A we may, for instance, distinguish:

- formally "free" wage labourers tied to a particular employer through loans (truck systems, etc.), housing facilities, etc.;
- indentured labourers tied to a particular employer through long-term contracts;
- unfree labourers hired out by their owners to other employers in exchange for wages.

⁷ On the genesis of bonded labour as a general category, see Gyan Prakash, *Bonded Histories: Genealogies of Labor Servitude in Colonial India* (Cambridge [etc.], 1990), pp. 1–12.

⁸ The worker is "free in the double sense that as a free individual he can dispose of his labour-power as his own commodity, and that, on the other hand, he has no other commodity for sale". Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth, 1976), p. 272.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 271.

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On line B we may, for example, distinguish:

- disguised wage labourers whose work products are regularly appropriated partly by an employer without these persons being official employees of the firm;
- dependent workers who do not perform wage labour but are dependent upon an employer for credit, rental of premises, etc.

Although it can be argued that "proletarianization is the most significant process in the contemporary world",¹⁰ developments in the so-called "Third World" can be understood only if these intermediary forms of wage labour (indicators of partial proletarianization) are taken seriously. History in general and the history of labour in particular is not a unilinear process embodying an ongoing transition from "traditional" to "modern" forms. "Modern" capitalism may involve the reconstitution of slavery (as can be seen in countries as diverse as Burma, Brazil, or India), as well as the reconstitution of older forms of industry.¹¹

The careful study of these intermediary forms may also shed new light on the history of the labouring classes in the so-called core countries. Not only have the debates on proto-industrialization¹² and worker-peasants¹³ shown that intermediary forms of wage labour have been of continuous importance in European history over the past three or four centuries, but "pure free wage labourers" in advanced countries are at times clearly forced back into alternative activities through which they can sustain their subsistence margins in times of unemployment.¹⁴ Alain Faure's contribution on Parisian ragpickers in the nineteenth century is a fitting case study of a partially proletarianized occupational group usually considered typical of the "Third World".

It probably makes sense to regard the intermediary forms of wage labour not as relationships existing outside the true working class, but as articulations of a worldwide segmentation of the labour force. In this segmented labour force, some workers (mostly in the core countries) are relatively free, well paid and secure, while other workers, both in the core countries and especially along the periphery, are less free, poorly paid, and "float-

¹⁰ B.R. Roberts, "Peasants and Proletarians", *Annual Review of Sociology*, 16 (1990), pp. 353–377, 354.

¹¹ See Ronald Aminzade's case study "Reinterpreting Capitalist Industrialization: A Study of Nineteenth-Century France", *Social History*, 9 (1984), pp. 329–350.

¹² See the survey of these debates in *Continuity and Change*, 8 (1993), pp. 151–252.

¹³ Douglas R. Holms and Jean H. Quataert, "An Approach to Modern Labor: Worker Peasants in Historic Saxony and the Friuli Region over Three Centuries", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 28 (1986), pp. 191–216.

¹⁴ See the example of the workers laid off in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, in the 1980s in June Nash, "Global Integration and Subsistence Insecurity", *American Anthropologist*, 96 (1994), pp. 7–30.

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ing".¹⁵ The boundaries between the two segments are vague and constantly shifting. Further exploration of the differences between segments might benefit from additional class criteria, like Max Weber's notion of the "market position of labour" and the worker's control over the work process. These criteria may also enable us to analyse gender-specific aspects more accurately.¹⁶

Recent work in labour history has stressed the question of "multiple identities" among the working class.¹⁷ Starting with the classic issues of the development of capitalism and of "abstract labour", historians in the "Third World" have begun to emphasize the historical and analytical relevance of Marx's notion of "concrete labour" and of labour power "as it exists in the personality of the worker".¹⁸ This approach requires careful consideration of both the culture and the material conditions of the working class.

Religion, caste, gender and region (long-distance migrants from culturally dissimilar catchment areas to mines, plantations and factories) have become important issues in recent works on "Third World" labour history.¹⁹ This interest has given rise to particularistic histories, where the operation of familiar Western machinery in far-flung corners of the globe is often pushed aside by accounts of specific groups of working women and men struggling to reproduce their cultural selves away from "home". The value of such histories lies not just in enriching the study of labour in different "Third World" locations – accretions to knowledge that can be accessed when the need arises to understand the working-class history of one or several non-Western societies. Some scholars have argued boldly

¹⁵ Frances Rothstein, "The New Proletarians: Third World Reality and First World Categories", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 28 (1986), pp. 217–238. See also Anibal Quijano Obregón, "The Marginal Pole of the Economy and the Marginalised Labour Force", *Economy and Society*, 3 (1974), pp. 393–428; June Nash, "Ethnographic Aspects of the World Capitalist System", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 11 (1981), pp. 393–423; Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley [etc.], 1982).

¹⁶ Kyung-Sup Chang, "Gender and Abortive Capitalist Social Transformation: Semi-Proletarianization of South Korean Women", *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, 36 (1995), pp. 61–81, 65.

¹⁷ David Roediger, "Race and the Working-Class Past in the United States: Multiple Identities and the Future of Labor History", in Marcel van der Linden (ed.), *The End of Labour History?* (Cambridge [etc.], 1993) [*International Review of Social History*, Supplement 1], pp. 127–143.

¹⁸ Marx, *Capital*, 1, p. 678.

¹⁹ See, for example, Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and Working Classes in Bombay, 1900–1940* (Cambridge [etc.], 1994), esp. chs 3–5; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History: Bengal 1890–1940* (Princeton, 1989); Gail Herstatter, *The Workers of Tianjin, 1900–1949* (Stanford, 1986); Emily Honig, *Sisters and Strangers. Women in the Shanghai Cotton Mills, 1919–1949* (Stanford, 1986); Charles van Onselen, *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, 1886–1994*, 2 vols (Harlow, 1982); Michael T. Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (Chapel Hill, 1979).

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that the experience of industrialization and proletarianization along the "periphery" has the potential to reveal the cultural characteristics of much of Western labour history itself.²⁰

Erick Langer's perceptive study of nineteenth-century Bolivian mine labour addresses three crucial issues: the implications of mechanization, the sources of labour and the effects of agrarian rhythms on labour supply. One of the author's striking observations is that "modern" mining enterprises were combined with haciendas and maintained a kind of peonage arrangement in which resident workers were obligated to pay for their access to lands by toiling in the mines. Such an arrangement obviously contradicts simple models of unilinear progress.

Juan Giusti-Cordero's essay on canefield labour in early twentieth-century Puerto Rico describes another example of the intricate unity of the historical peasant-proletarian relation. In a careful analysis of the Piñones region, Giusti-Cordero argues that the sugar cane workers were neither "peasants", nor "rural proletarians", nor a combination of the two. Rather, they were a social group *sui generis* demanding a fundamental reconceptualization.

The "Indian" papers in this volume also contribute to the rethinking of categories. Each focuses on grasping the colonial situation from a slightly different perspective. Dilip Simeon's detailed reconstruction of the life, work and hazards of coal miners in Jharia is predicated on an engagement with that "historical and moral element" that Marx identifies as a factor in determining the value of labour power. Though deeply concerned with one set of coal pits (the largest in India), Simeon's essay is a plea for situating the concept of "relations of production" within the "histories of given societies".

The two papers by Madhavi Kale and Samita Sen deal with the imperial and colonial contexts within which large-scale, long-distance migration was organized from the north Indian villages to the sugar plantations of the British Caribbean and the tea gardens of Assam. Kale touches upon a host of important issues in Caribbean history: the link between the planters' and the empire's interests, the crucial role played by Indian indentured labour in the plantation economies, the essentialist categories through which the coolie was perceived, and the fluid socialization that sea voyage and plantation life facilitated and encouraged. She highlights the plight of and the opportunities available to single woman migrants on board the ships and in the colonies.²¹

²⁰ See Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Class Consciousness and the Indian Working Class: Dilemmas of Marxist Historiography", *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 28 (1988), pp. 21–31; idem, *Rethinking Working Class History*; Raj Chandavarkar, "Industrialization in India before 1947: Conventional Approaches and Alternative Perspectives", *Modern Asian Studies*, 19 (1985), pp. 623–668.

²¹ For a splendid recapitulation of some of these experiences, see V.S. Naipaul, "Prologue to an Autobiography", in his *Finding the Centre: Two Narratives* (London, 1984), esp. pp. 62–67.

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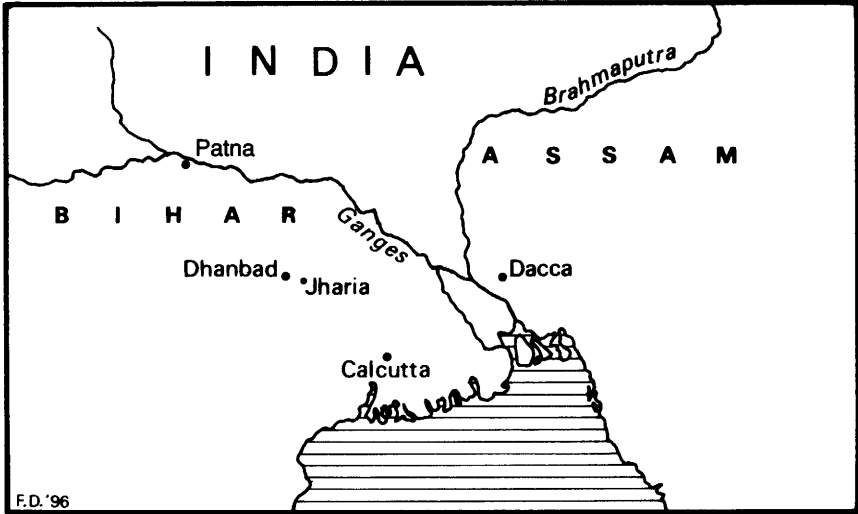
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Figure 1. Northern India, showing the regions of Bihar and Assam

Samita Sen applies important new theoretical insights in her investigation of the question of migration by single women to the Assam tea plantations within India. Faced with the difficult problem of facilitating migration by “good women” from north Indian villages without unsettling patriarchal control over females (both married and unmarried), the colonial state opted for an ingenious compromise. While the freedom to enter into wage contracts independently of male guardians was denied to women in law, the magistrates were “encouraged to wink at [. . . such . . .] illegal recruitment”. The alternative of facilitating family migration was not seriously entertained, as this choice would have stripped peasant agriculture and the colonial economy, more generally, of its widespread familial base. Such a process would have been contrary to the interests of both colonial capital and the colonial state. As Dilip Simeon remarks, “the hut in the village and the colliery lines became adjuncts of a household in which the rural location of one effected savings on infrastructure for capital in the other.”

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Colonialism, Capitalism and the Discourse of Freedom

GYAN PRAKASH

In the history and historiography of labour servitude, the ideology of modernity and progress looms large. Thus it was with bitter irony that a British officer described the miserable condition of a labourer in late nineteenth-century colonial India: "Steam, the great civilizer, has not done much for this man, although the railroad runs within a few hundred yards of his door."¹ The persistence of the miserably poor existence was bad enough, but truly appalling was the fact that the introduction of modern industry had not set the labourer free. The poor labourers, or *kamias* as they were called locally, had seen modernity whizz past them without carrying them along in its journey to progress and freedom.

The expectation that the abolition of unfreedom, even if it was "a very long time in coming", was bound to happen with "the advance of modern ideas, open communications and opportunities for industrial labour" was part of an ideology rooted in the post-Enlightenment belief that freedom constituted the natural human condition.² This post-Enlightenment discourse enunciated two fundamental propositions. First, that free labour was the natural and the normative form. Thus, even as the Enlightenment *philosophes* offered a tortuous defence of the enslavement of Africans, they also represented freedom as the essence of humanity and servitude as its negation.³ Indeed, Adam Smith attacked slavery as a system of restraints that stifled the slaves' pursuit of their self-interests and impeded the development of free labour.⁴ From this followed the second proposition according to which the purpose and meaning of History was to release human beings from the burdens imposed by the past and usher them into the realm of freedom because anything other than free labour was the suppression of an anterior human essence, because servitude was a deviation from the natural course of human evolution.

However, as Marx pointed out, the emergence of free labour required the dispossession of petty producers so that they could become "free"

¹ India Office Library and Records (IOL): Proceedings of the Government of Bengal, Scarcity and Relief Department, January 1874, File 13-76, Letter from the Officiating Collector of Monghyr.

² Bihar State Archives (BSA): Proceedings of the Government of Bihar and Orissa (Land Revenue), November 1919, Nos 6-10, Report by W.H. Lewis.

³ David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, 1966), pp. 391-421 *passim*.

⁴ Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (1776; New York, 1937), pp. 80, 364-367.

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to sell their labour power as a commodity. To project the universalization of free labour as the *raison d'être* of history, therefore, was to stage the bourgeois mode of production as History. Thus, even as capital reinforced and profited from slavery, it composed the servile relations of production in the inverse image of free labour. Whether it was slavery and indenture on the "New World" plantations, or bonded labour on the Indian subcontinent, they were constituted as the Other of free labour; what marked them was an economy of restrictions – restraints on the mobility of labourers, impediments on their ability to choose and change employers, controls over their culture, etc. With labour power turned into an exchangeable commodity, capitalism constituted other social forms of labour as the opposite of free exchange. As Eugene Genovese writes: "The power of slavery as a cultural myth in modern societies derives from its antithetical relationship to the hegemonic ideology of bourgeois social relations of production."⁵

To the extent that servitude has come to be defined in opposition to free labour, as the suppression of an innate condition of freedom, its position resembles the position repression occupies in the modern discourse of sexuality. According to Michel Foucault, the "repressive hypothesis" represents power only as a system of restraints, as a thing that represses an innate sexuality, as a force "that only has the negative on its side, a power to say no; in no condition to produce, capable only of posting limits [. . .]"⁶ Similarly, capital enacts servitude as the suppression of a prior human essence, as a system of *restrictions* on freedom to exchange labour power as a commodity. Power is banished from the realm of free labour and manifests itself in servitude alone; it becomes visible only in its juridical form, not in the realm of the economy but as "extra-economic coercion" – as an economy of suspended rights and suppressed essence. Such a naturalization of free labour conceals capitalism's role in constituting bondage as a condition defined in relation to itself, and presents servitude as a condition outside its field of operation, as a form of social existence identifiable and analysable as alien and opposed to capitalism. It is thus that the analysis of bondage, servitude and slavery as different degrees of unfreedom appears as a purely descriptive exercise, as self-evident distinctions unconnected to the force of the global spread of capital.

If the stage of history forms one site for the powerful emergence and functioning of the discourse of freedom, the pages of historical writings are another. Instituted by the workings of capital and writings of the Enlightenment *philosophes*, the discourse of freedom claims universal

⁵ Eugene Genovese, *Rebellion to Revolution* (Baton Rouge and London, 1979), p. xiii.

⁶ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1980), p. 85.

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applicability. With free labour disguised as a natural condition and a universal human destiny, not a specific historical form, social relations across history become representable by this discourse. It is thus that the free-unfree dichotomy has come to invade the understanding of societies ranging from ancient Greece to the Thirteen Colonies in North America. The condition of servitude in the Greek city-states is readily differentiated from bondage under medieval Islamic regimes and from slavery and indenture on sugar and tobacco plantations in the Americas, but the belief persists that they share something in common. Of course, as David Brion Davis suggests, there are grounds for identifying commonality. Certain institutional features, such as the treatment of the slave as a thing, legal codes and regulations, a system of restrictions, and the moral-ideological problem these posed, have existed throughout slavery's history.⁷ Orlando Patterson's analysis of slavery across time and space as a system of domination predicated on the "social death" of slaves also makes a persuasive case for continuity.⁸ But continuities in slavery as a system of domination cannot mean the persistence of unfreedom. As David Brion Davis writes, though "we automatically contrast slavery with free labor or with various modern ideals of individual autonomy", through "most of history such antonyms would have appeared absurd or contradictory".⁹ In classical societies, slave and free represented legal statuses connected with the classification and ranking of people as barbarians and citizens: free status was associated with citizenship, wealth and membership in the community, whereas slavery was imposed on the poor and foreigners who were identified as barbarians.¹⁰ Slavery enjoyed acceptance from philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle, who regarded it as a "natural" institution.¹¹ In pre-modern societies, generally speaking, "the salient characteristic of slavery was its antithetical relationship to the normal network of kinship ties of dependency, protection, obligation, and privilege".¹² But in spite of the accumulated evidence demonstrating that the free-unfree opposition is the product of a specific historical moment, the belief in the universality of the slave-free opposition persists. The assumption endures that there is a brute, material

⁷ Davis, *The Problem of Slavery*, pp. 30–31.

⁸ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982).

⁹ David Brion Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress* (New York, 1984), p. 15.

¹⁰ Thomas Weidemann, *Greek and Roman Slavery* (Baltimore and London, 1981), pp. 15–31 *passim*.

¹¹ Robert Schlaifer, "Greek Theories of Slavery from Homer to Aristotle", in M.I. Finley (ed.), *Slavery in Classical Antiquity: Views and Controversies* (New York, 1960).

¹² Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress*, pp. 15–16. Here it is worth mentioning the well-known argument of Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff that in African societies the opposite of slavery was not freedom but "belonging". See their "African 'Slavery' as an Institution of Marginality", in Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff (eds), *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives* (Madison, 1977).