

Abolitionist Anti-Politics? Capitalism, Coercion and the Modern Anti-Slavery Movement

Neil Howard, Marie Curie Fellow, European University Institute¹

Abstract

Although extremes of labour exploitation are part of capitalism, mainstream political discourse positions them outside the capitalist system, as ‘slavery’, ‘trafficking’ or ‘forced labour’. This discourse clearly reinforces capitalist hegemony, since it shields capitalism from legitimate critique regarding both its moral failings and the contradictions inherent to the theoretical justifications its advocates offer for it. By buying into and re-producing that discourse, the modern abolitionist movement unwittingly plays a hegemonic role in the defence of capitalist social relations. Indeed, in its current configuration, modern abolitionism can be understood as quixotically strengthening the very system that creates the exploitation it says it seeks to abolish. Unless modern abolitionists wish merely to serve the forces they should be opposing, they need both to re-frame what we understand by ‘freedom’ and to advocate policies which have genuine emancipatory potential, such as the Unconditional Basic Income (UBI). If they do so, they may well have the capacity to play a radical role in the promotion of global social justice, rather than a purely hegemonic one in defence of the status quo.

Introduction

‘Slavery’, ‘trafficking’ and ‘forced labour’ are crimes that sit at the far end of what Jens Lerche calls the ‘labour exploitation spectrum’ (2007). As Bridget Anderson observes, they are to ‘badness’ what Apple Pie and Motherhood are to ‘goodness’ (2007). And by most media or political accounts, they are getting worse. Barely a day now passes without stories of ‘trafficked people’ here or ‘modern slaves’ there². Governments everywhere are passing anti-slavery laws, modern abolitionist NGOs are mushrooming, and millions of consumers now call for products that are ‘slavery-free’³. Yet this trend poses major problems. For although exploitation merits our attention, the focus on its extreme forms obscures more than it reveals. Concentrating on extremes seen to lie *outside* of capitalism hides the fact that this ‘outside’ is actually *part* of capitalism, and represents nothing other than its worst excesses.

In this essay, I will make three main arguments. The first expands on the above point. I suggest that we need to understand ‘outside-the-system’ extremes as helpful for maintaining the system itself. This is because the discursive-ideological work that the

¹ Neil Howard is Marie Curie Fellow at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute (EUI). Research for this essay was funded by European Union Marie Curie Actions, and by the EUI’s Migration Policy Centre. Neil is grateful for this funding, and for the generous editorial assistance provided by this volume’s editors, as well as by Asha Amirali. Portions of the essay were previously published as media articles with *Al-Jazeera* and *openDemocracy*.

² Witness the prevalence of the figure of ‘the trafficker’ in European political discourse after the rise in deaths post *Mare Nostrum*.

³ See, for example, <http://slaveryfootprint.org/>.

idea of them does sustains both the fictitious binaries and the foundational principles upon which the system rests. It also shields the system from legitimate critique.

The second draws on a decade of my own and other research with ‘modern abolitionists’ to argue that these figures play a paradoxical role in defence of the status quo. Although choosing to ally with people they see as exploited, they end up serving the interests of their exploiters. This is a result of the power of capitalist ideology over their thinking⁴, and a consequence of the fact that those structuring the system that leads to their exploitation both pay their wages and place limits on what they can say and do. Abolitionists are thus central to advancing the notion that severe exploitation exists only outside the capitalist system, and that it can be overcome without systemic changes.

Finally, I present an alternative and a potential way forward. If exploitation under capitalism is necessarily contingent on the economic vulnerability deriving from propertylessness, then a genuine abolitionist response to that exploitation must strive to eliminate this vulnerability. There are two actions that certain abolitionists can take to contribute towards this effort. First, they must recapture the language of freedom from its current neoliberal masters, and they must reposition it as the ‘power to say no’. Second, they must unite in advocating for the one policy with the potential to guarantee all people this power – the Unconditional Basic Income (UBI). Should abolitionists be bold enough to take these steps, they are well placed to play a revolutionary role in the advancement of global social justice, instead of merely reinforcing the status quo.

Capitalism and Coercion

Two core dualisms structure capitalist thinking, between *consent* and *coercion*, and *freedom* and *force*. Each derives from what may be understood as capitalism’s twin foundational principles – self-ownership and private property (Cohen 1994, Brace 2004). The capitalist interpretation of the human condition centres on the notion of self-ownership (Cohen 1994)⁵, or what Brace terms the ‘territorial understanding of self’ (2004: 4). Thinkers from Locke to Nozick begin from the premise that ‘every man has a property in his own person’, which ‘nobody has any right to but himself’ (Locke in Cohen 1994: 209). From this it follows that each individual is an ontologically discrete island of autonomy, that stewardship over this island must be a matter of individual discretion, and that this discretion should extend up to the point at which it encounters the limits of another’s⁶.

⁴ Here I use ‘ideology’ in the three-dimensional way that Žižek uses ‘ideology’ (1994: 11-18). His first dimension is ‘ideology as a doctrine, a composite of ideas, beliefs, concepts, and so on, destined to convince us of its “truth”, yet actually serving some unavowed power interest’. This corresponds the more traditional Marxist notion of ‘ideology’. His second dimension is ‘the materiality of ideology’, which corresponds more to the Althusserian ‘Ideological State Apparatus’ (ISA). His third is what he terms ‘ideology-in-and-for-itself...neither ideology *qua* explicit doctrine...nor ideology in its material existence...but the elusive network of implicit, quasi-“spontaneous” presuppositions and attitudes that form an irreducible moment of the reproduction of non-ideological [practices]’. In this understanding, none of us ever live outside of the ideological, strictly speaking, while the ideological moment *par excellence* is the moment claiming itself to be beyond ideology.

⁵ In Cohen’s terms, ‘nothing is more bourgeois than this principle – it is *the* principle of the bourgeois revolution’ (1994: 259).

⁶ As Cohen has it, ‘Self-ownership ensures that my right to use my fist as I please stops at the tip of your nose, because of your rights, under maximal self-ownership, over your nose’ (1994: 215).

Importantly, in this capitalist world of meaning, the sphere of discretion includes (control over) the use of one's labour-power (man's 'original property'⁷), as well as the material property that one may acquire with that labour-power. Man is understood to be 'free' when he disposes of his energy and his property as he pleases, and 'unfree' when he is forced by another to dispose of his energy or his property according to that other's preferences. This in turn means that the exchange of goods or labour may be 'legitimate' – capitalist – when both parties to the exchange consent to it, and 'illegitimate' when at least one of them does not. Moreover, it implies that coercion can only ever be *individual*, for in a(n a-historical) world of self-owning individuals exercising their right to self-ownership, only a legal or moral person can impinge upon the ability of another to actualize this right. Just as it is impossible for an act of God to steal your car, so circumstance cannot render you a slave⁸.

For capitalist thinkers, then, 'capitalism' denotes the universe of self-owning persons freely exchanging their property, including their labour. Exchanges that do not correspond to these conditions – in other words, which are subject to individualized force or coercion – are those that lie *outside* the putative world of capitalism. With material goods, this includes theft, larceny or looting⁹, while with labour it includes 'trafficking', 'slavery' or 'forced labour', since each boils down, in definitional terms, to the presence or absence of consent or coercion in the exchange.

Yet there are obvious problems with these binary criteria. For one thing, they fail to reflect the messy realities that we find in the real world. For another, they cannot account for the pre-existing, property-based inequalities that structure these messy realities¹⁰. To give a concrete example, take the mother who is so poor and so lacking in social protection that she chooses to accept the proposal of the 'trafficker', who promises to feed her children if she will commit to a period of 'sexual servitude'. Who is guilty of coercion here? And where is the line between freedom and force? Or what of the subsistence farmer, so indebted and so limited in his options that he agrees to 'sell himself' into debt-bondage in order to pay off what he owes? Is his contract illegitimate simply because we find it morally unpleasant, and even though he consents to his 'coercion'?

It is important to recognise that these are *not* mere rhetorical or philosophical questions. A wealth of research now shows that people at the margins of the global economy routinely choose – and probably have always routinely chosen – to submit to this kind of exploitation as their best available option. In Steinfeld's terms, it is the lesser of their two 'disagreeable alternatives' (1991: 19)¹¹. Crucially for our purposes,

⁷ For it is usually, implicitly a man, who is also white and wealthy.

⁸ It is worth noting that this understanding of coercion has been formalized everywhere in law. Even the International Labour Organization makes this clear in its own interpretation of the Forced Labour Convention: 'An external constraint or indirect coercion interfering with a worker's freedom to "offer himself voluntarily" may result not only from an act of the authorities, such as a statutory instrument, but also from an employer's practice...However, the employer or the State are not accountable for all external constraints or indirect coercion existing in practice: *for example, the need to work in order to earn one's living could become relevant only in conjunction with other factors for which they are answerable*' (2007: 20-1, emphasis added).

⁹ Although in the more extreme, Nozickian formulation, it even includes even redistributive taxation, since Nozick sees taxation as incompatible with self-governing liberty in the same way that slavery is incompatible with liberty. Unsurprisingly, Nozick concedes the legitimacy of a tax that pays for the police force, even as he rejects the same tax being spent on 'welfare' (1974).

¹⁰ Or, as I shall argue below, for the historic 'primitive accumulation' generating those very inequalities (Marx, Capital Vol.1; 1977).

¹¹ Notably, these alternatives are not always as stark as between death or destitution. And those making the choice are often not the very poorest. As Nicola Phillips has recently shown, even the working poor often elect to accept exploitative, coercive or

this includes a great many people who are subsequently classified as victims of trafficking, slavery or forced labour. I have found this clearly in my own research in West Africa, where I interviewed dozens of adolescents officially labelled as ‘victims of trafficking’. Although depicted in official circles as agency-less innocents kidnapped by unscrupulous gangmasters, in reality almost all of these young men had exercised what we would commonly understand as their ‘choice’ in the decision to migrate for work. They did so in order to earn some money (Howard 2013 and 2014; see also Howard and Morganti 2015)¹².

What does this mean? There are three important points to be drawn out. First is the fact that in the messiness of real-world practice it is clearly impossible to sustain the fictitious, arbitrary binaries between consent and coercion or freedom and force that structure the idealised notion of individual capitalist exchange. There are myriad workers who both consent to their treatment *and* simultaneously experience coercion. The fact that their coercion is not of the individual, criminal, contract-abrogating type does not make it any less real, or any less brutal.

This brings us to our second point. Although capitalist ideologues maintain that in a free world populated by self-owning individuals, coercion can only ever be individual, this is clearly false. Indeed, at best it is incoherent, and at worst bad faith (Banaji 2003). As Robert Hale aptly puts it:

‘[The worker] must eat. Yet while there is no law against eating in the abstract, there is a law which forbids him to eat any of the food which actually exists in the community – and that is the law of private property’ (in Steinfeld 1991: 20).

The Nozickian formulation of market freedom works if everybody has property; it fails miserably if they do not. Because in very simple terms, for consent to be meaningful, you need to be able to withhold it. Saying yes means *being able to say no* (Van Parijs 1997, Widerquist 2013). But in order to say no, you have to have property to sustain yourself when you do. And if you do not, your formal freedom is substantively meaningless, because you will be coerced by the force of circumstance to say yes. *Capitalism is ultimately premised on this exploitative reality*, as Marx long ago showed us (1976), and despite what its apologists may claim. Although many actually-existing capitalists do not take advantage of their workers in the way that our trafficker does with the mother, their very existence as capitalists depends on the fact that most workers cannot really say no to a job. This is why Jairus Banaji asks, not without irony: ‘When is a contract “voluntary”? The answer is, probably never... [B]ecause economic coercion is pervasive under capitalism’ (2003: 69-70).

It is precisely this, then, the free market’s foundational hypocrisy, that the idea of ‘slavery’, ‘trafficking’ and ‘forced labour’ serves to hide. This is our third and most important point. Recall that even people engaged in labour officially labelled as ‘trafficking’, ‘slavery’ or ‘forced labour’ often consent to their work. This means that, according to the principle of self-ownership, even work that is supposedly outside of capitalism exists within it – and, indeed, *because of it*. Yet what the idea of ‘slavery’,

abusive labour conditions as a tactical necessity in the pursuit of their livelihood goals, since the adverse terms under which they have been incorporated into the global economy preclude any superior option (Phillips 2013, Phillips et al. 2014).

¹² This finding has been paralleled in many other contexts (see, for example, Sharma 2003 or Andrijasevic 2010).

‘trafficking’ and ‘forced labour’ does is to take these labour experiences that express capitalism’s moral and theoretical failings and present them as existing *outside of capitalism*. It thereby obscures the constitutive role played by property-based inequalities in securing the coerced consent that most people would intuitively understand as exploitation (Cohen 1994, Ch. 8). In doing so, it re-inscribes capitalism’s fictitious binaries, protects its underlying commitment to unfettered private property, and diverts the moral outrage that might otherwise challenge its hegemony.

The Hegemonic Function of Modern-Day Abolitionism

What role do the ‘modern abolitionists’ play in this process? ‘Modern abolitionists’ are those international agencies, academics, government departments, NGOs and charities whose self-appointed mission is to ‘rid the world of slavery, trafficking and forced labour’. I have spent the past ten years working with these people and their organisations, in Europe, Australia, Africa and North America. I have mixed professional engagement *with* them, with detailed, anthropological research *of* them. I have observed them at work, analysed the interactions across and between their different bureaucracies, and quizzed many on why they do what they do. They are, as David Kennedy would put it, very often ‘good, well-meaning people’ who (at least think they) wish to improve the lives of the world’s most exploited workers (2004; see also Heron 2007 and Kempadoo 2015). Yet although (at least some of) their hearts reside in the right place, their contribution to the workers of the world is at best highly limited and at worst very problematic. This is because they are central to promoting *precisely* the story that everyday exploitation under capitalism actually lays outside of it, and thus that it can be prevented by market-friendly policies.

Kemala Kempadoo’s recent article taking stock of the past two decades of contemporary abolition illustrates this point perfectly (2015). In examining the discourse and practice of the world’s major abolitionists, she concludes that most faithfully reflect and repeat the capitalist mantra that the world can be divided into ‘free’ and ‘forced’ labourers, and that these groups are separated by the vanishing line between individualised consent and coercion. For abolitionists, she asserts, ‘legitimate’ capitalist exchange is the norm, outside of which we find extreme ‘anomalies’ such as trafficking or slavery. Furthermore, as her example of the Walk Free Foundation makes clear, contemporary abolitionists ‘individualize’ the dividing line between one and the other, claiming that ‘it involves one person depriving another person of their freedom’ (ibid. p14). Causality is therefore abstracted from relations of property and reduced either to individual criminality or to the empty signifier that is ‘poverty’ (about which we shall have more to say below)¹³.

This tragic farce is echoed in the policies that abolitionists commonly advocate. For those policies consist predominantly of a-political, technical, market-friendly strategies that leave the market and its unequal property relations entirely unchanged. These include persuading businesses to behave better, pushing

¹³ Elizabeth Bernstein captures this trend forcefully: ‘The “freedom” that is advocated by contemporary abolitionists,” she writes, embraces neoliberalism and “locates all social harm outside of the institutions of corporate capitalism and the state apparatus. In this way,” she continues, “the masculinist institutions of big business, the state and the police are reconfigured as allies and saviors, rather than enemies, of unskilled migrant workers, and the responsibility for slavery is shifted from structural factors and dominant institutions onto individual deviant men” (in Kempadoo 20015: 16).

governments to better police the bad apples, or encouraging consumers to ‘shop more responsibly’. In this regard, Slavery Footprint, as analysed by Allison Page (2014), are paradigmatic. Slavery Footprint represent what Page describes as ‘an analog to green consumption’s carbon footprint’ (ibid. p1) – in other words, a green-washing device that allows consumers to ‘feel better about feeling bad’. They purport to measure consumers’ reliance on slave labor by analyzing their consumption habits (ibid.). They do *not* encourage a reduction in consumption, or bring into question wider relations of consumer capitalism. As their founder clearly states: ‘Our torches and pitchforks are out for the slave traders, not the multinationals’ (ibid. p.6). What they therefore do is encourage consumers to write letters to the companies with poor supply chain governance records and ‘urge’ them to do better, or simply to shop with companies certified as ‘slavery-free’.

Why is it that modern abolitionists remain so anodyne? Even when activists are seemingly so dedicated to social justice? On the basis of my research with them, I would argue that there are three interrelated reasons. The first is an ideologically conditioned simple *lack of understanding/ refusal to understand*. The majority of abolitionist staff do not have a nuanced grasp of how capitalism works or of the economic vulnerability that is central to it. Although declaring themselves to be outraged by exploitation and injustice, very few have ever actually met a ‘forced labourer’, and most see exploitation through the reductive binary prism of consent or coercion. As a result, when confronted with data showing that the coerced often consent to their coercion, the common response is one of denial or baffled silence. That silence is echoed when asked why they think that people have to make this choice. While some will identify ‘poverty’ as the reason, few are able to explain what poverty is, what causes it, or what relation it has to property.

In my analysis, this reflects the sheer hegemony of capitalist ideology over their thinking. For many abolitionists, it is *literally* un-thinkable that severe labour exploitation could be part of, or caused by, capitalist social relations. Their denial and their silence are genuine *aporia*, a real expression of the fact that their mental framework cannot account for such disturbing realities. As Mark Fisher (2010) and Jodi Dean (2012) have rightly noted, this is not uncommon in the age of ‘capitalist realism’. Ideology is at its most powerful when at its most opaque (Žižek 1994, 2012), and under conditions of capitalist realism, it has become so opaque and so naturalised that these abolitionist figures simply cannot see through its fog.

This does not mean, however, that they do not experience distress. On the contrary, their denial reflects this clearly, while the invocation of the word ‘poverty’ is surely a doomed attempt by those who reject denial to fill the void which erupts when their framework is confronted by its own contradictions. Here we may turn instructively to Lacan and Laclau¹⁴. Lacan shows that the human psyche is irredeemably primed to seek narrative closure, because absences of meaning are too disquieting for us to entertain. In order to cope, therefore, we identify ourselves with closed, narrative totalities that build meaning for us. Crucially, when these break down (when, in Lacanian terms, the ‘Real’ irrupts into our narrative Reality), we are thrust into the disturbing position of having to respond. Our response can either be to confront the

¹⁴ Here I draw variously on: Stavrakakis (1999), Laclau and Mouffe (2001), Critchley and Marchart (2004), Glynos and Stavrakakis (2004).

ultimate impossibility of total narrative closure, to adopt a new narrative, or to seek to reconstruct the old. The abolitionist invocation of poverty falls into this latter camp. As Laclau would have it, it is an attempt to suture the tear in the capitalist imaginary by using the patch of poverty. This is a capitalist ideological response *par excellence*. For what the word ‘poverty’ does is to locate the cause of ‘forced labour’ again *outside* of capitalism, rather than as both a consequence and a part thereof. This is nothing other than a deferral, for poverty is itself an empty signifier that has no positive content of its own – it is an a-historical description of what is, rather than an historicised account of *why*¹⁵.

The pathos of this is lost on most abolitionists, but certainly not all. Some are troubled by their *aporia* and others do have a sense of where it comes from. Yet despite their understanding, many are prevented from saying or doing anything genuine about it. This encapsulates the second and third of the reasons why I believe that the abolitionist field behaves as it does – what I have elsewhere called the *politics of silence* and the *politics of representation* (Howard 2012). In brief, these operate as follows: either 1) abolitionist staff may be forbidden by their (capitalist) donors from identifying the political-structural forces that sustain the poverty (propertylessness) that underpins exploitation, or 2) they may self-censor in the knowledge that the truth does not sell, whereas sensationalist stories of outside-of-the-system suffering do.

On the first point, I do not wish to suggest that abolitionists are corrupt, at least not in the conventional sense of that term. Rather, the problem is that those who pay their wages and fund their work are the very same governments or corporations with greatest stake in the status quo (Kempadoo 2015). These figures are virtually all major neoliberals. For them, inequality is almost entirely off the table. And when it is on the table, it is (to be) understood as a problem of exclusion from the market economy, rather than as a consequence of differential and adverse incorporation into it (Phillips 2013). Their discourse thus constructs wealth as a factor of endeavour. There is no place to challenge its legitimacy with an admission that it relies on profiting from some people not being able to say no to bad work¹⁶. What this in turn leads to is the propagation of a sensationalist, simplistic narrative depicting trafficking, slavery or forced labour as existing entirely *outside of capitalism*, the straightforward consequence of bad men¹⁷ choosing to abuse innocent victims. As one very senior abolitionist bluntly told me: ‘we must avoid discussion of politics’. Or, in the words of another: ‘this story is “sexy”, it raises money, and it mobilises support’.

Many abolitionists are thus caught in a catch-22 situation. Squeezed on one side by their paymasters and on the other by the rigours of fundraising, they are reduced to peddling a story that protects the very injustices responsible for what they stand

¹⁵ In this sense, the invocation of ‘poverty’ as causal represents a parallel to the very creation of the concepts of ‘modern slavery’, ‘trafficking’ and ‘forced labour’ in the first place. Indeed, it represents the next step in the psychic-conceptual self-defence strategy of which their creation is the beginning. Both are attempts to preserve the integrity of the capitalist imaginary and its foundational principles, in the face of real-world experiences that manifest their practical-theoretical impossibility. ‘Modern slavery’, ‘trafficking’ and ‘forced labour’ thus arguably represent what may be understood as capitalism’s Real, its un-symbolisable ‘constitutive outside’. When they force their way back ‘inside’, ‘poverty’ comes to the rescue to fill the necessary conceptual void.

¹⁶ It should be noted that I do not wish to depict these donor figures as (purely) consciously malevolent, or as architects of some conspiracy-theory puppet-show of global dominance. *They too live within ideology*. They are figures who inhabit Žižek’s first and third dimension of ideology. The problem for the rest of us, however, is that, in our unequal world of concentrated power, they happen to control important components of the second dimension – the ISA that materialise dimensions one and three.

¹⁷ For once again, it is usually, implicitly, men, even if these men are usually, implicitly non-white and non-wealthy.

against. If they say otherwise and mobilise around alternatives that challenge foundational inequalities, they risk losing the money that enables them to do anything at all. Under these circumstances, the rise of such an a-political, technical, consumer-centred version of abolitionism must be understood as a perfect hegemonic coup by the forces of the established order¹⁸. Its corporatized co-optation of dissent channels outrage at systemic injustices away from any collective, politicised resistance to them (Dauvergne and LeBaron 2014).

A Potential Way Forward?

So what, then, is to be done? If the modern abolitionist movement wishes to be more than a mere fig-leaf for injustice and wants to achieve more than simply making consumers and activists feel better about feeling bad, what options does it have? Does it have any at all? In my analysis, and as I will argue in this essay's final section, there are a number of key actions that certain well-placed abolitionists can take. If they do, and if these are successful, they have the potential both to change this pitiful state of affairs and to open a wider breach within the neoliberal armour. These actions involve, first, a discursive effort to re-frame the concept of freedom, and second, an advocacy effort behind the one policy that could have genuine emancipatory potential, precisely because it seeks to operationalise this re-framed freedom and put an end to propertylessness. That policy is the Unconditional Basic Income (UBI).

Which Actors?

Before we discuss these actions, however, we must first establish which actors can take them. Given the constraints outlined above, which abolitionists can lead their movement beyond its current impasse? The obvious answer is, 'Those who get it', who are able to see the ideological and donor restrictions, reject the trite invocation of 'poverty', and scorn market-friendly policy solutions. This, of course, is vital. But it is not enough. For precisely the catch-22 reason that most abolitionists will lose their funding – and thus their ability to do anything at all – should they rock the hegemonic boat.

So who is it to be? In my estimation, and unless a radical wave of (materially self-destructive) bravery or principle sweeps through (a politicised version of) the modern abolitionist movement, it will necessarily have to be an organisation that is both critically aware *and* financially independent from (and thus autonomous of) neoliberal paymasters. This could conceivably be an endowment-funded NGO, or even a 'philanthropic' body. But it is much more likely to be a subscription-funded representative of the labour movement. Why? Firstly because, for all its many ills, the labour movement still retains the historical memory of concepts such as 'wage slavery', and it continues to battle against the advancements of neoliberal capitalism. Secondly because the labour movement receives the majority of its funding directly from the levies it raises through its members. This means that it is free of the influence of wealthy individual benefactors or governments, and is correspondingly 'free' to say things that other organisations are not.

¹⁸ Itself a parallel to the many other ways that neoliberalism's major powerbrokers render technical problems that are eminently political – as indeed tragically evidenced by the European discourse around Greek exit from the Euro.

The International Trades Union Confederation (ITUC) perfectly illustrates these dynamics¹⁹. As an umbrella body representing the ‘voice’ of global labour, it is staffed by many veterans of the life-long battle against capital. It is therefore full of critical perspectives. Moreover, it receives its funding directly from member affiliates, and not from governments or philanthropists. As a result, its positioning is consistently more sophisticated than that of many fellow abolitionists. It frequently campaigns against ‘corporate greed’, loudly denounces inequality, and at times critiques capitalism itself.

Re-Framing Freedom

Let us say, then, that the ITUC does decide to lead a charge against the banality of (other) abolitionists. What then? A crucial first step, I believe, must be an attempt to re-frame the concept of ‘freedom’. This is a conclusion inspired variously by the insights of post-Marxist political theory (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, Critchley and Machart 2004, Fisher 2010, Dean 2012), psycho-analysis (Žižek 1994, Stavrakkakis 1999, Critchley and Machart 2004, Glynos and Stavrakkakis 2004), and cognitive science (Lakoff 2004, Lakoff and Johnson 2008). Each argues that hegemony depends on establishing meaning-dominance over certain key signifiers (which are foundational to identity formation and to the metaphors we live by) and on the articulation of equivalences or differences between these signifiers and others. On this understanding, contemporary neoliberal hegemony relies on neoliberal success in colonising the core signifier of ‘freedom’, and on the articulation of its equivalence with the market and its difference from the state²⁰. A reversal of that hegemony will thus require a reversal of these differences and equivalences, and a reversal of freedom’s framing. Indeed, if the labour experiences defined as unfree are what motivate abolitionists to do what they do; if it is the propertylessness pertaining to the social organisation of capitalism that engenders these labour experiences; and if ownership of the concept of freedom is central to the hegemony that makes this propertylessness possible; then there is simply no other way for abolitionism to proceed.

What content will a re-framed freedom have? Our answer lies nascent within the theoretical incoherence of the conventional abolitionist position that ‘poverty’ is a ‘root cause’ of slavery, trafficking and forced labour²¹. For it is impossible to square the capitalist understanding of (negative) freedom as non-interference with the idea that an infringement on that freedom possess a ‘root cause’. A ‘root cause’ is a fundamental reason for the occurrence of a problem, an original source of action which sets in motion a chain of subsequent actions leading to an event. ‘Poverty’ is an impersonal, abstract concept that we use to designate the fact of possessing very few resources. If poverty is said by many abolitionists to be the root cause of extreme exploitation, it is because they understand the poor as having been ‘pushed’ into exploitation by others by their lack of suitable alternatives. This *necessarily* implies a theory of freedom that is significantly broader than the traditional, capitalist

¹⁹ <http://www.ituc-csi.org/>.

²⁰ Indeed, neoliberals have been tireless in their efforts to achieve this. From the early work of von Mises and Hayek, through the diligence of the Mont Pèlerin Society and the Heritage Foundation, they have consistently and very consciously striven to establish the ‘common sense’ that freedom equates to the market, and that the state (along with all of its redistributive functions) represents freedom’s antithesis (Lakoff 2004, Harvey 2005, Peck 2010).

²¹ The following draws on Howard and Lebaron (Forthcoming, Ch. 2).

understanding of negative non-interference, for it acknowledges that positive capabilities are *required* for guaranteeing non-interference.

That broader theory is best articulated in the disarmingly simple terms of political philosopher Karl Widerquist – ‘*freedom as the power to say no*’. Widerquist’s formal definition reads that freedom is ‘the effective power to accept or refuse active cooperation with other willing people’ (2013). The key word here is of course ‘effective.’ For it underscores that ‘legal self-ownership is not enough to make a person free’ (ibid. 26) – positive capabilities are also imperative if we wish secure even negative freedom. Thus, when we say that poverty is a root cause of ‘slavery’, we acknowledge that people’s negative freedom from interference may be violated by coercive others *because* they lack the more fundamental positive freedom to say no. This means that everybody must have an exit option; and in the world of private property, it means everyone having *enough of their own property to sustain themselves when they refuse exploitative work*.

Arguably, the timing is particularly propitious for re-framing freedom in this way. Millions have recently been politicised by the ongoing capitalist crisis and the intensification of neoliberal governance since 2008²². Inequality is back on the agenda, and capitalist legitimacy is once again widely in question (Della Porta 2015). The terrain is therefore fertile. What is more, the rise in precarity now characterising life in the core capitalist countries (Standing 2011, 2014) offers abolitionists like the ITUC the chance to convincingly link the unfreedom of putatively outside-of-the-system extremes – ‘slavery’, ‘trafficking’ and ‘forced labour’ – with the unfreedom of the everyday, and to do so by blaming the system itself²³. For what precarious worker really possess freedom as the power to say no? Very few indeed. And it is precisely the surfeit of neoliberal capitalist freedom that ensures this. The precarious are so ‘free’ from regularised hours and set career paths that they are ultimately ‘free’ from any economic security whatsoever. They, like the ‘slave’, are ultimately free to starve because capital is itself free from any geographical moorings, long-term commitments, or protective ‘red tape’. And many are both aware of it and angry about it (Standing 2014).

So what are the revolutionary rhetorical linkages that could be made in an effort to re-frame freedom? We can imagine many²⁴, and in doing so we should recall two things. Firstly, abolitionists have been so vocal for so long that the building blocks of their iconographic architecture are already everywhere in place – chains, cages, barcodes, dollar signs, and so on. All that is now needed is for actors like the ITUC to *politicise* this iconography, and to deploy it to advance the idea that both extreme and everyday exploitation derive from the *same* market-based realities, that for those

²² It is not coincidental that the words ‘root’ and ‘radical’ both derive from the Latin *radix*.

²³ The dialectical irony of this will not, I am sure, be lost on many readers.

²⁴ For instance:

- Paralleling the (un)freedom of the ‘forced labourer or ‘slave’ with the (un)freedom of the graduate working three internships or the mother begging for Walmart shifts in order to make ends meet.
- Contrasting the free movement of capital with workers’ immobility.
- Mocking the equation of consumer purchasing decisions with ‘freedom’.
- Contrasting the ‘freedom’ of access that corporations have to politicians with the access that most citizens are denied.
- Ridiculing the gap between substantive and formal freedom, for example with an image showing a person ‘free’ to have whatever they want...if only they have the money.
- Lampooning the pointlessness of ‘freedom from’ without ‘freedom to’.

who lack property the market is coercion masked as freedom, and that the guarantee of ‘real freedom’ requires redistributive policies that ensure the progressive freedom to say no (Van Parijs 1992). Secondly, a politicised version of the abolitionist movement is *uniquely* well positioned to lead this effort. Why? Because ‘slavery’ is the conceptual obverse of freedom; because it possesses similar emotive power to freedom; and because the anti-slavery movement therefore possesses the (pro-freedom) moral gravitas necessary to bring this message to the public consciousness.

Unconditional Basic Income

How, practically, can we guarantee people their ‘real freedom’ to say no? In my view, the one policy that has greatest potential is UBI²⁵, precisely because its central purpose is to give people an ‘exit option’ from the market, to overcome their propertylessness, and to prevent them from ever having to accept exploitative work for want of a better alternative.

UBI has a long and respected theoretical pedigree. Thomas Paine advocated a version of it in *Agrarian Justice*, it has had modern supporters ranging from Bertrand Russell to John Rawls, and now even established progressive political parties are taking it up (Blaschke 2012). What does it entail? The idea is as simple as it is disarming: give everyone a regular stipend sufficient to guarantee survival, with no strings attached. The amount is not intended to make you rich, but to prevent you from going hungry (Van Parijs 1992: 1). In this regard, it represents a good faith response to the economic vulnerability characterising a world of unequal property relations. For if, as we have seen, control over private property is necessary for survival, then it is crucial that everybody possesses a necessary minimum. In seeking to ensure that they do, UBI aims to actualise the ability to say ‘no’ to labour, to withhold one’s consent, and to resist what Marx termed ‘the dull compulsion of economic relations’ (Van Parijs 1997, Wright 2005, Widerquist 2013).

Importantly for our purposes, UBI is no longer simply utopian theory. It has also been explored in practice. UNICEF have recently completed a large-scale pilot study with the Self-Employed Women’s Association in India to trial UBI among thousands of villagers in the state of Madhya Pradesh (Davala et al. 2015). This is the first ever large-scale UBI trial in a country of the Global South, and the findings are predictably electric. Indeed, they attest to the policy’s multi-dimensional emancipatory potential. In this case, it led to an increase in economic activity among the poor, generated improvements in things ranging from nutrition to sanitation, and had egalitarian outcomes that saw greater benefits for women than for men and for the poorest vis-à-vis the wealthy. Most significant of all, however, it had profoundly liberatory consequences. Since it engendered a clear decrease in debt bondage, as poor villagers were able either to pay off their debts or to accumulate sufficient cash reserves to avoid indebting themselves in the first place (ibid.)

The importance of these findings simply cannot be overstated. As I have argued throughout this essay, the labour exploitation denoted by the terms ‘trafficking’,

²⁵ UBI is here defined as ‘an income unconditionally granted to all on an individual basis, without means test or work requirement’ (*qua* Van Parijs 1992, 1997 and Widerquist 2013).

‘slavery’ and ‘forced labour’ mainly results when people lack suitable alternatives to that exploitation. UBI has the potential to ensure that no-one finds themselves in this unenviable position by guaranteeing that all people possess a sufficient monetary minimum. This is equivalent to replacing the patchy existing social safety-nets – through the gaps in which many always fall – with an unconditional floor on which everyone can stand (Van Parijs 1992: 5).

How, in concrete terms, can abolitionists seize on this breakthrough and begin advocating UBI as their genuine, real freedom-enhancing way forward? First, of course, they must prepare the ground by pushing the analysis presented in papers such as this. They must make the case that real freedom requires people to have the power to say no to the compulsions of the market economy and they must argue that unless they do there is a structural likelihood that some will end up in situations akin to what we call ‘slavery’. Second, they must make the theoretical case that UBI represents the policy that can guarantee real freedom. And third, most immediately, they should fund research-action pilot projects that *empirically* explore the effects of using UBI as an anti-slavery policy. For if, as one may expect, this research generates large-scale data showing tangibly that UBI does indeed diminish severe labour exploitation, then abolitionists will have all the discursive ammunition they need to drive home the message that UBI is what freedom-guaranteeing social protection must look like in the 21st Century.

Conclusion

The argument I have sought to make in this essay turns on a very simple premise – that the ‘freedom’ held so dear by capitalist ideologues can only be substantively meaningful when every ‘yes’ is backed by a potential ‘no’. Despite professing their allegiance to self-owning liberty, the architects of the market economy have designed it in such a way as to deny that liberty to most people. This is why the arbitrary division between ‘free’ and ‘forced’ labour is so patently dishonest. In reality, many people have no alternative to the exploitation offered by their ‘employers’. This is capitalism’s original sin. And although it is re-enacted every day on the body of the exploited worker, that re-enactment is hidden precisely by the idea contained in the terms ‘slavery’, ‘trafficking’ and ‘forced labour’.

The modern abolitionist movement exists officially to put an end to the exploitation denoted by this terminology. Yet in its current guise it hinders more than it helps. For by positioning exploitation as an anomaly laying *outside* of capitalism, instead of representing capitalism’s major failings, it stifles any possible conversation about how we might organise things differently. In my estimation, this reduces most modern abolitionists to the pathetic status of an unwitting accomplice, blindly defending the unjust status quo.

One alternative to this sad state of affairs would be for materially-autonomous and conceptually-critical abolitionists like the ITUC to begin a twofold battle. On the one hand, to re-frame freedom *away* from the capitalist negative of non-interference, and towards the progressive, redistribution-requiring ‘power to say no’. On the other, to advance the idea of worldwide Unconditional Basic Income as the policy move that can give all people this power. Such a move would undoubtedly be bold, and there can be no doubt that the eventual implementation of a successfully-advocated UBI

would pose technical and political challenges. Not least how to ensure that its introduction did not come at the expense of other public goods provision (Bergmann 2005), or with non-recipient migrants being reduced to denizen status (Wright 2005: 7, Cruz 2013). Nevertheless, we can safely assume that humanity possesses the collective wherewithal to suitably overcome these challenges if only sufficient political will can be mobilised.

Intriguingly, as suggested above, for all their current failings and for all we may rightly assume that the unification of the abolitionist movement behind the critical advocacy of bodies like the ITUC remains a long way off, abolitionists are nevertheless uniquely well placed to lead such a mobilisation, since they enjoy unrivalled discursive power. Nobody is *for* what is commonly understood as slavery; everybody is against it. This is why the contemporary abolitionist call to ‘end slavery within a generation’ goes entirely unopposed and garners allies ranging from the global business elite to the Pope himself²⁶. If abolitionists were to channel this discursive energy into an advocacy effort behind freedom as the power to say no and UBI, might these ideas not shift rapidly from the margins to the mainstream? Moreover, might they not conceivably bring ‘the enemy’ on board? They have, after all, been described as ‘the capitalist road to communism’ (Van der Veen and Van Parijs 1986). Because what self-respecting capitalist could really object to anything that enhances ‘free labour’, or that makes consent real by giving people the chance to withhold it?

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²⁶ See: <http://thinkprogress.org/economy/2014/12/11/3602687/pope-francis-modern-slavery/>

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