

Atti delle “Settimane di Studi” e altri Convegni
45

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SCHIAVITÙ E SERVAGGIO
NELL'ECONOMIA EUROPEA

SECC. XI-XVIII

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SERFDOM AND SLAVERY
IN THE EUROPEAN ECONOMY

11TH - 18TH CENTURIES

* *

Atti della “Quarantacinquesima Settimana di Studi”
14-18 aprile 2013

a cura di Simonetta Cavaciocchi

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Sheilagh Ogilvie

I would like to begin by echoing Professor Karpov's pleased comments about the amount we have learned during this conference about various forms of unfreedom in the pre-industrial world – both in Europe and in parts of the world with which Europe began to interact in the medieval and early modern period. We have learned a great deal about what we know, but also a great deal about what we do not yet know and need to know more about.

However, to use the metaphor of the forest and the trees, we have identified so many new trees over the past three days that I believe that we should end our conference by making sure that we do not sight of the forest as a whole. I am sure that we all agree that it is important for us to form an idea not just of the individual cases of unfreedom that have been studied, but also the more general role that unfree labour played in the wider economy and society. To that end, what I would like to do in this round-table contribution is to draw seven general propositions from what we have learned over the course of the conference, and derive from them some suggestions for future avenues of research.

Proposition 1: One thing that has emerged from many of the papers that have been given, and many of the interventions in the discussion, is the importance of disaggregating monolithic concepts such as 'serfdom' and 'slavery'. There was enormous variation in serfdom and slavery by time-period, by European society, even among different regions or localities within the same society. In considering serfdom, we have seen the range of variation from 'serfdom lite' (as you might call it) in medieval England (which nonetheless did constrain the options of serfs in a number of ways), to more intermediate versions of serfdom, for instance in parts of early modern Denmark, to extremely burdensome forms of serfdom, for example in parts of Prussia and Schleswig-Holstein, in Mecklenburg and Pomerania, and in most of Russia. The same finding emerges from the slavery papers which have been presented over the past three days. What this implies for our future research is the importance of getting behind over-arching concepts such as 'serfdom' and 'slavery', to examine the real constraints that they imposed on people's choices. I believe that the institutional approach which has been discussed on a number of occasions over the past three days provides a very promising avenue for disaggregating both serfdom and slavery in this way. The contributions to this conference have shown that when we do this, we find that unfreedom was created

and maintained not just by the institutional framework of slavery or serfdom itself, but also by other institutions in society – notably the state, the village community, urban institutions, and merchant organizations. Only by getting behind monolithic concepts such as serfdom and slavery and disaggregating them into their separate institutional constraints will we learn more about the everyday life of serfs and slaves, as Professor Karpov urged, and come to a better understanding of how unfreedom affected the wider economy. That is my Proposition 1: To make unfree labour analytically tractable, we need to disaggregate monolithic concepts such as serfdom and slavery by breaking them down into specific institutional constraints on human action.

Proposition 2: In analysing regimes of unfree labour, we need to pay attention both to the variance and to the mean. We must recognize the existence of variations across different systems of serfdom and across different forms of slavery. But we must also pay attention to *average* or typical experience of societies characterized by unfree labour. We need to devise indicators for comparing serf or slave societies with societies in which workers were largely free. The reason this is important is that it has sometimes been argued that because there was a range of variants of serfdom across pre-modern Europe, and because some of the least oppressive variants of serfdom intersected in some respects with some of the most oppressive variants of non-serfdom, this implies that there was no difference *on average* between serf societies and free societies, in any respect. But, as the discussion at this conference has shown, the existence of variation among different serf societies, and among different ‘free’ societies, does not imply that there was no difference between the average serf society and the average non-serf society. The same is true when we compare slave with non-slave societies. However, we do not yet know enough about these averages. The available evidence, as we have seen, suggests that per capita GDP, wage rates, living standards, human height, and labour productivity were on average lower in serf societies than non-serf societies. However, the lively debate about these findings, especially those on per capita GDP, has shown that we need to know much more about the performance of the economy in serf and slave societies. What has emerged strongly from this conference is the importance of more empirical work at all levels – the macro-level, the meso-level, and the micro-level – on various measures of economic well-being. As someone who has been working for the past five years on peasant living standards and peasant consumption in south German villages, I would like to urge in particular the importance of studying the consumption patterns of ordinary people as a major desideratum for future research. This is my Proposition 2: The existence of variation among different systems of unfreedom does not imply that there was no difference on average between unfreedom and freedom.

Proposition 3: We must pay attention both to the choices of unfree people and to the constraints on those choices. The discussion at this conference has shown that even unfree workers have ‘agency’ – they make choices. This is a major reason why studying the everyday lives of unfree people is important. But we have also seen that unfree workers faced a wide variety of constraints on their choices. Serfs and

slaves themselves were bitterly aware of those constraints. Serfs certainly viewed serfdom as a costly constraint on the economic, social and demographic decisions they regarded as best for themselves. Several contributions to this conference, for example, have shown how serfs preferred cash rents to forced labour services. Others have shown how serfs, for instance in Russia and eastern Germany, were willing to pay for exemptions from manorial restrictions so as to be able to go to places and engage in activities in which their labour would be more productively allocated. Manorial restrictions on serfs' labour-allocation decisions were perceived as costly constraints – by the serfs themselves. The general lesson is that both the choices of unfree workers and the constraints on those choices matter. We must not focus exclusively on the constraints, as much of the traditional historiography has done by uncritically accepting purely legal sources. But it is important not to veer to the opposite extreme and focus solely on the agency and autonomy of serfs and slaves, as some of the revisionist literature has done. We need to be attentive to both aspects of the experiences of serfs and slaves. One way of doing that is to focus on the actions and the revealed preferences of unfree people themselves. This is my Proposition 3: We need to pay attention to both the choices of unfree persons and the constraints on those choices.

Proposition 4: This leads to my fourth proposition, which is the importance of looking at causation and change. Serfdom and slavery arose, mutated, weakened, intensified, and ultimately declined, at different times and with a different chronology in different parts of Europe. We might, as modern people, think that societies always followed a unidirectional development from less freedom to more freedom. But, as emerges from so many of the papers at this conference about both serfdom and slavery, this was not the case everywhere in the course of the medieval and early modern periods. In many parts of central, eastern-central and eastern Europe, for instance, what happened during the early modern period was not a move towards greater freedom but rather an increase in the burdens and constraints on the agency of ordinary people. What has emerged from this conference is the need for much more research on the causes and consequences of change over time in the degree and nature of unfreedom. This was something which John Munro, in his contributions to the discussion, urged us to think about: causation. Why do serfdom and slavery arise to begin with, in certain parts of the world and not in others? Why and how does unfreedom become entrenched? Why does it survive in some societies and break down in others? So this is my Proposition 4: We need to investigate the causes of change over time in freedom and unfreedom.

Proposition 5: We should try to think about the impact of serfdom and slavery in terms of *costs*. In doing so, I would advocate adopting a broad definition of costs: costs not just in terms of money, or solely in terms of the relative cost of land and labour (as in the Domar model of serfdom proposed in the 1970s), but rather in terms of 'opportunity cost', the value of foregone alternatives. As the contributions to this conference have shown, serfdom and slavery affected the people involved, and the economy at large, not just through outright prohibitions, restrictions on

free labour allocation, limits on mobility, controls on marriage, constraints on education and training, and direct interventions in factor and product markets. Unfreedom also exercised its effects in a much wider penumbra of ways. First, there were the payments which unfree persons were willing to make to get around the restrictions – payments for exemptions, licenses, permits, or manumissions. Second, there were the costs incurred by serfs, slaves, and many other members of serf and slave societies, in seeking to evade and circumvent the restrictions of slavery and serfdom. Furthermore, and arguably even more important, there were the costs imposed on the economy because slavery and serfdom, by prohibiting or hindering certain choices, pushed economic activity into the black-market informal sector where, as we know from modern less-developed economies, workers are unprotected, property is insecure, contracts are hard to enforce, and violence and exploitation are rife. This conference has shown that an important avenue for future research is to analyze the wider penumbra of effects of serfdom and slavery – the evasion costs, the rent-seeking, the distortion of human incentives – which went far beyond the purely monetary costs and those imposed by straightforward prohibitions. This is my Proposition 5: We need to think about the effects of serfdom and slavery in terms of opportunity costs, in terms of the wider, general-equilibrium effects of unfreedom.

Proposition 6: We need to know more about the differences in behaviour and productivity between forced labour and free labour. As many of the contributions to this conference have shown, the unfree labour of serfs and slaves was, on average, less productive than free labour, even than free *wage*-labour. The causes of this appear to be that unfree labour lacks motivation to work productively, whereas free labour can be rewarded for its efforts: people working for themselves will receive the rewards for working more productively; people working for wages can be rewarded by being paid higher wages or given improved working conditions in return for working harder. The lesser intensity of these “carrot” incentives for unfree workers (i.e., the lack of positive reward for working harder) can seldom, it appears, be compensated for by the greater intensity of the “stick” incentive (i.e., the fact that landlords and slave-owners can punish serfs and slaves for shirking, in ways that employers of free workers usually cannot). Whatever the combination of causes, the lower productivity of unfree workers was recognized by contemporaries in slave and serf societies, and evidence confirming this productivity gap has emerged repeatedly from the contributions at this conference. We must recognize that this finding has important wider implications: economies in which more human time was allocated and more work was carried out in a framework of coercion, unfreedom and force, had lower average labour productivity than those where more work was done by free labourers. But we need to *measure* the difference between unfree and free labour, in order to assess the size of this productivity gap. This is my Proposition 6: We need to know more about the differences in behaviour between unfree and free labour, and particularly about differences in their productivity.

Proposition 7: We need to recognize the analytical importance of gender. Serfdom and slavery also constrained women, as we have seen in many of the contributions to this conference. Perhaps unfreedom constrained women *more* than it constrained men, and it certainly constrained women *differently* than it constrained men. Let me give just two examples. The first comes from slave societies, where we know that female slaves were not only forced to provide ordinary labour for their masters, but were also often forced to provide sexual services and even bear their masters' children; in this way, slavery constrained their lives even more severely than it constrained those of male slaves. The second example comes from serf societies, where landlords often opposed the continued existence of female-headed households on the grounds that such households were less able to render rents and labour services. Manorial administrators were often supported in dissolving female-headed households by male serfs and by communal institutions manned by male serfs, who even manipulated manorial regulations against female household-heads to obtain benefits for themselves. In this way, in many societies under demesne lordship female serfs were constrained even more severely than male ones, since they were forced into dependent positions in male-headed households when their own revealed preference was to head their own independent households, however poor. We know from modern less developed economies, as well as from studies of historical societies, that the status of women is an important determinant of economic growth and improvement in human well-being. The status of women is important for the whole economy and society, therefore, not just for women themselves. So it is possible that part of the deficit in economic growth and human well-being between serf or slave societies on the one hand and 'free' societies on the other may have arisen from the wider gender gap under serfdom and slavery. This has implications for future research. We need more analysis of the effects of serfdom and slavery on women, in order to assess the size and nature of the gender gap under different forms of unfreedom, and hence the potential growth penalty of serfdom and slavery. So my final proposition is: We must analyze unfreedom using gender as one of our analytical criteria. Only by doing so will we be in a position to assess the full economic and social effects of unfreedom.