Joseph C. Miller Memorial Lecture Series

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When Looms Begin to Weave by Themselves: The Decomposition of Capitalism, Automation and the Problem of "Modern Slavery"*

> What we are confronted with is the prospect of a society of laborers without labor, that is, without the only activity left to them. Surely, nothing could be worse. (Arendt 1998, 5)

1. An apparent paradox

Aristotle once said that if looms were to weave by themselves masters would not need slaves. Even though slavery has been progressively outlawed throughout the world over the past two centuries, the historical trajectory of capitalism seems to place humanity in the exact opposite situation: on the one hand, the accelerated scientific development of the productive forces and the rise of automation processes, on the other hand, a diversification and intensification on a worldwide scale of forms of "forced" or so-called "unfree labour", which many academics, NGOs and the media in general have already become accustomed to classify as "modern slavery."

Such classification gave rise to an intense debate, mostly centered on the legitimacy and effects of the use of the term "slavery." In these controversies, it is very common to see "jumps" from extremely uncertain global statistical estimates regarding the number of "modern slaves" to biographical reports and photo sessions about individual "modern slaves," invariably treated on a first name basis. Faced with so different and complex phenomena, the main question has not been: "What exactly is this and how did it come to be?" but rather: "Is this real slavery or not?." The answer has been sought through analogies and comparisons

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with historical slavery, almost always with transatlantic slavery, often isolating phenomena from their specific historical context where they acquire their full meaning. The discussion has given rise to some important clarifications, but legal aspects have occupied more and more space (e.g. Allain 2012) and I do not think we are much closer to realizing what is really happening as long as it is given so little space for explanations of the structural causes of the different phenomena. Kristiina Kangaspunta, chief of the *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons* of 2016 (UNODC 2016), said in a *Guardian* interview (Kelly 2017) that she does not "think there is any real comprehension of what we are facing." If someone in that position admits this, then it seems that we really have a serious problem.

While the dominant discourse refers to exponential demographic growth, globalization, and government corruption (Bales 2012a, Kara 2017), its critics denounce the misuse of the term "slavery" and highlight the consequences of neoliberalism, poverty, and restrictive immigration policies (O'Connell Davidson 2015; Brace and Davidson 2018; Sharma 2005; Quirk 2007). But these explanations are too superficial and seldom theoretically framed in the historical trajectory of capitalism. However, while we are witnessing a comeback of the historiographical question of the relationship between historical slavery and capitalism (e.g. Beckert and Rockman 2016), the debates about "modern slavery" seem to continue to unfold with little discussion about the relation of the different phenomena to the historical trajectory of the capitalist social totality.

Whether explicitly or implicitly, with a greater or lesser conceptual basis, approaches to the so-called "modern slavery" look at the various phenomena from a concept of capitalism and within a particular historical framework, i. e., they have some understanding of what "capitalism" is and the historical phase in which we are today, from which they envisage "modern slavery" and "unfree labour." What historical frameworks do they have? We must bear in mind that there are overlaps and it is obvious that the same authors sometimes make use of more than one of the possible frameworks. The idea that the phenomena of "modern slavery" are a pre-capitalist or feudal reminiscence, while it seems to be the

dominant historical framework in the modern collective consciousness, especially in the media, is not very common in academic research. But if we look at the work of Kevin Bales, for example, one of the main promoters of the dominant discourse, the relation between "modern slavery" and capitalism is approached only a few times, superficially and descriptively (Bales 2005, 54–55), without it being clear what the author means by "capitalism." Sometimes "modern slavery" is described as the result of "capitalism at its worst" (Bales and Soodalter 2009, 6); other times it is treated as something that "mix the worst parts of feudalism and modern capitalism" (Bales 2012, 233). Although Bales explicitly states that "new slaves" "are part of the globalization process itself" (Bales 2005, 113), the claim is too generic and he seems to understand "capitalism" subjectively, simply as another word for "greed," a moralistic reductionism that we also find in Siddharth Kara (2017).[1]

In the critiques of the discourse on "modern slavery," the use of the term "capitalism" is much more frequent, but appears to be more rhetorical than categorial, with much more explanatory emphasis placed on neo-liberal policies (LeBaron and Ayers 2013; O'Connell Davidson 2015). At times "modern slavery" is more adequately presented as something internal to capitalism and criticized the ideological character of "neo-abolitionism" (Howard 2018; Manzo 2005). This position is more or less in line with studies of "unfree labour" that argue that the various phenomena are exemplary instances of a "fully functional capitalism" (Brass 2011). On the other hand, these positions contrast with those that argue that we are facing moments of "ongoing primitive accumulation" (Boutang 2005; Gerstenberger 2014), which, however, also evoke neoliberal policies.

What seems to be generally excluded from all the approaches is that "modern slavery" and contemporary forms of "unfree labour" are an expression of a fundamental and irremediable crisis of capitalism itself, a symptom of its collapse and not of its immaturity, hardness, or political orientation. From this perspective it will be possible to verify that the

[1] "From the early days of my research, it was clear to me that slavery is motivated by greed" (Kara 2017, 21).

phenomena subsumed in the vague notion of "modern slavery" only in appearance are paradoxical.

2. Capitalism as a world system of abstract labour

> "Labour" by its very nature is unfree, unhuman, unsocial activity. (Marx 1975, 279)

The collapse of capitalism is not an overnight event but a process of several decades resulting from the development of the fundamental contradiction of capitalism identified by Karl Marx. To fully understand this, we must bear in mind some key concepts and the general "historical trajectory of the capitalist social formation as a whole" (Postone 2003, 321). Marx claims that the capitalist mode of production is the "mode of production founded on wage labour" (Marx 1993, 833) or that has wage labour as "its basis" (Marx 1992, 418). At the same time, Marx also states that the world market is "the very basis and living atmosphere of the capitalist mode of production" (Marx 1991, 205), which seems to point to something much broader than the relationship between capitalists and wage labourers and that also marks fundamentally the whole history of modern society. These two different approaches are at the base of a divergency between those who assume capitalism as practically equivalent to wage labour, eventually putting their focus in the relation between capitalists and wage labourers in some European countries (Dobb 2013; Brenner 1977), and those who see capitalism as an evolving world system of market relations and combined labour regimes (Gunder Frank 2008; Wallerstein 2011), a controversy that always reappears whenever the intention is to clarify the relationship between capitalism and "unfree labour."

In order to overcome some of the impasses of this controversy, we must first remember that capital is not wealth in general; it is a particular form of wealth, socially and historically specific to capitalism. Capital is not a "thing," but a social relation and dynamic process of what Marx called the "valorization of value" (Marx 1990, 253). Marx

(1993, 199, 234, 327, 348; 1990, 136–137) repeatedly mentions the difference between "real wealth" or "material wealth" on the one hand, and "value" or "abstract wealth" on the other. But it is not a matter of opposing material wealth, as if it were an anthropological constant, to wealth in value, as a variable social form. Material wealth also exists only in a certain social form. Therefore, we should not talk about wealth in general, but about the social form of wealth (see Murray 2016, 41–48, 89, 294–297; Postone 2003, 24–30). These fundamental distinctions made by Marx are rarely noticed, even by Marxists. Marx indicates that if there is a double character of value in commodities (use value and exchange value) as classical political economy stated, then the objectified labour in them necessarily also has a double character: on the one hand, "concrete labour", which refers to concrete and sensitive acts in the production of goods (the side that produces material wealth); on the other hand, what he called "abstract labour," i.e., the process of combustion of human energy, "essentially the expenditure of human brain, nerves, muscles and sense organs" (Marx 1990, 164), which is the true source of the "abstract wealth" of value. But it is not difficult to see that "labour" is itself already an abstraction, since it groups a set of concrete human activities under the same category, regardless of their content, and leaves others out. In this sense, the abstraction "labour" is already problematic, something that Marx did not fail to recognize with some ambivalence: in a long reflection in the *Grundrisse*, for example, Marx asserts that "'labour' is as modern a category as are the relations which create this simple abstraction"; and that this "simple abstraction" "which modern economics places at the head of its discussions, and which expresses an immeasurably ancient relation valid in all forms of society, nevertheless achieves practical truth as an abstraction only as a category of the most modern society" (Marx 1993, 103, 105).

So, if labour is already an abstraction, Marx's "concrete labour" is a contradiction in terms. Its purpose is only to analytically separate the material side of the abstraction "labour" but this is done under the presupposition of a real social separation from human practices historically specific to modern society (rigidly separating "labour" from other activi-

ties of social reproduction).[2] "Abstract labour," in turn, is a "double abstraction," or as Kurz (2016, 27) said, a "logical pleonasm." It refers only to the pure expenditure of human energy in the production of commodities "without regard to the form of its expenditure" (Marx 1990, 128) and which must necessarily happen in any concrete labour. In this sense, it also has a material side (human energy) which, however, is not empirically palpable as such, but rather a social abstraction represented in a fetishistic way in commodities and money. Abstract labour cannot, therefore, be interpreted as a mere physiological or natural abstraction. It is not just a question of combustion of human energy in the abstract (if that were the case, being alive would immediately produce value), but of the socially objective and fetishistic meaning of that combustion in the production of commodities. Abstract labour is thus a category that is *simultaneously social and physiological,* and only as such can it be the very "social substance" of capital and which is represented in a fetishistic way in the "phantom-like objectivity" of money and commodities (Marx 1990, 128). Capital is, thus, "self-valorizing value" (Marx 1990, 711), the compulsive social relationship of transforming money into more money from the combustion of human energy in the production of commodities; and Marx leaves no doubt that *capitalism is a world system of abstract labour inseparable from the universalization of value as a form of "abstract wealth":* "[…] it is only foreign trade, the development of the market to a world market, which causes money to develop into world money and *abstract labour* into social labour. Abstract wealth, value, money, hence *abstract labour*, develop in the measure that concrete labour becomes a totality of different modes of labour embracing the world market" (Marx 2010b, 388). What Marx thus shows is that capitalism is the historical process of development of a world system of abstract labour, making modern society, as Hannah Arendt (1998, 134) later puts it, a "labor society." From this perspective, as proposed by the paradigm of the "critique of value",[3]

[2] Various historical, sociological, and anthropological investigations over the last decades have begun to question the very category of "labour," highlighting, in particular, the absence of any truly equivalent category in pre-modern societies (Becquemont and Bonte 2004; Bischoff 1995; Chamoux 1994; Finley 1999, 81; Freyssenet 1999; Hopkins 1957, 276–279; Méda 2010; Vernant 2007, 486–504).

[3] See among others Postone (2003), Kurz (2016), Jappe (2003), and Larsen et al. (2014).

the central problem of modernity is not simply the distribution of wealth or its surplus but its own fetishistic social form, and we cannot make a critique of capitalism "from the standpoint of labour," labour itself must be the object of critique (Postone 2003, 5), because it is the very social ground of modern unfreedom. This also means that the controversy over the (in)compatibility between capitalism and "unfree labor" has to be relativized and dealt with at a higher level of abstraction than is usual.

The long process of constitution and development of a world system of abstract labour did not occur in a structural or geographically uniform way, but with discontinuous jumps over several centuries, having the world market as "presupposition of the whole as well as its substratum" (Marx 1993, 227–228). It's a world process but its historical constitution and development meanwhile affect unevenly countries and regions, which can thus present both internal and external historical non-simultaneities. Despite this, Marx is quite clear that there are at least two distinct historical phases that, although they are difficult to delimit empirically and in their particular moments, must always be acknowledged in historical research. The *first phase* is the "so-called primitive" or "original accumulation of capital," which extends from the fifteenth or sixteenth century to the turn of the nineteenth century, and which should more properly be called the process of "constitution of capitalism," since it was an unrepeatable process. The *second phase* is when we have a capitalism already established or, as Marx sometimes said, the system already "stands on its own feet" (Marx 1990, 874, 928) and "is already moving on its own foundation" (Marx 1993, 253); for Marx, this implies the existence of "*the capitalist mode of production proper"* (Marx 2010a, 432).

The "so-called primitive accumulation of capital" was not simply the increase and concentration of capital as a previously existing "thing" but rather the very process of its constitution as a form of social wealth historically new. What is involved in categorial terms here is the "transformation of money into capital" (Marx 1993, 511), a violent and contingent process that in no way had to necessarily result in what we call "capitalism." Money, which in pre-modern societies money had a religious function or one that mediated relations of reciprocity and personal obligation

(sacrifices, gifts, counter-gifts, offerings, etc.), lost all of its religious traits and became autonomous as a fetish and purpose of all social production. Many events participated in this historical process, but Robert Kurz (2012, 112–134) showed that the so-called "Military Revolution" and the establishment of the "fiscal-military state" in Europe were the turning point in changing the social function of money, coercing people to "earn money" to pay taxes and forcing a violent and progressive monetization of all social reproduction. It was this "hunger for money" of modern states at birth, associated with the changing character of war (after the invention of firearms) and the implantation of new military devices, that truly created modern money as the first fully autonomous commodity and that social sphere that Marx called "circulation" and which we get used to calling "market." The "world system" in the terms of Wallerstein (2011) that emerged from the sixteenth century was for a long time predominantly a mere system of circulation, having gold and silver as "world money," which gradually and troubledly started to take over social production. This progressive domination did not have to lead necessarily to the capitalist mode of production, and, in fact, for centuries this growing control had several modes of existence in the four corners of the world. But the European transformation had both incomparable territorial scope and social depth, associating the new system of circulation with a large-scale colonial system. For centuries, millions of human beings were forcibly separated from their livelihoods, reduced to mere energetic bodies and compelled into a huge variety of forced "labour" situations. It was this "positing of the individual as a *worker*, in this nakedness" (Marx 1993, 472), that truly brought to the world the abstract activity we call "labour," a social abstraction of human energy channeled into the production of commodities, the "economy" as a specific social sphere of valorization of value, and the "State" as foreman of the organizing of human material and transformation of society into a giant labour machine. The constitution of capitalism was thus based on *a violent logic of constitution of "labour" and mobilization of "labour power,"* provoking tremendous social transformations in the Old World, guiding the expansion through the *terra incognita* of the vast New World, the

development of the modern colonial system and the new phenomena of mass coercive migration.

This new system of production based on "labour" could only be socially sustained and universalized if workers were possessors of money too,[4] effectively tying abstract wealth to abstract labour, integrating circulation and production in a self-perpetuating cycle of valorization of value. This could only happen to the extent that workers appear "as working proprietors" (Marx 2010c, 143), owners of their energy-commodity and sellers of its use ("labour-power"), a historically unique condition of human individuals that arose in the modern European era.[5] It is not by chance that the first formulations of the principle of "self-ownership," that place the individual as a private owner of his body, date from this period (Grotius, Hobbes, Overton, Locke, etc.), starting from a metaphysical split in the self-owner, an internal division between a part that is proprietary (subject) and a part that is property (body) vis-à-vis another self-owner. As the new sphere of circulation took over European social reproduction, this was quickly associated with the modern metaphysics of contractual freedom between subjects and a whole ideology based upon the equality and consensus of commodities exchange. It was not, therefore, difficult to derive an ideological equivalence between self-ownership and supposed freedom, autonomy, and self-determination of the subject.[6]

It was from this historical constellation that the ideology of "free" wage labour began to emerge. But Marx does not theoretically favor wage labour because it is of European "origin," supposedly "more civilized" and based on the juridical form of the contract; he expressly says

4 "What precisely distinguishes capital from the master-servant relation is that the worker confronts him as consumer and possessor of exchange values, and that in the form of the *possessor of money*, in the form of money he becomes a simple centre of circulation – one of its infinitely many centres, in which his specificity as worker is extinguished" (Marx 1993, 419–420).

5 "The capitalist epoch is […] characterized by the fact that labour-power, in the eyes of the worker himself, takes on the form of a commodity which is his property; his labour consequently takes on the form of wage-labour. On the other hand, it is only from this moment that the commodity form of the products of labour becomes universal" (Marx 1990, 274).

6 Self-ownership also has a gender and racial bias with several extensions to the present, but unfortunately I cannot develop this topic here.

that "free" wage labour "always remains forced labour, however much it might appear as the result of free contractual agreement" (Marx 1991, 958). The key issue is the link between "labour" and "money," and *it is only where and when this nexus between abstract labour and abstract wealth is socially posited at a certain scale can we speak of a "capitalist mode of production" and a capitalism that runs "on its own foundations."* Retrospectively we can see that the structural turning point was the Industrial Revolution of the last third of the eighteenth century (already a technical expression of the new social form), triggering a vortex centered in Europe that affected the whole planet, based on the existence of a "capitalist mode of production proper" and on wage labour as a characteristic "labour" form. So, there is no need for the last peasant of the world to have been expropriated or the last slave to be freed and both forced to become industrial wage earners in order to say that the process of constitution of capitalism is over. On the other hand, it took a whole world to give birth to the general form of wage labour in Europe, and from the moment that this form acquires a certain social scale and allows capitalism to "stand on its own feet," that same whole world must, in one way or another, suffer the devasting consequences of this new dynamic based on the valorization of value. From this moment on, there is no longer simply a sphere of circulation mediating points of production, but rather "a spiral, an expanding curve, not a simple circle" but "a self-expanding circle," with "a moving magnitude, being expanded by production itself" (Marx 1993, 266, 746, 407), creating more and more points of monetary exchange and installing the corresponding general tendency to expand wage labour. And, as Marx argues, "[t]he fact that slavery is possible at individual points within the bourgeois system of production does not contradict this. However, slavery is then possible there only because it does not exist at other points" (Marx 1993, 464).

Meanwhile, in the last decades, the theoretical reductive approach which considered capitalism to be simply identical to wage labour and treated slavery and other forms of "unfree labour" as "precapitalist" or "external" to capitalism, lost ground to other equally problematic perspectives. The most common, represented mainly by Marcel Van der Linden (2008, 10–37; 2020), is an approach that theoretically devalues

wage labour as an essential moment in the constitution and reproduction of capital and considers capitalism as just a "combination" of different forms of so-called "labor commodification," treated in an equivalent and undifferentiated manner. This perspective has an ontological understanding of labour and wealth, as if all expenditure of human energy always and everywhere created wealth in general and as if value was not a specific social form of wealth necessarily expressed in money. It also assumes the point of view of individual capital, for whom the option for slaves or wage labourers, for example, is determined only by its individual profit, forgetting that this is not and cannot be the case from the point of view of "total social capital," i.e., from the point of view of the reproduction of capital as a whole. On the one hand, each individual capitalist wants to produce at the lowest possible labour costs; if in a given circumstance slaves are available and are the cheapest way, he will use slaves. But, on the other hand, he will want all workers employed by other individual capitals to be wage labourers, possessors and spenders of money, as consumers of his commodities.[7] The contradiction is obvious and that is exactly why labour regimes (slaves, servants, sharecroppers, etc.) cannot be treated as all playing essentially the same function (e.g., creating wealth in general). Another perspective, introduced by Jairus Banaji (2003, 82–83, 91), treats wage labour a-historically as an ideal type and claims that almost all labour regimes are just "forms of exploitation based on wage-labour," "where the 'sale' of labour-power for wages is mediated and possibly disguised in more complex arrangements," "once we extend the notion of wages to include payments in land, housing, etc.". We are left to wonder what exactly "based on" means, but it seems certain that in this way not only "labour" but wage labour itself becomes a transhistorical category, and capital,

7 "To each capitalist, the total mass of all workers, with the exception of his own workers, appear not as workers, but as consumers, possessors of exchange values (wages), money, which they exchange for his commodity. They are so many centres of circulation with whom the act of exchange begins and by whom the exchange value of capital is maintained. […] The greater their number – the number of the industrial population – and the mass of money at their disposal, the greater the sphere of exchange for capital. We have seen that it is the tendency of capital to increase the industrial population as much as possible" (Marx 1993, 419–420).

in turn, loses all socio-historical specificity and seems to have a purely external relationship with money. Following this approach, Bhandari (2007, 397, 398, 399) even goes to the point of claiming that there is "no good reasons for separating wage labor from manifestly unfree forms of labour", since slavery in modern plantations was "essentially wage labour", a "disguised form of wage labour."

Successive discussions like this over the (in)compatibility between capitalism and "unfree labour" tend to focus on specific countries, production systems (plantations, etc.) or labour regimes to determine whether or not they can be classified as "capitalists," rather than understanding the impossibility of these forms sustaining themselves in isolation and evaluating the evolution of their relative positioning within the historical process of constitution and development of the world system of abstract labour as a whole.[8] While the foundation of the system is abstract labour, i.e. the combustion of human energy represented in commodities and money, the different labour regimes cannot be treated as interchangeable. The function of the wage labourer, as a *working monetary subject*, *both producer and consumer of commodities*, is always decisive, because all other labour regimes are necessarily mediated by the relative but necessarily increasing presence of a mass of wage labourers within the system and only through that mediation is the production of surplus-value and accumulation of capital possible. This means that *there is no capitalism without wage labour, although not all abstract labour in the world capitalist system necessarily has to be wage labour*.

Once established, the system is a "directionally dynamic totality" (Postone 1993, 272), since it is based on a contradictory social form of wealth. Considering that the magnitude of value is given by what Marx called the "socially necessary labor time" (average) of producing commodities, each individual capital increases his profit in only two possible ways: by lowering workers' wages (or extending their labour time – "absolute surplus value") or by increasing the number of commodities produced in a given time with the introduction of new means of production ("relative surplus value"). Although both situations are common, it

8 See Tomich (2018) and Marques (2020) for similar ideas.

is the second that gives capitalism a general compulsion for technological innovation: once a given invention of an individual capitalist is generalized through all its intra-sectoral competition, the initial advantage disappears and the cycle is objectively forced to start over in an expanded form of material productivity, but the increase in material output in each economic cycle does not correspond to a concomitant increase in value production. Through widespread competition, capital becomes a contradictory process of valorization of value that implies a very particular historical and geographical trajectory: a growing material productivity in smaller and smaller units of time and a corresponding need for market expansion. In other words, the valorization of value is a dynamic and objective social process of increasing temporal intensity (productivity) and progressive geographical expansion (global market). What we must therefore consider is that the reproduction of the capitalist system is necessarily always expanded, both in material terms in the absolute number of products and in terms of technical and scientific knowledge; but *this ever-increasing material and scientific wealth does not correspond to a concomitant rise in value*. This implies a "historically specific, abstract, and impersonal form of social domination" (Postone 2003, 30, 287–291), a dynamic social form based on the "silent compulsion of economic relations" and the corresponding widespread competition that coerce all individuals regardless of their class.[9] And it is through this competition that the "law of capitalist production" exerts itself; "it appears as inflicted by the capitalists upon each other and upon the workers – hence it in fact appears as a law of capital operating against both capital and labour" (Marx 2010a, 460). Competition became thus a major principle of modern socialization and since then has always been a fertile ground for new forms of violence, especially in times of crisis.

For Marx, in the long run and considering the overall social capital, the historically predictable result of the "automatic functioning" (Marx

[9] "Conceptually, *competition* is nothing other than the inner *nature* of capital, its essential character, appearing in and realized as the reciprocal interaction of many capitals with one another, the inner tendency as external necessity" and "the competition among workers is only another form of the competition among capitals" (Marx 1993, 414, 651).

2010b, 492) of capitalism would be a growing contradiction between the importance of science and general social knowledge (what Marx called "general intellect") applied in material wealth and a form of abstract wealth founded on the undifferentiated combustion of human energy. This is, in fact, a *third phase* of capitalism (which is also what we live in today), that Marx only theoretically suggested in a dispersed way and that perhaps has the most elaborated version in the famous *Fragment on Machines* in the *Grundrisse*. There, Marx announces that this new context will be marked by an explosive social situation (Marx uses the expression "life or death"), as a result of capitalism's fundamental contradiction that is at the core of its fetishistic form of wealth: "Capital itself is the moving contradiction, [in] that it presses to reduce labour time to a minimum, while it posits labour time on the other side, as sole measure and source of wealth" (Marx 1993, 706). This means that despite the widespread introduction of machinery and industrial production processes, abstract labour, the pure combustion of human energy in the production of commodities, is and remains the social substance of abstract wealth and the foundation of the entire system. This also means that from a given moment of the capitalist world system, workers become more and more superfluous without ceasing to be necessary at the same time. It seems clear that this "moving contradiction" cannot continue *ad aeternum* and it is in the context of this argument that Marx refers to the "breakdown" of capitalism.

This "breakdown," however, is not a sudden event but rather a whole epoch of several decades, as Kurz already wrote in 1986:

> [t]he collapse of the value relation does not wait until the elimination of the last worker from immediate production before starting, but rather begins at precisely that historical point when the general relation between the elimination and the reabsorption of living immediate productive labor begins to overturn – that is, as early as the moment (and to a growing extent afterwards) when (and how) more living immediate productive labor is eliminated then is reabsorbed. This point, to the extent that it can be called a point at all, has probably already been passed, approximately in the early- to mid-1970s. (Kurz 2014, 57)

Highlighting the mediation with the social whole of capitalism changes the way we look at "extra-economic violence" and "unfree labour" in the history of the capitalist world system. It is an undeniable fact that primitive accumulation took place through extremely violent social processes, often conducted or tolerated by state apparatuses, both in the peripheral and central countries, both in the colonial and independence contexts. But it cannot be concluded that whenever violent processes occur (expropriation of land, mass forced labour, etc.), with or without the involvement of the state, we are unmistakably faced with forms of primitive accumulation. This is a frequent, if not explicit, at least implicit short circuit. Violence was a moment of primitive accumulation; it is not primitive accumulation that is a moment of human violence and exploitation understood in an unhistorical and abstract way. The accumulation processes that took place throughout the twentieth century, especially in the southern hemisphere, and which are often conceptualized by analogy or interpreted heuristically as primitive accumulation, took place in a historical phase of the world system as a whole entirely different from what happened centuries before during the constitution process. It is because there is a capitalism already constituted at that time that the so-called primitive accumulation in the countries of the southern hemisphere had a very different configuration, namely of "catch-up modernization" (Kurz 1999, 259–269).

It is therefore necessary to consider the mediation of forms of violence with the different historical stages of the constitution, development and collapse of the world system of abstract labour. Despite their similarities, the forms of direct coercion in the constitution process are different from the forms of coercion that exist in a capitalism that moves "on its own foundations,"[10] and, for the same reason, they are both different from the forms of violence that occur in the process of decomposition of capitalism. Of course, this structural backdrop makes little difference to whoever is lying on the ground with his head under a foreman's boot, but those who focus only on the immediacy of violent phenomena and ignore the essential and historical transformations of the

[10] This approach is somewhat similar to Ince's (2018), historically differentiating between "capital-positing violence" and "capital-preserving violence."

social whole will always be forced to wrongly see the simple repetition of mechanisms or mere continuation of steps of the past. These ways of thinking stem from an inadequate and somewhat moralistic understanding of the relationship between violence and the reproduction of capital. Although it is obvious that capitalism develops accompanied by numerous forms of violence and misery, from the point of view of the reproduction of capital as a whole, there is no immediate relationship between these forms and the production of surplus-value, no direct relationship between intensification of suffering and increased abstract wealth (Kurz 2013, 71). In fact, in a context of system collapse, increasing social suffering even tends to be associated with decreasing production of abstract wealth.

3. "Modern slavery" and the new global logic of superfluity

For the current explanations of the so-called "modern slavery," which ignore the "moving contradiction," the collapse of capitalism is not even a possibility. So their explanations are anachronistically based on the mechanisms of the two previous historical phases. Either they tend to see the historical trajectory as an eternally upward movement of primitive accumulation that lasts until today, or they assume that there is nothing new in the phenomena of "modern slavery" that cannot be framed by a "fully functional capitalism" or explained in terms of neoliberal policies. For the former, capitalism appears to have no immanent contradiction and can be extended indefinitely through progressive "commodification" of everything, thereby forgetting that turning something into a commodity might "enrich" its seller but does not produce surplus-value (and thus capital). For the latter, capitalism is a simple arena of political struggle and an eternal back and forth of victories and defeats. Both fail to recognize fully the evidence and consequences of *an ever-upward historical development of the productive forces, driven by the generalization of capitalist competition and search for profit, and its significance for the reproduction of capital and the increase of surplus populations on a world scale*. So, they seem unaware of the essential logic of devaluation of

value and social superfluity underlying the empirical phenomena of the contemporary crisis of capitalism.

Marx gave enormous importance to the problem of surplus population in capitalism and, in fact, the entire chapter of *Capital* dedicated to the "general law of capitalist accumulation" is actually a long reflection on surplus population. It is only concerning capital that this population is superfluous and not in relation to the material production capacity of subsistence goods. Marx called it "relative surplus population" or "industrial reserve army" and divided it in 4 groups (Marx 1990, 794–798): (i) floating, workers kept out of production during the periods of stagnation and called during economic booms; (ii) latent, the agricultural workers always in imminent superfluity with the intensification of capital in agriculture, migrating towards cities; (iii) stagnant, "a part of the active labour army, but with extremely irregular employment" within time "taking a proportionally greater part in the general increase of that [working] class than the other elements" (Marx 1990, 796); (iv) paupers, "lowest sediment" and "dead weight of the industrial reserve army."

Most Marxists have focused and continue to focus on "floating surplus population" at the regional or national levels and its correlation with economic cycles (e.g. De Genova 2018), seeming to ignore that Marx pointed the "stagnant" and "consolidated surplus population" on a world scale as the most significant historical result of capitalism, both from a quantitative and qualitative point of view (see also Benanav and Clegg 2014, 590–592). At a given moment, Marx presents a reflection, complementing the notion of "moving contradiction" presented in the *Grundrisse*, that deserves to be quoted at length:

> The relative mass of the industrial reserve army thus increases with the potential energy of wealth. But the greater this reserve army, the greater is the mass of a consolidated surplus population, whose misery is in inverse ratio to the amount of torture it has to undergo in the form of labour. The more extensive, finally, the lazarus-layers of the working class, and the industrial reserve army, the greater is official pauperism. *This is the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation.*
> […]

> On the basis of capitalism, a system in which the worker does not employ the means of production, but the means of production employ the worker, the law by which a constantly increasing quantity of means of production may be set in motion by a progressively diminishing expenditure of human power, thanks to the advance in the productivity of social labour, undergoes a complete inversion, and is expressed thus: the higher the productivity of labour, the greater is the pressure of the workers on the means of employment, the more precarious therefore becomes the condition for their existence, namely the sale of their own labour-power for the increase of alien wealth, or in other words the self-valorization of capital. The fact that the means of production and the productivity of labour increase more rapidly than the productive population expresses itself, therefore, under capitalism, in the inverse form that the working population always increases more rapidly than the valorization requirements of capital. (Marx 1990, 798)

In its historical trajectory, capital needs to absorb abstract labour in as much quantity as possible; but on the other hand, competition creates an increase in productivity through which labour power becomes superfluous and is replaced by machinery. This relation between technology and labour power is not direct; it is not a simple technical-material problem of replacing humans with machines, as so often is assumed by automation theories, but of a tendentially global contradiction between a necessarily ever-increasing amount of fixed capital (machinery), and the limit of its ability to absorb an absolute mass of labour power producing surplus value (productive workers). This contradiction has a well-known compensation mechanism which is expressed in the capacity of the system as a whole, at each increase in productivity, to absorb greater absolute amounts of labour power (number of workers) than those that are eliminated through rationalization or the introduction of machinery. Fordism was the positive paradigm of this relationship: at the same time that the assembly line reduced the working time for each commodity, it also allowed the absorption of greater absolute amounts of labour power. The temporary result was a “labour society” in full swing and the progressive widespread cheapening of commodities initially sold as luxury

goods (cars, refrigerators, washing machines, etc.). The problem is that this internal compensation mechanism can only be effective while the speed of innovations in products is greater than the speed of innovations in the production process. Since the start of the Third Industrial Revolution, the relation is inverted and for the first time the rationalization and scientification of productive forces make superfluous more labour power than the one that it can absorb, and here it is not just about individuals but about whole regions, countries and continents. This implies a drastic fall in the production of surplus value, not a new round of accumulation of capital (Ramtin 1991; Kurz 2014), the problem being only postponed by the growing importance of "fictitious capital" (Marx 1991, 525) in financial markets, completely decoupled of the social substance of abstract labour. Only in the immediate appearance this postponement is a relief. What it does is actually feeding financial bubbles and making possible the daily financing of many economic activities, anticipating a mass of future surplus value that will never win existence. This means that the present capitalism lives of the surplus value of the future; a game of deceptions that puts a huge pressure throughout the entire system and which is increasingly socially disastrous in each financial collapse (Kurz 2012, 326–354).

Thus, abstract labour cannot fail to reveal more and more what also has never ceased to be: a very violent form of social exclusion, where a self-owner who shows himself/herself unable to sell his/her labour power in the world market becomes superfluous and is simply abandoned to his/her fate. We are no longer dealing with a "relative surplus population" of self-owners who at some future moment will be called to industrial production; we are dealing with a "disposable industrial reserve army" (Marx 1990, 784) put on hold forever, an "absolute surplus population" from the standpoint of capital, with unequal manifestations throughout the world, as Aron Benanav shows (2015) in his *Global History of Unemployment*. Like Ramin Ramtin stated in 1991:

> What we have seen with increasing frequency since the beginnings of the current crisis, since the late 1960s and early 1970s, will become dwarfed in quantity, frequency and scale with the further advance of

> automation, as this begins to generate the most massive concentrations of superfluous humanity history has ever known. Thus, the most important social manifestation of the crisis of surplus value production, in the age of automation, is not simply the enormous growth of mass unemployment as such, but that of the new phenomenon of unemployability: a mass of unwanted humanity. (Ramtin 1991, 128)

In this sense, precisely in contrast to what happened in the constitution phase of capitalism, *we are facing today a violent logic of demobilization of labour power and containment of superfluous populations*, while the planet is now entirely dominated by the logic of capital and all continents tightly organized in competing nation-states (see also Kurz 2005). The condition of the so-called "free" wage labourer has not even reached a general level in many regions of the world, especially in the Global South; at the same time, where the wage condition has consolidated, it is also beginning to break. For many human beings, selling body energy simply does not guarantee enough monetary income. But, although an important part of the process, this is not just a "crisis of wage labour" as some defend (e.g. McMichael 1999) and even less of "labour market restructuring" (LeBaron and Ayers 2013, 877); *this is an irremediable crisis of labour itself*. People are in greater numbers expelled or kept out from the production of capital but they still need to survive under the dictatorship of capital. For this reason, they also do not simply become unemployed and live off the air; they still need to earn money just to survive. So, in addition to increasing structural unemployment, what we see is rampant "underemployment," informality, pauperism and the permanent threat of starvation,[11] leading to all kinds of economic instabilities and social conflicts, civil wars and mass migrant and refugee movements. This objective structure of superfluity is at the core of major structural

[11] According to ILO 2020 *World Employment and Social Outlook* report, "the mismatch between labour supply and demand extends far beyond the 188 million unemployed across the world in 2019"; the "total labour underutilization is more than twice as high as unemployment, affecting over 470 million people worldwide," "around 2 billion workers worldwide are informally employed, accounting for 61 per cent of the global workforce […] and over 630 million workers worldwide still live in extreme or moderate poverty" (ILO 2020, 13).

social transformations of the last decades and helps us understand not only the reason why most cases of "modern slavery" begin with fictitious job offers but also why a "global apartheid" (Sharma 2005) and a "global deportation regime" (De Genova 2010) started to take shape.

Several authors noticed the rise of a general logic of superfluity and disposability (e.g. Bauman 2004; Yates 2011; Marks 2011; Li 2009), and in fact the notion appeared right at the beginning of the dominant discourse on "modern slavery"; after all, Kevin Bales' first and widely quoted book on the topic was significantly entitled *Disposable People* (2012a). But there are at least two serious problems with Bales' argument. First of all, Bales' explanation is simply Malthusian, relating the growth of "modern slavery" fundamentally to the growth of world population[12] and seeking to correlate it in a rather absurd way with the price of slaves over the course of four thousand years. Certainly, the rapid demographic growth in the last half-century, especially in the urban areas of low-income countries, is a significant moment of the structural transformations of the last decades (see Benanav 2019), but these demographic trends are themselves mediated by the recent leap in the development of productive forces and the intensification of the "moving contradiction" of capital. In the second place, Bales seems to defend the idea that people are disposable as "slaves," but at all times it is obvious in his argument that they were already disposable before becoming "slaves." That is why Bales throughout all his works so often uses expressions like "possible slaves," "potential slaves" and even "surplus of potential slaves," but without recognizing the ambiguity.[13] Even if "modern slaves" are in fact slaves, as Bales argues, one thing is certain: a "potential slave" is not a *de facto* slave. Enslavability presupposes disposability, not the reverse.

12 "The number of people who are available to be enslaved […] is more a function of increased population than anything else" (Bales 2012b, 362).

13 For instance: "For the first time in human history, there is an absolute glut of *potential slaves*. It is a dramatic example of supply and demand. There are so many *possible slaves* that their value has fallen and fallen" (Bales 2004, 8; see also Bales 2005, 88; Bales 2012a, 12, 14, 18, 26, 32, 79; Bales 2016, 192; Bales 2017, 659, 661; Bales, Trodd, and Williamson 2009, 28–29).

The structure of disposability is also so wide that Bales sometimes asserts that even some "slaveholders" are as disposable as the "enslaved."[14]

Bales (2010) stated that the overwhelming majority of new "slaves," anywhere in the world, are first of all *lured* with fictitious job proposals in a "recruiting" phase where "violence is seldom exercised" (Bales, 2005, 134). And when, writing with Ron Soodalter, Bales explicitly refers to the reality of an industrialized country like the US, where the structural unemployment crisis is most pronounced, he is even more eloquent: "ironically, most slaves in America are volunteers at first. Today the slave takers rarely have to coerce or kidnap their victims. All the criminals have to do is open a door to 'opportunity' and the slaves walk in" (Bales and Soodalter 2009, 13). The *Global Slavery Index of 2016* presented some important empirical data provided by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and collected by its monitoring system of "human trafficking" victims (MiMOSA), that show the "Mode of Entry into Trafficking," by world region, of victims of trafficking assisted by the IOM in 117 countries in 2015 (see Walk Free 2016, 53, 61, 69, 75, 83). In the vast majority of cases the "Mode of Entry into Trafficking" was through the "Offer of Employment or Labor Migration Opportunities." Despite that huge numbers, there is not a single reflection or even a comment about this data in the *Global Slavery Index*, although the report often mentions in passing high unemployment rates as a factor of "modern slavery."

Now, we do not have to accept the notion of "slavery" used by dominant discourse to recognize that it is just loosely applying the term to what is in fact one of the actual expressions of the logic of superfluity of the breakdown of capitalism, where the impersonal and abstract violence of a shrinking labour market relates with the very real violence of everyday life of a great part of humanity. But, instead of a discussion and theoretical reflection on the new global logic of superfluity, it was rather the notion of "vulnerability" that took its place and became increasingly used, both by the dominant discourse and its critics, but

[14] "He was the personification of the violence needed to enslave someone, but in many ways he was just as disposable and replaceable as the enslaved prostitutes" (Bales 2005, 25).

once again without much theoretical development. The idea is not that only "modern slaves" are vulnerable, but that vulnerability is key to understand "modern slavery." Of course, social vulnerability has a long history related to the development of the world system of abstract labour since the sixteenth century (see Castel 2003), but perhaps this notion is not able to capture exactly what we are currently facing. The term "vulnerability" has a military connotation of exposure to an enemy when one is between two safe positions; it is also associated with risk management, especially in natural disasters; more significantly, points to something that is only temporarily at risk (and this temporary character of the notion blends very well with approaches that continue to think only in terms of "floating surplus population"). "Superfluity," on the other hand, points to the normal condition of something that has no more utility or reason to exist in a determinate state of things (see also Marks 2011, 12). If vulnerability accompanies the historical trajectory of the development of capitalism, superfluity is the fundamental operative logic in its collapse, being the essential backdrop of existing mass social vulnerability and the outcome of universal competitive socialization. The difference is implicit in the question that Barrientos, Kothari, and Phillips (2013, 1037) ask: "Are vulnerable workers those who have been excluded from participation in the global economy, or those who have been incorporated on adverse and exploitative terms?"

Despite the notion of "surplus population" being at the origin of the dominant discourse of "modern slavery" and continuing to be fundamental for its explanations, its most relevant and persistent critics either completely ignore the topic (O'Connell Davidson 2015 not even mentions it), avoid direct theoretical confrontation with the elements of truth contained in that notion or leave unclear the mechanisms that relate it to the current phenomena of unfree labour. With a perspective of ongoing primitive accumulation, Genevieve LeBaron and Alison Ayers, for example, in an article on "new slavery" in Africa argue:

> Although scholars have described overall labour conditions as either a "reserve army of labour" or a "surplus" population to be "let die", our analysis suggests that such characterisations may not be sufficiently

> nuanced to encapsulate the complex modalities of labour exploitation. In particular, generalisations regarding "surplus" populations may overlook the ways in which "surplus" workers are not, in fact, epiphenomenal to capital accumulation. Rather, these workers' unfreedom has been fostered by firms, and works to anchor accelerated exploitation across the spectrum of labour exploitation. (LeBaron and Ayers 2013, 883)

A detailed or more "nuanced" analysis of surplus population is certainly necessary.[15] Although the development of the "moving contradiction" of capitalism and its logic of superfluity apply virtually to everyone in the whole world, they do not manifest themselves with the same intensity and scale everywhere. Thus, assuming the relentless structural character of superfluity should not exempt us from considering real differences, not only in terms of social stratification but also gender, "race," age, nationality, geographic location (center-periphery, urban-rural), etc.; but these are *differences within a general and global trend of superfluity*. In the context of the collapse of capitalism and desperate social competition, what we are facing is an unstable *hierarchy of superfluity* that crosses world society from one end to the other and feeds all types of social Darwinism and exclusion ideologies (Kurz 2006). Not taking the structural objectivity of superfluity seriously, this perspective ends up reducing the problem to vulnerability and overemphasizing the role of the state. In another article LeBaron and Nicola Philips claim that:

> states do not themselves *cause* unfree labour. Rather, through the political projects pursued to facilitate globalisation and engagement with its various processes [...], they put in place the conditions in which individuals and groups of people become vulnerable to unfree labour. (LeBaron and Phillips 2019, 6)

[15] Marx also recognized different levels of abstraction. When, in the quote above, he argued that a greater "mass of a consolidated surplus population [...] is the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation," he added: "Like all other laws, it is modified in its working by many circumstances, the analysis of which does not concern us here" (Marx 1990, 798).

It is obviously necessary to denounce state policies and their barbaric social consequences, but it must be borne in mind that States, regardless of their political orientations, cannot fail to assume more and more the role of *national administrators of a crisis of global dimensions* and which has state-debt and superfluity as two of its main moments. In this sense, superfluity is already a presupposition of State actions, not a result. States are indeed important in *managing superfluity*, but they do not create it. Likewise, it is absolutely correct to account for the intensification and increase of phenomena like land grabbing, the number of Export Processing Zones (EPZ) and different new forms of informality and labour precarity in recent decades all around the world. But these phenomena have nothing to do with an "ongoing primitive accumulation" and are not explained only by neoliberalism, IMF policy options or Structural Adjustment Programs. These are not demonstrated proofs of an "ongoing primitive accumulation" of capital but moments of its exact opposite: an ongoing collapse of the reproduction of capital. Rural populations are not being driven out of common agricultural land by the thousands to be mobilized and exploited as labour power in industrial projects on a national scale with implications in all economic branches; thousands of people are being thrown out and simply turned to their fate,[16] while only a few hundred are still integrable on a few "islands" of competitive productivity[17] that have almost no connection with their hinterland. Keeping landless migrants hanging around on the fringe of urban areas is still a common practice (Breman 2016, Ch. 6), but in global terms, most of the surplus population has been urban since birth and simply seeks to survive through informal work from an early age, with no prospect of becoming integrated into the formal economy throughout their lives (Benanav 2019). This is a logic of demobilization of labour power and it is no coincidence that a significant part of the contemporary phenomena of unfree and "forced labour," especially in the agrarian periphery, many times more or less integrated in global

16 "Contemporary expropriation without incorporation spawns an ever-expanding global surplus population that does not even belong to the 'reserve army of labor' and dwell in the wasteland of capital" (Ince 2018, 904).

17 "The global factory is an island in a sea of surplus population" (Benanav 2015, 33).

commodity chains (LeBaron 2018), involves increasing participation of foremen (the dominant discourse would say "slave masters"), criminal intermediaries and "recruiters" who have the same background than the workers and emerged themselves from identical situations, only rising within the hierarchy of the "superfluous" group without ever leaving its ranks.

This relationship between unfree labour, universal competition and a new hierarchy of superfluity is an expression of a crisis much more serious than the traditional Marxism of the "class struggle" paradigm would have us believe, especially if one thinks that unfree labour is always a clear proof of a "fully functioning capitalism." Demonstrating the shortcomings of those who associate unfree labour only with primitive accumulation, Brass argues that unfree labour "constitutes a central aspect of a 'fully functioning' capitalist system" that "has to be situated centrally within the context of capitalism proper" (Brass 2011b, 26, 30) and that "[f]ar from being systemically peripheral, economically marginal or indicative of primitive accumulation, therefore, unfree workers are central to a pattern of labour regime change that characterizes a 'fully functional' twenty-first century capitalism" (Brass 2011a, 276). First, Brass is never entirely clear on the scale of this "fully functional capitalism" (regional, national or global?), although he seems to argue mostly in national terms. Second, there is also an ambiguity as to the scale of the phenomena: what exactly does "central" mean? Brass himself asserts numerous times that unfree labour is a "relation of choice" in just "certain", "particular" or "specific circumstances" (Brass 1999, 164; 2011b, 25, 32; 2011a, 1, 4, 252; 2014, 571), but at all times he wants to convey the idea that universal unfree labour is essentially the secret purpose of capitalism. But these "circumstances" are not and cannot be those of the world system as a whole or of all regions and economic sectors, and it is for this reason that Brass ends up saying that the "unfree labour is regarded here as a crucial aspect of class conflict in particular agrarian situations" (Brass 1999, 153), that "bonded labour is in particular circumstances for rural capital the preferred relational form" and "the issue […] is similar to that of the agrarian question" (Brass 2011a, 252). It is only in this admittedly limited sense of agrarian

capitalism throughout most of the twentieth century that Brass' analysis seems adequate. On the other hand, in the current collapse process, unfree labour relations are beginning to gain ground everywhere, taking over the general economy of entire countries and also appearing more and more in the central and urban regions of the world system. Brass recognizes these trends, but ends up misinterpreting superfluity and the corresponding advance of social collapse as a mere global "recomposition" of the labour process and an irrefutable proof of an ongoing "fully functional capitalism."

Brass even acknowledges a "*de facto* global reserve army" but understands it simply as a result "of the Green Revolution program during the 1960s and *laissez faire* policies in the 1980s" and theorizes it as just a relative and floating surplus population used by capitalists "to undermine the bargaining power of free workers in secure employment" (Brass 2011a, 31), forgetting the absolute and consolidated character of this global surplus population as a result of the "moving contradiction" and the Third Industrial Revolution of microelectronics. Brass seems to try to reduce this historical dynamic to the eternal class struggle, as if the impossibility of freely selling labour power was simply the result of a temporary victory of the subjective will of capitalists and had nothing to do with the historical tendencies and objective restrictions of the overlying social form itself. At the same time, Brass admits that "free markets that are global in scope mean that unfree labour becomes for capitalists not just an option but in some instances a necessity, as competition cuts profit margins which in turn force down labour costs" (Brass 2011a, 5). But why is unfree labour "necessary" if there is a global reserve army? As Das (2014, 90–91) asked in a critique of Brass, "why is the reserve army of *free* labor itself not enough to keep the wages down and undermine the political power of currently employed and free workers?" In fact, the answers are in Brass' own writings but they do not easily fit into his class struggle paradigm: as Brass often shows, the daily and empirical unfreedom experienced by unfree workers, in their inability to "freely" sell their own labour power, is not caused specifically by the action of "capitalists," but also and increasingly by the direct coercion of other "workers," through kinship structures, neighborhood social ties and debt

arrangements and using all types of criteria (gender, age, ethnic, "racial," caste, etc.), which Brass both admits and devalues as supposedly mere ideologies (2011a, 32, 149, 214, 249–250). In itself this is not new; for example, to critically show the effects of the introduction of machinery on the devaluation of (male) labour power and the declining trend of real wages, Marx had already argued: "Previously the worker sold his own labour-power […]. Now he sells wife and child. He has become a slave-dealer" (Marx 1990, 519). But these forms of coercion are now increasingly commonplace in different parts of the world and can in no way be reduced to epiphenomena of the presupposed essential class struggle. They need to be explained as part of the capitalist collapse, its logic of superfluity and the corresponding struggles of universal competition.

The difficulty in assuming theoretically the historical tendency of capitalism to collapse is so strong that, even when the relationship between superfluity, the phenomena of "modern slavery" and the context of social collapse is somehow acknowledged, the traditional matrix of interpretation that sees capitalism eternally on the rise always ends up imposing itself. David Neilson and Michael A. Peters (2019, 480), for example, try to provide an "explanatory account of slavery under contemporary capitalism" using "Marx's theory of the 'relative surplus population', that he predicts […] will become the majority of the world's labouring population." Strangely they argue that this "majority" is only a "relative surplus population" and a manifestation of "capitalism's continuing uneven development" (Neilson and Peters 2019, 482). At the same time, they describe trends that show just the opposite:

> Today, slavery grows especially on the periphery of the capitalist mode of production, understood in terms of both the non-developed regions of the world and the relative surplus population. Nonetheless, the periphery advances towards the core, as the whole capitalist world descends towards becoming a 'planet of slums' on the edge of 'eco-catastrophe'. (Neilson and Peters 2019, 482)

It seems clear that this is not a "continuing uneven development," but rather a "continuing uneven collapse."

In general, seeming to axiomatically reject the possibility of capitalism collapsing as a result of its "moving contradiction," these perspectives argue through analogies and immediate similarities with previous historical phases of capitalism and seriously misinterpret what is really happening (see also Scholz 2016): a long downward socio-economic spiral, marked not by simple exploitation, but by abandonment and expulsion. This situation will not improve. With the development of what has been called "Industry 4.0," through the widespread use of industrial robots and the increasing importance of artificial intelligence, we enter a new stage of the "moving contradiction" and the corresponding logic of superfluity of labour power intensifies. Although at different rates, industrial automation is advancing rapidly in both developed and developing countries. The matrix of "comparative advantages" that shaped the last decades will certainly change very soon. For now, low-income countries still have competitive labour costs, but the situation will not continue for much longer. In 2017, for instance, a well-known global brand of sportswear put into operation in the USA a "sewbot," a robot capable of making 8000 t-shirts per day. If this is a sign that automated industrial production will be installed more intensively in high-income countries (re-shoring) then offshore production will tend to decline with serious employment effects in both high and low-income countries (ILO 2018). But the development of automation in low-income countries themselves will have devastating impacts.

The ILO (2016) estimates that, by 2040, in the ASEAN-5 (Cambodia, Indonesia, Thailand, The Philippines, and Vietnam), 56% of workers could be expelled from the labour market as a result of industrial automation. Nearly 3 in 5 jobs face a high risk of automation. In Vietnam, for example, 70% of jobs may be at risk, which means more than 36 million people. In the garment, textile and footwear (GTF) industry, which accounts for 59% of industrial employment in Cambodia and 39% of Vietnam, automation may affect more than 85% of workers in these two countries. But this is not a problem of GTF only. Around 27 million subsistence farmers and low-skilled crop farm labourers, nearly 23 million street vendors, stall and market salespersons and almost 5 million low-skilled construction labourers of the ASEAN-5 are also in the high-risk

category of technological substitution. No wonder that there are already several warnings on the risk of the so-called "human trafficking" (e.g. Verisk Maplecroft 2018).

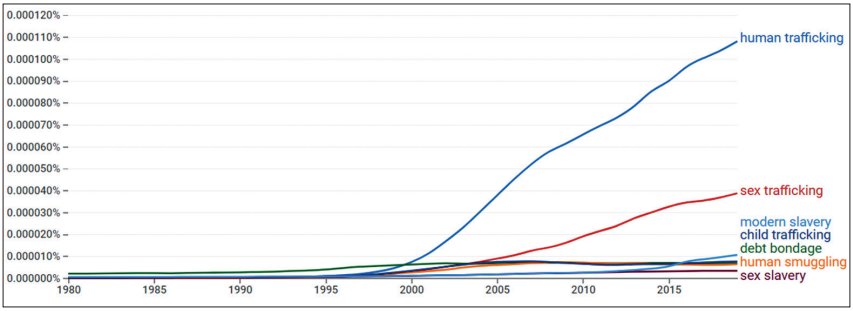
4. The strange limelight of "human trafficking"

> What is worse than being exploited abroad? Not being exploited abroad. (Martin, Abella, and Kuptsch 2006, 208)

Certainly, the "neo-abolitionist" discourse that emerged in the last twenty years gave greater public visibility to several atrocious realities of the world social collapse, on the other hand, systematically applying to them the emotionally charged term of "slavery" without explaining the new historical context, ends up framing them in a tremendously ideological way. Instead of these so diverse phenomena being perceived as blatant evidence of the worldwide collapse of capitalism, their simplified and abusive interpretation as a mere continuation of the everlasting "slavery" has clearly fueled the "last crusade of liberalism" (Robert Kurz 1999, 374) in its attempt to give some meaning to the misunderstood course of events. The fact that slavery is universally condemned is precisely the reason why the recurrent and rhetorical use of the word requires increased critical attention, all the more so because over the past two hundred years it has been continuously used as a "wild card" or "joker" (Miers 2003, 13) in the moralistic language games of world politics. Not doubting the well-intentioned and even sometimes critical character of a large part of the actors working on the ground today (NGOs, activists, etc.), it is also clear that an "anti-'slavery' industrial complex" (Bravo 2019, 123) has already been set up worldwide; and that this complex, especially in the attention it dedicates to the so-called "human trafficking", is becoming increasingly part of the legitimating apparatus of an "imperialism of security and exclusion" (Kurz 2003, 156–189) in its barbaric programs for the global management of "superfluous" populations.

Considering the naturally close association between the new global logic of superfluity and the recent intensification of migratory movements, it is not surprising that the theme of "human trafficking," the most mobile of "modern slavery" phenomena, has gained a leading role in the international media and political agenda in comparison with the other phenomena dubbed "modern slavery," although it is widely recognized that debt bondage in Asia and Latin America is by far the mode of "unfree labour" with the greatest weight in global numbers.

Graph 1 represents the result of a *Google Books Ngram* search for different terms related to "modern slavery," between 1980 and 2019. What is important to emphasize here is the total mastery of the expression "human trafficking" over all other terms associated with "modern slavery," especially since 2000.



Graph 1. Google Books Ngram search for different terms related to "modern slavery," 1980–2019.
The y-axis represents the relative frequency of use of terms in the English google books database (more than 8 million books). See http://books.google.com/ngrams.

Until 2000, there was no definition of "human trafficking" in international law (Quirk 2007, 191), the year in which the United Nations defined the *Additional Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children.* According to the Protocol, "human trafficking" means:

> the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of

> abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. (Article 3)

To this definition it is added that "exploitation"

> shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs. (Article 3)

It is not difficult to see the extraordinary elasticity of the concept of "trafficking." After all, it does not define an *event* but a *complex spatial and temporal process*, with predictably variable amplitudes and durations (O'Connell Davidson 2015, 110); it seems less a crime than a succession of crimes, artificially brought together legally as if they were a single act. The process is strangely defined by its ultimate objective ("for the purpose of exploitation"), which may or may not be achieved and is itself quite difficult to define and even more to prove. Despite this, the definition makes it very clear that "slavery" is only one possible outcome of trafficking. But even this simple differentiation is often overlooked by the "modern slavery" discourse. Sometimes "modern slavery" and "human trafficking" seem to be treated almost as equivalents; at other times, "slavery" appears as a sub-category of "trafficking"; and in other situations, the exact opposite occurs. Kevin Bales' publications, both individual and collective, are particularly ambiguous in this regard. In the 1999 work, i.e., prior to the *UN Trafficking Protocol*, Bales only occasionally used the term "trafficking," but the conceptual short circuit was already noted: "Notice that the crime itself tends to be called 'trafficking' rather than by its true name – the slave trade" (Bales 2012a, 252). After the *Protocol*, Bales did not adjust his concepts but contributed to even greater confusion, presenting ambivalent or even contrary versions at different times, both to the *Protocol* and to his own:

> Human trafficking is the modern term for a phenomenon – that of forcing and transporting people into slavery – which has been a part of civilization since the beginning of human history. (Bales 2005, 126)

> Trafficking is simply a mechanism or conduit that brings people into slavery. It is one process of enslavement itself, not a condition or result of that process. (Bales, Trodd, and Williamson 2009, 35)

> Human trafficking is the process of delivering a person into enslavement. (Bales and Soodalter 2009, 112)

> […] it should be made plain that trafficking is not in itself slavery, but a process by which slavery can be achieved. (Allain and Bales 2012, 2)

> […] that part of contemporary slavery termed "human trafficking", which describes the process of moving a person into a situation of slavery. (Bales 2012c, 287)

To the confusions resulting, on the one hand, from the elasticity of the concept of "trafficking" of the *UN Protocol* and, on the other hand, from the ambiguous use of the term by the "modern slavery" discourse, we can add the problem of the complicated relations with the so-called "smuggling" of migrants and which concerns the irregular entry of foreigners into a country, conducted or facilitated by third parties.

First of all, it is important to bear in mind that the *Trafficking Protocol* is part of the *UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime*, being only one of the three treaties that constitute it; the other two are the *Additional Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air* and the *Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, their Parts and Components and Ammunition.* This connection between the three protocols is significant because it shows that the impetus that truly animates the convention is the fight against transnational organized crime through greater inter-state articulation (Quirk 2007, 197; Wylie and McRedmond 2010, 2–3), as is the fact that states can only sign any of the protocols if they sign the Convention in advance.

Finally, it is interesting how quickly the *Trafficking and Smuggling Protocols* were signed by almost all countries worldwide, in comparison with, for example, the *International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families,* which has existed since 1990, and which, within the scope of legal instruments related to migration, has the lowest rate of adherence, took thirteen years just to reach the minimum limit to come into effect (20 states) and to date it has not been ratified by any country in Western Europe and North America or by Australia, among other common destination countries of migrants (see also O'Connell Davidson 2015, 157–158). Even more interesting is the fact that this Convention already includes support for measures to combat trafficking and smuggling of migrant workers, but, unlike the *Trafficking and Smuggling Protocols*, its main objectives are to reinforce respect for the human rights of migrant workers and equal treatment between them and nationals.

While the protection of human rights is referred to in the *Trafficking Protocol* and its definition of "trafficking" does not include any reference to crossing borders, Article 4 explicitly states that the protocol applies only when crimes "are transnational in nature and involve an organized criminal group," thus not covering situations of domestic "human trafficking" (internal trafficking) (see also Quirk 2007, 197) and creating an ambiguity that lasts until today (Lazaridis 2015, 83). In addition, it is also relevant that many of the rules of the *Trafficking and Smuggling Protocols*, "concerning border controls and travel documents, are the same" (Bales 2005, 132).

The *Smuggling Protocol* defines the phenomenon as "the procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident." As is obvious, in the material reality of human relations, where smuggling ends (which is a crime against the state) and "trafficking" (which is a personal crime) begins is extremely difficult to identify; as well as where consent ends and force begins. It is not uncommon for a migrant to start a crossing in smuggling conditions and pass or end in a situation covered by the concept of "trafficking." There are countless stories of the kind and these

problems have long been reported, both by agents on the ground and by human rights activists and academics (Anderson and Hughes 2015; O'Connell Davidson 2010; Andrijasevic 2010). The situation is truly paradoxical: on the one hand, in the media and even academic discourse, the distinction between trafficking and smuggling is not always made, and the confusion is politically explored internationally in different ways (both by left and right). On the other hand, the legal discourse requires that a distinction be made, but, in reality, it seems increasingly impossible to make.

The confusion becomes even greater when not only this indeterminacy is explored, but the emotionally charged theme of "slavery" is added to it. Note how Kevin Bales (in partnership with other authors) articulates the three circumstances:

> In cases of trafficking, the act of smuggling is just a prelude to and conduit into enslavement. Put another way, human trafficking is smuggling plus coercion or deception at the beginning of the process and enslavement at the end. (Bales, Trodd, and Williamson 2009, 40)

> If a person is smuggled into the United States and then left free to find a job, the crime is smuggling. If a person is brought here and then held against his or her will and forced to work without pay, the crime is human trafficking, which is to say slavery. (Bales and Soodalter 2009, 112)

Firstly, and following the *Trafficking Protocol*, it is assumed that border crossing is a condition of human trafficking. Second, it is assumed that trafficking is the same as slavery. Third, that trafficking is just smuggling added of violence and deception. In other words, combating smuggling is always, in principle, combating potential crimes of trafficking and, according to the conceptual shortcut of "neo-abolitionism," also combating slavery. It is not difficult to see how a "logical" conclusion with political consequences can be drawn from this argument: *the fight against irregular immigration is a condition of the fight against "modern slavery."* It is not by chance that in recent years the "modern slavery" discourse has

begun to be severely criticized, mainly for more or less implicitly defending measures and actions that end up placing migrants in situations of even greater vulnerability and risk, just exposed to the pitfalls of what the dominant discourse calls "modern slavery."[18]

What seems more and more obvious is that the ambiguities of the "human trafficking" discourse provide States with a wide margin of maneuver and discretion and not only do not prevent but also allow border security policies to be justified with supposed humanitarian concerns in a context of decomposition of the capitalist world system. When the argument of the crime of smuggling of migrants turns out to be insufficient (as is the case with the current criminalization of the rescue of migrants in the Mediterranean) it is always possible to invoke the humanitarian argument of "combating trafficking and slavery" for what is in fact an "international migration management" program (Geiger and Pécoud 2010) with the purpose of legitimizing tight border control, arbitrary arrests and deportations of migrants.

The instrumentalization of anti-slavery arguments for purposes of political domination and population control is far from being a historical novelty (Forclaz 2015). At the end of the nineteenth century, the Berlin Conference, which distributed the territory of the African continent among the various European empires, justified colonization by invoking, among other things, the "fight against slavery" in Africa, a claim that supported king Leopold II of Belgium in his atrocities in the private colony of Congo; Mussolini invaded Ethiopia using the same pretext (Miers 2011, 9). But in the context of the collapse of capitalism, the "fight against slavery" argument is used not to *include* populations under the imperial rule but above all to legitimize the *exclusion* of absolute surplus populations from certain national or supranational territories. The global crisis of capitalism and its corresponding logic of superfluity will not slow down and "neo-abolitionist" concerns with "human trafficking" will likely end up flanking an increasingly "imperialism of exclusion" in barbaric migration management programs of "superfluous" populations.

[18] O'Connell Davidson (2015), Anderson and O'Connell Davidson (2002), Prokhovnik (2014), Doomernik (2003), De Genova (2010), Sharma (2005), Quirk (2007), Quirk (2017), O'Connell Davidson and Howard (2015).

In the United Kingdom, the application of the *Modern-Day Slavery Act* is often used to justify the strengthening of border control while making common practice the deportation of people that the system itself recognizes as victims of "slavery," including children. Something very similar has been happening for years in the USA. The European relationship with Libya is perhaps the most striking example of this strategy.

5. "Slave markets" in Libya as an example of the ongoing collapse

Since 1992, the European Union has been externalizing its borders, both to the east and to the south, and since 2005 in a more aggressive way. This strategy has implied agreements with neighboring EU countries to accept deported migrants and adopt security policies to control their borders, in a kind of outsourcing that transforms them into buffer states and subsidiary guards of the European *limes* (Akkerman 2018, 2). One such country is Libya. In March 2011 there were about 2,5 million immigrants in Libya, out of a population of about 6,5 million (Malakooti 2013, 101). In that same year, Libya entered in a chaotic situation that lasts until today, marked by a plundering economy and the struggle between two rival governments, while significant parts of the territory are disputed by a complex mix of militias, armed groups, warlords, tribal alliances of precarious loyalty and jihadists. The country is also crossed by several migration land routes, especially by those who seek by all means to reach Europe fleeing poverty, war, ethnic conflicts and hunger, coming mainly from Sudan, Nigeria, Niger, Ghana and Egypt, and that upon entering Libyan territory they also plunge into an unknown and even greater hell of multiple hostilities and dangers, totally exposed to abductions, extortion and trafficking by armed gangs (Micaleff 2017; Micaleff, Horsley, and Bish 2019; Noria Research 2019).

On April 18, 2015, a boat full of migrants and refugees sank off the coast of Libya. About 700 people died. The next day, Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi called for international military interventions in the Mediterranean to combat what he repeatedly called the "21st cen-

tury slave trade", reinforcing that "[w]hen we say we are in the presence of slavery, we are not using the word just for effect" (Mackenzie and Emmott 2015). In the same circumstance, Renzi defended European financial support for the construction of more "camps" for migrants in the countries of North Africa to combat the so-called "slave trade" (Kingsley 2015). Following this appeal and the media's generalization of the analogy, more than three hundred scholars and researchers of slavery and migration signed an open letter against this "patently false" interpretation of the history of the transatlantic slave trade, carried out by European political elites in a hypocritical attempt to legitimize military interventions that not only do not provide aid but violently repress the desperate escapes of migrants and refugees (Twisting the lessons 2015).

This perverse analogy did not disappear from the media discourse and was even reinforced with the events of the end of 2017 and the entire political marketing operation that followed. On November 14, 2017, CNN (Elbagir et al. 2017) released a report showing an amateur video of an "auction" of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, especially Nigerians, in very similar situations narrated about the old slave markets of the transatlantic trade. The fact that migrants are black reinforced this perspective. The report also illustrated moments captured by journalists themselves in the suburbs of Tripoli from an auction in everything similar to that amateur video. A dozen black men lined up, a dealer and some buyers: "Does anyone need a digger? Here is a digger, a strong man, he digs ... $ 500, $ 550, $ 600, $ 650 ...." Journalists also visited one of the more than 40 "detention centers" for migrants in Libya, some of them unofficial and controlled by militias. The report shows several hundred migrants detained and huddled in a warehouse without any conditions, awaiting deportation to their countries of origin, while some narrate stories of violence, torture, abuse and theft, since they started their journey towards Europe, several weeks before and several thousand kilometers away, until the unfortunate capture and detention in Libyan territory, often also including their sale in "slave markets."

At least since April 2017, the IOM was aware of the existence of "slave markets" in Libya (cf. IOM 2017), but it was the dissemination of CNN's report on social networks, often accompanied by photographs

of other situations (older or in other countries and unrelated to the event portrayed), which generated a huge wave of international outrage. Several demonstrations and protests took place in the following days against the Libyan "slave markets," both in African countries and in European capitals, namely with protests with the Libyan embassies in London, Paris and Madrid. Reactions from several international organizations and political agents did not take long to emerge. On November 20, António Guterres, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, emits a statement (United Nations 2017) that "slavery has no place in our world" and confesses that he is "horrified" by what appears to him "the most egregious abuses of human rights" and even "crimes against humanity," calling on the competent authorities "to investigate these activities without delay and to bring the perpetrators to justice" and that all nations comply with the UN *Convention against Transnational Organized Crime* and its *Protocol against Trafficking in Human Beings*. On 22 November, France calls for an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council to discuss the problem, and President Emmanuel Macron says that the CNN report shows "scandalous" and "unacceptable" situations, appealing to "fight against traffickers" and the "dismantling of trafficking networks." On November 30, the United Nations, the African Union and the European Union held a meeting to try to resolve the problem. The IOM estimates pointed to the possibility of 700,000 migrants in Libyan territory, some of whom were already caught in the Mediterranean Sea. At the same meeting the mechanisms were established to carry out an "emergency evacuation plan" of about 3,800 migrants, funded by the European Union and implemented by the IOM under the program *Voluntary Humanitarian Return* (VHR). The rescue plan was actually a deportation program. For these migrants, as well as tens of thousands of others, the traumatic journey of thousands of kilometers ended exactly where they had sought to leave.

On a certain level, this case concentrates a significant part of the ambiguities and controversies around "modern slavery" and "human trafficking." Media coverage and outrage on social networks was extremely marked by the existence of "slave markets," while paying very little attention to the broader social context of those events (O'Connell David-

son 2017). The disastrous political and economic situation in Libya was rarely referred to, or the situation in the migrants' countries of origin was deepened and the reason why they travel thousands of kilometers, risking crossing the hostility of the desert and the unpredictability of areas of armed conflict. In the CNN report (and many others that followed), the obsession with the fact that some migrants have been sold is above all else. "Have you ever been sold?" is the recurring question of journalists. This is "the" scandal, and it also seems to have been what fundamentally motivated international outrage. The fact that some of the protests were also directed against European immigration policies was hardly covered, much less the subsequent "humanitarian repatriation" of migrants and "slaves."

The dominant neo-abolitionist discourse also contributed to the ideological digestion of events. After the report was released, Maurice Middleberg (2018), the executive director of *Free the Slaves*, reproduced the limited dominant interpretation: "The international community's just indignation at CNN's recent discovery of a slave market that sells migrants in Libya, it will only be important if it produces a response that interrupts the purchase and sale of human beings"; while also insisting on the need for "mass repatriation of migrants to their West African countries of origin." In other words: the focus in on the purchase and sale of human beings; not a word about the conditions of migrants in detention centers and the various atrocities revealed by the report and nothing about the complacency and even involvement of European states and several international organizations, throughout the process, both in fostering the conditions that allowed it and in everything that followed. Silvia Scarpa (2018, 6), author of a report commissioned by the European Parliament's Subcommittee on Human Rights (DROI) in the aftermath of the "scandal", uses the "slave auctions" in Libya just "as a case to illustrate the need to reconsider the obsolete system of international law about slavery", as if the problem was only a legal one, also without considering the historical chain of events. Fiona David (David 2018, 14), one of the executive directors of the *Walk Free Foundation*, did not fail to mention that the "[i]ncreasingly restrictive approaches, applied by the European Union in an effort to curb the flow of migrants from Libya

by returning migrants back to detention centres in that country, have exacerbated the issue". But the complaint has no further development, and David too concentrates on the "scandal" of the purchase and sale of individuals, expressing some perplexity and misunderstanding about the current historical context:

> How is it that with all we have in place to respond to modern slavery in 2018, human beings are still being sold in Libya as "big strong boys for farm work?" Why is modern slavery still so pervasive around the world? Why and how is it tolerated in the globalising economy? What are we missing? (David 2018, 15)

What neo-abolitionists are "missing" is that the phenomena they call "modern slavery" are not simply pre-modern reminiscences of traditional social structures "tolerated in the global economy" but rather products of the process of economic collapse and social disintegration of world capitalism, something that in the Global South is much more advanced and on which the European authorities seem to have far less illusions than neo-abolitionists. After all, the externalization and militarization of the European border not only continues but the budget for this strategy is expected to increase very significantly in the coming years. In the approved next EU budget cycle (2021–2027), EUR 22.6 billion is earmarked for migration management (9.8 billion) and border management (12.7 billion) and several budget and responsibilities reinforcements are planned for Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, continuing the impressive growth of its power. In the first year in operation, in 2005, Frontex's budget was 6 million euros; in 2015, with the "migration crisis" in the Mediterranean, it was already 142 million. Since then the budget has not stopped growing: in 2019 it was 333 million and in 2020 it was 460 million (+ 34%). For the budget cycle 2021-2027, 5.5 billion euros are foreseen (an annual average of 785 million euros), with Frontex being responsible for constituting a contingent of 10,000 agents, at the latest by 2027, to among other tasks, help fight against "human trafficking." This budget growth translated into an increase in the number of deportations carried out or coordinated by the agency:

in 2008 there were eight people; in 2018 there were 6 thousand. By the year 2018 the agency had deported a total of 53,000 people, but the objective set by the EU is the deportation of 50,000 migrants per year, a clear message of its metamorphosis into a "deportation union" (Jones, Kilpatrick, and Gkliati 2020, 2).

Overall, it seems that the Libyan slave markets and its historical context illustrate quite well the ongoing decomposition of global capitalism: a collapsed peripheral state dominated by militias, located at the edge of a central and increasingly fortified supranational entity (European Union), with which it cooperates in security terms and has several unofficial economic relations involving natural resources (Pradella and Cillo 2020), and on the path of unwanted absolute surplus populations that seek to escape the misery and hunger of an entire continent, of which several thousand end up imprisoned in "camps" without any legal status and "enslaved" by armed groups of other "supernumeraries." Despite being extremely rich in empirical information and insights, Pradella and Cillo (2020) misinterpret this situation by defending that migrants from sub-Saharan Africa crossing Libya and reaching the Italian coast are a *relative* surplus population. The authors explicitly deny "superfluity," arguing that the European "imperialism" "securitizes the border against the immigrants it displaces with the goal of increasing their exploitation" (Pradella and Cillo 2020, introduction, pagination not available), and, from their point of view, "[s]imilarly to Marx's example of Ireland, Libya has come to play a role of labour reserve for Italy, even if the majority of those trying to cross the Mediterranean do not originate in Libya itself" (Pradella and Cillo 2020, conclusion, pagination not available). The authors therefore: (i) seem to ignore the historical trend of *absolute* and "consolidated surplus population" identified by Marx; (ii) make an unreasonable analogy with a specific case of floating surplus population studied by Marx over 150 years ago in entirely different historical and demographical circumstances; (iii) take the anachronistic national scale as a reference while admitting that the problem is much wider; and finally (iv) seem to ignore the fact that for every African migrant who arrives in Italy there are perhaps many thousands more who stay or are left behind. From my point of view, although it is obvious that

Italian agrarian capitalism takes advantage of the cheap labour power of African migrants and refugees, putting thus pressure on the wage level of agricultural workers and fostering "unfree" labour relations, the idea that this is the actual "goal" of the whole expensive military apparatus of European "border imperialism" is completely mistaken. It is something much worse.

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Aristotle once said that if looms were to weave by themselves masters would not need slaves. The historical trajectory of capitalism seems to place humanity in the exact opposite situation: on the one hand, the accelerated scientific development of the productive forces and the rise of automation processes, on the other hand, a diversification and intensification on a worldwide scale of forms of "unfree labour," often classified as "modern slavery." Several studies have approached these phenomena as remnants of "pre-capitalism;" others see them as moments of an "ongoing primitive accumulation;" still others interpret them as extreme cases of "fully functional capitalism" or "neoliberal capitalism." In this paper the author intends (i) to show the different theoretical problems of these approaches and (ii) to argue that the phenomena of "modern slavery" are more adequately understood through a perspective of global decomposition of capitalism, a process that began with the third industrial revolution of microelectronics and is now accelerating with the emerging automation, intensifying a violent logic of demobilization of labour power and containment of "superfluous" populations.

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