

## Book Review

**Julia Harnoncourt (2018) *Unfreie Arbeit. Trabalho escravo in der brasilianischen Landwirtschaft*. Vienna: Promedia Verlag.**

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The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the reality of precarious jobs and working conditions all around the world, ranging from meat-cutters in Germany, to fruit and vegetable pickers in Peru, and to women from Eastern Europe working as 24-hour assistants for elderly people in Western Europe. The global health crisis has shed light on exploitative working conditions as well as global power inequalities. The book *Unfreie Arbeit. Trabalho escravo in der brasilianischen Landwirtschaft* (Unfree Labour: Trabalho escravo in Brazilian Agriculture) addresses exactly these issues by looking at *trabalho escravo*, a form of unfree labour, in the north-western Brazilian state of Pará. However, Harnoncourt explains that *trabalho escravo* is just one of many mechanisms of creating inequality which the study aims to disentangle (p. 10).

In four chapters plus an appendix Harnoncourt analyses the aspects which constitute and shape this labour regime. Due to the fact that the book is based on a PhD thesis, the introduction (pp. 7–44) is reduced to the basics, such as sources, perspective, method and theory as well as the state of the research. Familiar with the original text of the thesis, the reviewer has to point out the excellent editorial work that has been carried out by the author and the editorial staff at Promedia. Why is that important? The book was published in the series “Critical Science” (*Kritische Forschung*) and therefore wants to accomplish – apart from scientific standards – also a socio-political statement. This implies that the outcome of scientific research addresses a wider audience, reaching not only “expert” circles. The introduction proves that this goal has been met, due to the previously mentioned editorial work, but also through clear language and logical argumentation. Although up to now the book has only been published in German, which limits its possible outreach, the study proves to be useful for various settings, from undergraduate students at university seminars to basic reading material for journalistic investigations.

The main part of the book (pp. 45–199) then deals with *trabalho escravo* in the agricultural complex in Pará. As a peripheral state inside the Brazilian nation–state, Pará constitutes a favourable location for the exercise of unfree labour and other forms of exploitation. During the last military dictatorship (1964–1985) the Amazonian region experienced an “internal peripheralization”, becoming a source of primary materials such as cattle, sugar and soya. These are produced basically only by men under various unfree labour mechanisms which are implemented in order to reproduce surplus value for global agrobusiness (pp. 126–7). Harnoncourt’s study focuses on these agricultural workers and describes the process of how these young men – often of black or indigenous descent – step into a vicious circle of dependency and exploitation (pp. 87–105).

The empirical basis for the book consists of qualitative interviews with members of different organisations which oppose *trabalho escravo* and its agents, like the Landless Workers’ Movement

(*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais sem Terra, MST*). Harnoncourt points out convincingly the problems of acquiring interviews with persons directly involved in *trabalho escravo*: possible persecution by large landowners and their local henchmen, distrust of a young European woman and scientists, as well as very personal feelings. Because of that Harnoncourt points at the problem of a “double translation” (p. 12) of the voices from below and therefore decided to use problem-focused interviews. This enabled her to illustrate the various interpretations, opinions and stories about the reality experienced by the workers. At the end she was also able to meet one person who experienced *trabalho escravo*. Harnoncourt inserts the interviews where they are needed: be it to elaborate on local perceptions about the functions of capitalism or the explanation of the inhuman working conditions at the farms.

But what then is *trabalho escravo* and can the Brazilian case help to explain the mechanisms creating global inequality within a capitalist world system, as Harnoncourt proposes?

She delivers a dense compilation of the various meanings and interpretations of *trabalho escravo*. The (post-)colonial past of Brazil is vital in this context, especially given that Brazil was the last country in the Americas to abolish slavery in 1888. Harnoncourt points at the complicated use of the slavery connotation when speaking about *trabalho escravo* or other unfree labour conditions. Due to the fact that the term slavery is used in public discourses – as term and concept – in order to point at continuities in today’s Brazilian society, with its past as a colony based on slavery, there are nevertheless essential differences between the past and present forms of slavery. Slavery before 1888 was a legal system whereas since then it has been officially delegitimised and denounced – even by agents who use mechanisms of *trabalho escravo* – and there is a social consensus that these forms of labour are illegal. Therefore, today *trabalho escravo* has to operate concealed from the public. It adapts to new social and political realities where the agents – large landowners – come up with new strategies to operate an unfree labour system. While physical violence may be exercised less openly than was the case during slavery (for example, public flogging), intimidation and psychological violence are common. The interviewed speak of unhygienic life and work conditions, rotten food which they are obliged to pay for with their salaries, getting sick by drinking contaminated water, or refusal of medical treatment when they are sick. This of course reminds one of similar strategies from the times of slavery before 1888. These measures, accepted and implemented by large landowners and their henchmen, prove that “the life of the workers has no meaning for the entrepreneur” and therefore, *trabalho escravo* “does not have to be an active act, but can also be caused by omission” (p. 62). At the end it is up to the observer’s perspective – whether more historically based or political – to interpret *trabalho escravo* as slavery. Harnoncourt states that her decision to interpret it as a form of unfree labour is based on the argumentations and interpretations which are used by social movements since the 1970s as well as the Brazilian legal authorities since the mid-1990s. The legal and socially delegitimised construction of unfree labour constitutes the crucial element of this assumption.

In the last chapters (pp. 199–234) Harnoncourt opens up the connections between *trabalho escravo* and the global world economy. Given the production and export of products like wood, sugar, soya, palm oil and especially beef, the author shows that increased demand on the world market leads to an increase of unfree labour in the region of Pará. It became clear in the second chapter that without international agents *trabalho escravo* would not exist. The most important finding is that forms of unfree labour are not a local problem of Pará but a global one. It follows the basic rules of global capitalism: profit maximisation and the accumulation of capital. It depends on local and regional social conditions which allow the use of unfree labour and its various forms. Harnoncourt’s study shows that capitalism itself creates the basis for today’s existence of unfree labour.

## **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

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