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Richard Croucher

## **Alessandro Stanziani, *Bondage. Labor and Rights in Eurasia from the Sixteenth to the Early Twentieth Centuries***

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Richard Croucher

## **Alessandro Stanziani, *Bondage. Labor and Rights in Eurasia from the Sixteenth to the Early Twentieth Centuries***

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- 1 This book is volume 24 in the International Studies in Social History series edited by Marcel Van Der Linden of the International Institute of Social History Amsterdam (IISH) and makes a significant contribution to the trans-national history of labour. Its publication is timely, coming as it does in a period where interest in slavery, bonded labour and their legacies has steadily developed in both the developed and developing worlds. I begin by summarising the work's aims, research base, scope and arguments, and then offer views on how well the author succeeds in establishing the latter.
- 2 The work sets out to analyse the evolving forms of labour in Eurasia, and the interactions between them, in the emerging tradition of trans-national labour history championed by the IISH in general and this book series in particular. By 'Eurasia' the author means Europe (France and Britain), Russia and Central Asia and also the Western Indian Ocean (Mauritius and Réunion). He draws on a comprehensive and sure-footed if occasionally idiosyncratic review of literature in English, French and Russian and on selective archival research in the relevant archives across the world. The links between the conditions of labour in the different parts of this constructed 'Eurasia' are explored to show their interdependence and inter-relations and much of the volume's contribution lies in its detailed examination of these linkages. At this level of analysis, as the author points out, comparisons on the national and imperial levels are 'a rough approximation' (15) but they are also extremely useful as the basis for numerous stimulating and provocative arguments.
- 3 Stanziani begins by arguing that the Enlightenment experienced a central dilemma about the relationship between labour and the law on the one hand and actual economic developments on the other. The English law concept of 'master and servant' framed labour law while *moral* arguments brought about the abolition of slavery; in Russia, élites shared their Western counterparts' ambiguous attitude to issues of labour freedom. In short, Stanziani argues that Western approaches to labour rights were more repressive than often thought, while in Russia they were less so. Moreover, there were links between them and in an extensive discussion he reminds us that Samuel Bentham's famous Panopticon was developed for western use via Russian experience. He is therefore criticising the use of Weberian ideal types in analyses of the 'liberal' West in comparison to the 'despotic' East. He illustrates his argument by empirical investigation in this case. In Russia, he stresses the importance of *kholopstvo* or limited-term slavery, a lack of compulsory labour *corvées* and the mobility that peasants exercised in practice. Localised forms of bondage existed in heterogenous forms, but no national-level institutionalization of serfdom occurred. These bonded labourers exercised voice through legal channels. Thus, prior to 'liberation' after 1861, peasant labour was less repressed than previously thought. Meanwhile, in the West, capitalism could not be identified as in Weberian or Marxist definitions with 'free' labour: Britain's 'master and servant' legislation accompanied the first Industrial Revolution while American slavery flourished under capitalism. Indeed, unlike American slaves, Russian serfs did not suffer from ethnic distance from their masters while peasant communes acted as negotiating intermediaries between them and estate owners. In short, the two institutions of Russian and American labour repression were quite different. Russian bondage was simply a polar expression of a wider, shared conception of labour as a form of service.
- 4 In relation to the Western Indian Ocean, the variation in labour forms is again a prominent feature. Stanziani enumerates and points up the significance of the multifarious forms of

slavery which carried different statuses and may not be compared to the more uni-dimensional form of its American counterpart. The different forms often involved interdependencies between subordinates and intermediaries who were themselves under obligation to others (in Mauritius he implicitly refers here to the *Sirdars* and labour contractors). His argument is then that the Mauritian and other indenture contracts—which replaced slavery after the latter’s abolition in the British Empire—would have been impossible if the British had not had the Master and Servant conception; a similar logic is applied to France and Réunion. These contracts helped extend the effective continuation of slavery’s conditions if not its status long after its formal abolition. As he points out, the evident status difference and the non-hereditary nature of indentured labour in relation to slavery later made a huge difference to the development of freer forms of labour in the Twentieth Century. He proceeds to nuance his argument by contending that colonies were not simply dependent on the metropolitan countries since Indian Ocean labour forms were very varied and more complex than ‘dependency’ might suggest. Emancipation did not come about ‘solely under pressure exerted by the advanced West’ (14). Nevertheless, the essential contribution relates to his identification of the complexity of different labour forms.

5 Overall, Stanziani argues that there were reciprocal influences. The circulation of ideas between different national practices led to a degree of homogeneity in practices which co-existed with the evident differentiation between them. Importantly for his overall argument, the Industrial Revolution enhanced rather than broke this system of regional circulation as the forms of labour evolved as part of a long-term process. The ‘presumed Western domination’ is challenged. By the last quarter of the Nineteenth Century, this world started to disappear as a result of ‘new’ labour contracts in many of these countries, the 1861 abolition of serfdom in Russia and the 1865 end of slavery in the United States. By 1904 slavery in Francophone Africa was ending and the Indian indenture contract ended in 1916. Trade unions were becoming legalised (or rather – your reviewer would specify-- at least beginning to acquire specific ‘immunities’ from prosecution in Britain) and social democratic parties were on the march. The welfare state’s limited initial foundations were also laid in this era. In broad terms, he seeks to push the time when one can justifiably discuss ‘free labour’ toward a much later date than is conventionally conceded.

6 Stanziani’s adventurous and detailed work succeeds in challenging many of the easier assumptions of labour history and notably those concerning the gap between Russia and Western Europe in terms of the forms of labour practised in both regions. In this connection, it is the Russian rather than the West European side of the comparison which is most convincing. Our first point here is that in Britain (rather than the ‘England’ he often uses as a synonym), the Master and Servant legislation can hardly be taken as encapsulating the reality of employment relationships. To take just one well-documented example, the Lanarkshire (Scottish) miners—themselves subject to a form of serfdom for much of the Eighteenth Century—developed their early Brotherhoods into strong trade unions well capable of challenging many employer practices in the 1820s and 1830s (see Campbell, 2013). Thus, the gap between Western and Eastern labour realities may have been smaller than previously thought, but it remained considerable. It was the greater degrees of systemic openness to politicised self-activity which made the difference. Our second point relates to the Western Indian Ocean. In the Mauritian case, he successfully criticises general conceptions of the ‘plantation economy’ by deploying insights largely available already from excellent works by previous authors, notably Vijaya Teelock (1998) and Richard B. Allen (1999). Specialists had already discerned much of this argument; generalists had not and the value of his work here therefore lies mainly in the way these insights are integrated into his wider analytic framework. This broader complex of ideas is indeed dazzling and stimulating. Your reviewer found it hard to put down; although sometimes hard to penetrate and thinly indexed, it is very engaging. However, it also outruns itself on occasion and this is our third main point: theoretic symmetry and desire to make ‘transnational’ points are sometimes advanced on very little evidence. Thus, the argument that influences flowed from the colonial world to the metropolitan is not convincingly underpinned by empirics. It was indeed the case that the Mauritian élite maintained very great influence

over what went on locally (Croucher and McIlroy, 2013a), but it is implausible to hint that they did—or wanted to do—much more than that. One imagines that it is not seriously being argued that it significantly influenced labour policy towards British workers. Such an argument would require substantial empirical support.

7 Despite these three reservations, Stanziani has produced a very useful *Feuilleton* that questions a good deal of labour history and that is an extremely useful service at a time when the subject's study can only benefit from such a fillip. It may on the other hand be going too far to assert that it (as Marcel Van Der Linden suggests on the book cover) 'effectively undermines several certainties that have characterised our thinking about the history of labour relations worldwide'.

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### **À propos de l'auteur**

#### **Richard Croucher**

Middlesex University London, R.Croucher@mdx.ac.uk

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