

REPORTS AND CORRESPONDENCE

Ball and Chain: An International Conference Exploring the Boundaries of Freedom and Coercion

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Naturally enough, Australian scholars regard convict labor as integral to their national history. Founded in the wake of the American Revolution as an alternative penal colony, over the next seventy years Australia received tens of thousands of transported British subjects branded as part of England's growing "criminal class," a term most Australian historians hasten to reject. The current lively interest in convict history, however, turns out to be a relatively recent phenomenon in Australia, akin to the post-New Left attention to slavery, working-class history, and social history in the United States. Once regarded as the "convict stain" and more often than not swept under the rug by previous generations, Australia's penal past has at last become fashionable. Convict ancestry is now worn as a badge of pride; the Hyde Park Barracks museum in central Sydney offers a marvelous exhibit documenting the role of "convictism" and its changing meaning in the colony's history; and a faux ball and chain has become as representative a souvenir of a visit to Sydney as a postcard of the Opera House.

Those of us new to Australia and to Australian historiography quickly discovered that Robert Hughes's well-known account of the country's history, *The Fatal Shore* (1988), dismissed by professional historians as "a good novel," was not proper background reading. Indeed, mindful of the tendency of the unpleasant facts of history to make their way into the larger culture as banalities, Australian historians are attempting to develop an analytically rigorous account and detailed social history of the nation's experience with convict labor. "Ball and Chain," held at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) in Sydney on December 4–6, 1996, grew out of some of the perceived limitations of the field of convict studies. Sponsored by the Department of Economic History at UNSW and the British Australian Studies Association, the conference sought to broaden the discussion of convict labor beyond its usual focus on New South Wales, to step outside the often technical questions of economic history which have shaped the field, and to examine Australia's convict history in comparison with other systems of coerced labor, including slavery, indenture, and convict labor elsewhere in the world.

David Meredith, an economic historian at UNSW, convened the con-

ference with an extraordinary overview rooting Australia's parochial historical narrative firmly in global developments of the nineteenth century, particularly those associated with the spread of capitalism and empire. Meredith noted that the settlement of Australia in the late eighteenth century was intimately connected with events halfway around the globe. The Atlantic economy, dependent on slavery and yet linked with the expansion of capitalism, had reached its apogee, and its social order faced the dual transformations of revolution and slave emancipation. The racism so integral to the Atlantic system played a crucial role in Australia as well, Meredith noted, shaping both the invaders' response to Australia's aboriginal population and an increasingly rigid definition of "criminality" analogous to definitions of "race" on the other side of the British Empire. The metropolitan social forces generating transportation of criminals to the new colony differed sharply from those underlying the Atlantic slave trade and the formation of plantation societies in the Americas. Yet, Meredith astutely reminded the conference, transportation of the "criminal class" arose in a world confronted by the moral dilemmas, critiques of political economy, and paternalistic ideologies generated by the clash of slavery and antislavery in an emergent and contested imperial system.

The extremely ambitious historiographic and theoretical agenda set by Meredith and co-organizer Deborah Oxley (UNSW) was well served by the thirty-five papers presented by scholars from the United States, South Africa, the United Kingdom, Argentina, the South Pacific, and, predominantly, all regions of Australia. Nearly half of the papers focused on Australian history (often with a comparative perspective), but the scope of the remaining presentations, ranging from the "repertoires of coercion" that coexisted with market relations in nineteenth-century Argentina (Ricardo Salvatore, Universidad Torcuato di Tella) to black convict workers in the American South (Alex Lichtenstein, Florida International University) to the racial division of labor in South Africa (Ben Maddison, University of Wollongong), was quite remarkable. Despite the diversity of scholarship, three broad themes emerged from the conference: the role of the state in drawing and maintaining the "boundaries of freedom and coercion"; the nature of resistance to labor coercion; and the usefulness of postmodern theory to explore the latter.

Papers on the rise of new forms of labor coercion in the wake of slave emancipation in the South African Cape Colony in the 1820s and 1830s (Nigel Worden, University of Cape Town), the persistence of coercive contractual arrangements in the plantation economies of the Pacific well into the twentieth century (Doug Munro, University of South Pacific), Chinese contract workers in Queensland during the 1840s (Maxine Darnell, University of New England), economically restrictive legislation directed at indigenous people in British Columbia (Peggy Brock, Edith Cowan University), and a comparison of Australian and Canadian labor legislation (Greg Patmore, University of Sydney and Gregory Kealey, Me-

morial University of Newfoundland) suggested the differential impact of state action on particular labor regimes. State intervention articulated regional or national political economies with labor coercion, helped to distinguish the free from the unfree, and provided mechanisms to carry out or mitigate coercion.

Two areas of study emerged as significant in this group of papers. The first was the legal realm of courts, labor legislation, enforcement of contracts with criminal sanctions, master–servant law, and the latitude of coercive mechanisms available to employers. The second and related area was the impact of state formation on labor coercion: settler, colonial, and national states appeared quite different in the forms of coercion they deployed. From a comparative perspective, these papers pointed to the distinctive outcomes found in coercive labor regimes that superficially appeared rooted in a similar set of practices derived from Anglo-American legal traditions and state formation. At the same time, however, a capacious definition of coercion at times eroded distinctions between slavery, convict labor, indenture, military conscription, child labor, and less directly coercive restrictions on employment or land ownership. This blurring was thrown into sharp relief when Eve Fesl (Griffith University) described the harsh Australian legislation permitting the removal of aboriginal children from their homes as a form of twentieth-century “slavery.”

Many of the papers on Australian history looked at convict resistance in New South Wales or Tasmania and leaned quite heavily on James Scott’s notion of “weapons of the weak.” The weighing of the forms, efficacy, and meaning of convict resistance against the hegemony of colonial Australia’s penal state and labor regime might be dubbed the Edinburgh School, for its pioneers include Ian Duffield and his current and former Ph.D. students at this Scottish university. Duffield himself offered a striking account of a transported West Indian emancipated slave’s ability to subtly manipulate abolitionist and antitransportation sentiment to secure his passage from the harsh conditions of Tasmania to the more benign convict colony of New South Wales.

To the infrapolitics, moral economy, and hidden transcripts unearthed by Duffield, his former students Kirsty Reid (University of Manchester) and Hamish Maxwell-Stewart (University of Tasmania) added postmodern twists, with mixed results. In a paper paired with Michael Meranze’s (University of California, San Diego) meditation on the “conundrums of discipline” in the early American republic, Reid remained properly skeptical of blanket claims that language has agency. Nevertheless, she persuasively demonstrated that convict women at the Hobart house of correction in Tasmania used obscenities, insolence, ridicule, and gossip about potential employers to resist colonial authorities both materially and ideologically. “The colonial dominant class,” she concluded, “was largely unable to shut convict women up.” Reid’s paper dovetailed with Meranze’s contention that the penitentiary in postrevolutionary America, “designed to help sta-

bilize a raucous and contentious public sphere,” sought to simultaneously discipline the realms of speech and labor. Silence and hard work: These were the definitive elements of social discipline in emergent bourgeois societies.

Maxwell-Stewart presented a provocative and imaginative reading of convict tattoos as a site of contestation. Normally used to identify convicts as “subjects of state power,” tattooing also served as a form of convict self-expression. But Maxwell-Stewart’s bold claim that the convicts’ texts inscribed on their own bodies served as a “challenge to the state” seemed to stretch the definition of agency and resistance to the limit.

At the final plenary session, David Phillips (University of Melbourne), a South African historian of Great Britain who lives and works in Australia, offered concluding remarks reflecting the cosmopolitanism of the conference and his own background. New vistas for Australian history had been opened up, Phillips suggested, as convictism had been recentered as part of an ongoing larger project in the global and comparative history of labor coercion, engaged in by scholars from every continent, much as the conveners of the conference had hoped. As an American historian interested in slavery, emancipation, and convict labor, the converse proved true as well; my introduction to Australian history added important new comparative dimensions to my own thinking about the dialectic of freedom and unfreedom in the modern world.

American Historical Association Annual Meeting

Dorothy Sue Cobble and Belinda Davis

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The history of subaltern groups took center stage at the American Historical Association’s 111th meeting, held January 2–5, 1997, in New York. Fully one-third of the 154 panels focused on the history of labor, women, or racial or ethnic minorities. Sessions spanned an impressive chronological and regional reach, covering topics from “Social Rank, Liberty, and Peasantry: New Perspectives on Central Europe in the Middle Ages” to “Downsizing in the 1990s.”

Race and gender themes also were prominent in panels specifically focused on work and unions. Deborah Gray White (Rutgers University), the featured luncheon speaker at the Coordinating Council for Women in