

REVIEW ESSAY

Crisis of Capitalism, Crisis of Labour

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BARONIAN, LAURENT. *Marx and Living Labour*. [Routledge frontiers of political economy, Vol. 171.] Routledge, London [etc.] 2013. 234 pp. £80.00; € 89.99.

CHAIGNOT, NICOLAS. *La servitude volontaire aujourd’hui. Esclavages et modernité*. [Collections “Partage du savoir”.] Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 2012. 243 pp. € 24.00.

FUMAGALLI, ANDREA. *Lavoro male comune*. Bruno Mondadori, Milano 2013. 134 pp. € 15.00.

“Capitalism is back!”, declares Nancy Fraser in a recent issue of the *New Left Review*.¹ Fraser is referring, of course, to the growing number of commentators and scholars, from all points on the theoretical spectrum, who have, after decades of oblivion, returned to the notion of capitalism, in many cases offering a critical analysis of this socio-economic system and its history.

The main reason for this revival of interest is the financial and economic crisis that started in 2007 and which has not as yet abated. Indeed, many argue that this critical situation is set to continue for a long time, with growing poverty and unemployment in the historically richer countries of the world. Discussions on the crisis have led to a reappraisal of capitalism – its historical expansion, its functioning, and its characterization as a mode

1. Nancy Fraser, “Behind Marx’s Hidden Abode: For an Expanded Conception of Capitalism”, *New Left Review*, 86 (2014), pp. 55–72.

of social and economic development. Among the growing body of literature on the crisis, a sizeable portion has openly questioned the fundamental workings of capitalism, and several theses have been put forward as to the systemic causes of the present crisis. In many ways the three books under review add to this body of literature; at the same time, they offer aspects and angles rarely found in the typical crash-and-crisis analysis. First, their domain is more one of philosophical and theoretical reflection than purely economic analysis; secondly, whereas a dominant (or, at least, the most visible) part of the critical literature on crisis is Anglophone, these books reflect the theoretical and intellectual debates in other countries and languages (France and Italy); thirdly, they give historical aspects considerable weight; and fourthly, they expressly offer a labour perspective on the crisis of capitalism.

The backgrounds of the three authors are quite diverse, which makes itself felt, *inter alia*, when they take a historical perspective: only one, Andrea Fumagalli [AF], is an economic historian; Laurent Baronian [LB] is an economist, and Nicolas Chaignot [NC] is a social scientist. Despite these disciplinary differences and despite the fact that the authors apply related but diverse methodologies, the underlying theme of these three works is the same, namely that the present social and economic crisis, particularly when analysed historically, should be viewed as a crisis of labour in capitalism. Another similarity between these authors derives from the fact that their analysis is, on the whole, Eurocentric. This is not a disadvantage *per se*, especially as two of the books offer – in their approaches and cases studied – views somehow decentred from the dominant Anglosphere. While all of them struggle with the emergence, development, and crisis of the labour relation commonly associated with capitalism – free wage labour – they show that one does not have to leave the boundaries of Europe to reveal the inconsistencies in the very notion and the inner contradictions of the concrete historical forms of this dubious thing, free wage labour. In that, their focus is legitimately on evaluating and relativizing concepts and discourses that have originated in Europe: Baronian’s study centres on the Marxian concept of “living labour” – the physical, subjective labour “in process” by the workers, constituting thus the radical opposition to labour “objectified” in money and capital; Fumagalli uses Italy as a case study for his critique of labour in “cognitive capitalist” societies (“cognitive” in the sense of “knowledge-based”);² and Chaignot characterizes labour today as

2. The idea of cognitive capitalism was first elaborated at the end of the 1990s by a group of researchers at the Sorbonne led by Bernard Paulré. The end of Fordism and the push towards globalization due to the Internet revolution were the driving forces behind the development of this new type of capitalism. Cognitive capitalism is sometimes referred to as “third capitalism”: after mercantilism and industrial capitalism. Because of its focus on the socio-economic changes caused by the Internet and the new information technologies that have transformed the mode of production and the nature of labour, the theory of cognitive capitalism has assumed great

“voluntary servitude” and consequently rethinks the European-born concept of “modernity”.

VISIONS OF LABOUR: “VOLUNTARY SERVITUDE”,
“COMMON BAD”, AND “LIVING LABOUR”

As is to be expected, any serious study on the history of capitalism and labour, and their intrinsic relationship, necessarily has to refer to Marx, either by association or disassociation. Chaignot is the most distant of the three authors from Marx, while Baronian’s discourse fits closely within the tradition of Marxian analysis and methodology. Fumagalli is somewhere between the two. He does not use a Marxian approach to his history of the ideology of labour, but he does cite Marx and Marxian scholars quite regularly in his work.

Chaignot borrows the concept of “voluntary servitude” from Étienne de La Boétie, a French intellectual of the sixteenth century who claimed that every power is inevitably arbitrary and that every citizen, if a “citizen”, is entitled to resist power. Chaignot uses the concept of “voluntary servitude” to refer to the present predicament facing “modernity”, defined as the end of slavery in the Western world. The crisis of capitalism determines a crisis of modernity based on the freedom of workers to choose their work and the labour conditions in which they wish to perform it. Part of Chaignot’s work is preoccupied with specific aspects of the conditions of workers today, in particular the psychological and pathological relationship between what he calls the “citizen-worker” and the “tyranny” of labour in capitalism. This, he argues, is due to new forms of management of labour inside the working place. Chaignot is concerned with the “fundamental ambivalence of power”, which every modern human being, i.e. salaried worker-citizen, has the right to confront. In Chaignot’s words, it is “the dialectical relationship between ‘slavery and modernity’ that allows one to think differently about the question of

importance among economists and sociologists today. The theory of cognitive capitalism has its origins in French and Italian thinkers, particularly Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London, 1988), Michel Foucault’s work on the birth of bio-power, and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2000) and *Multitude* (New York, 2004). Given its recent character, as a concept cognitive capitalism is work in progress, but it makes colossal claims. As noted by Yann Moulier-Boutang in his recent book *Cognitive Capitalism* (Cambridge, 2011), it posits a “new great transformation”, and “total paradigm shift” over the idea of capitalism. Unlike the putative first (mercantile) and second (industrial) types of capitalism, this third one introduces the idea of a mode of accumulation in which the object of accumulation consists mainly of knowledge, which becomes the basic source of value. This has been made possible by the new information technologies, of which the computer and the Internet are emblematic in the same way in which the coal mine, the steam engine, the loom, and the railway were emblematic of industrial capitalism.

dominant power in contemporary reality” (NC, p. 127).³ The oxymoron “voluntary servitude” helps to reveal the contradictions and problems present in society from a labour history point of view: history functions by reference to a concept of modernity that is defined as the history of emancipation from slavery. If unfree labour exists today, then it means that the present does not coincide with the value of modernity and the end of slavery.

Chaignot takes the history of slavery and abolitionism in the Western world as a starting point in order better to understand how and why contemporary workers live increasingly under conditions of servitude, albeit “voluntary”. He therefore seeks to shed some light on the fundamental ambivalence of modernity, as reflected in contemporary labour relations based only formally on free wage labour (which the author calls *salariat*, or wage labour, or a “new social relation of production”) but that in reality are closer to serfdom.⁴ One question Chaignot tries to answer is the following: What is the reality of labour in contemporary modern society where, formally, the dominant form of labour relation is free wage labour? The answer given is a powerful *remise en cause* of the very essence of free wage labour. For Chaignot, the modern form of voluntary servitude or labour is a central element of the crisis of modernity, based on the repression of the “subjective autonomy” of workers (NC, pp. 157–159), on new forms of managerial and technological domination, as well as on the multiplication of the mental pathologies and psychosis which he explains as the “invention of new forms of defence” (NC, pp. 205–207).

Fumagalli holds equally critical views on the situation of labour today. Like Chaignot, Fumagalli first offers a historical overview, this time on the “ideology of labour” (AF, ch. 1), before engaging in an analysis of the Italian case and the transformations of labour exploitations in the era of cognitive capitalism. Fumagalli’s hypothesis is that our understanding of labour today derives from an ideological construct. This is why we consider labour a “commodity” or a “good” or “common good” (the title of the book *Lavoro male comune*, which translates as “Labour as a common bad”, is of course a programmatic rebuttal of the idea of labour as a “common good”). The modern ideology of labour developed from the mid-fifteenth century and was, according to Fumagalli, who follows a rather traditional narrative here, closely linked to the rise of Protestantism in Europe. The ethic of labour was equated with “common sense” and seen as a “normative principle” deeply absorbed culturally by both

3. All translations from French and Italian are mine.

4. For another recent study on the continuities of “servitude” in the emergence of modern wage labour relations, see Maria Luisa Pesante, *Come servi. Figure del lavoro salariato dal diritto naturale all'economia politica* [Storia/Studi e ricerche] (Milan, 2013).

societies and individuals (AF, p. 8). Therefore, contemporary societies today praise industriousness and extol the virtue of labour. At the same time, labour, according to Fumagalli, is the “device for disciplinary command” or control. In this regard, he refers explicitly to Foucault’s concept of “bio-power” (AF, p. 9).

Fumagalli takes up again, as Chaignot does, the old debate around the question of how “free” is the activity of a worker under capitalism. Fumagalli opposes the mercantilist, liberal, and neo-liberal assumptions according to which “the labour market can be analysed in the same way as any other market for goods and services” (AF, p. 27). Indeed, the author stresses that “labour relations cannot be considered an example of free exchange” (AF, pp. 30–31): a worker seeking employment is subject to an “income bond” that does not, however, tie down an employer offering work, who owns or controls the means of production.

For Fumagalli, labour must be understood as a “continuously evolving social relationship” measurable not through its market price (wage) but rather through the degree of alienation and exploitation experienced by the worker. This is especially true in societies where “cognitive bio-capitalism” is dominant. Cognitive capitalism’s mode of production is characterized by an increasingly intellectual and non-material involvement of the worker in the production process. In cognitive capitalist societies, the worker is apparently meant to be more autonomous, but the reality is that the worker-person-consumer is totally subsumed within the working dimension of life. This is why labour, in the eyes of workers and societies, “does not have an intrinsic value per se”, but is rather “a tool to produce value” (AF, p. 34). In this sense it is important to distinguish between “labour”, “work”, “opus”, “leisure”, and “fun” (pp. 35ff.),⁵ so as not to mix up the many aspects of human activity and to ensure that the “labour” dimension does not consume all the others. According to Fumagalli, this is a real risk, because of what he sees as “a dehumanizing process [...], made possible through the distortion of the two cardinal principles that have guided the human species ever since we first appeared on earth: how we organize our *time* and our sense of *community*” (AF, p. 37). For this reason, in Fumagalli’s view, far from being a common good, modern-day labour is becoming more and more a “common bad”.

From a more outspoken Marxian perspective, Baronian brings to the fore the centrality of the nature of labour in the critique of political economy. Like Fumagalli, Baronian denounces the mercantilist and the neoclassical economic theories as incapable of analysing the realities of capitalism today because their analysis is grounded on a false hypothesis on labour. According to Baronian – who echoes Marx – labour has a

5. On the meaning of each of these notions in Fumagalli, see the discussion below.

double nature (a notion that is closely related to, but not completely congruent with, the more commonly known ideas of Marx on the “dual character of labour”, differentiating between the real-life “use value” of labour and the socially constituted, commodified “exchange value”). Baronian identifies the presence of two different, but not contradictory, meanings given to “abstract labour”, that is labour as a value-creating substance: on the one hand, labour by reference to its result, i.e. “dead labour”, which is objectified as a commodity, and on the other, labour as an active process engaged in by a worker, i.e. “living labour”. Mercantilist and neoclassical economists conceive labour solely through its productive results – goods or services. The “sociality of labour” here occurs only through the exchange of products and objects of labour (such as raw materials, tools, and machinery) that contain the labour necessary for their production. Labour congealed into the production machine is seen as “dead labour”.⁶ This “objectification of labour” is therefore the way in which economists separate “dead labour” from “living labour”.

For neoclassical economists, living labour is non-objectified labour: it is the pain and sacrifice of the worker, and thereby has a negative connotation. In short, it is a “disutility” required for the creation of the object necessary to satisfy individual needs. Baronian does not deny that there is some validity in what the neoclassical economists say about the pain of labour. However, to the extent that labour creates value, it can also be described as a specific type of exchange of “living labour”. A new general and abstract definition of labour can thus be arrived at. Labour is not limited to a value measurement, but rather it is the expenditure of labour energy: through the nerves, muscles, and brain of a worker.

Baronian explains that a key element in the critique of political economy is the emphasis on the nature of the transformation of labour capacity into the effective living labour provided by the salaried worker. For this very same reason, the liberal neoclassical and mercantilist approaches offer little elucidation on the crisis of capitalism. It is therefore not possible to maintain that the effective labour “effort” flows directly from the process of bargaining in the labour market. Another problematic question is how to measure work in action, i.e. the value of a worker’s

6. “Dead labour” is embodied in the production process. Owners of the means of production control “living labour”, i.e. actual labour, which would not be able to be carried out without the necessary tools (constant capital). On the recent interest in debates about “living labour” see, for instance, Milena Hoegsberg and Cora Fisher (eds), *Living Labor* (Berlin, 2013), with contributions by Will Bradley, Julia Bryan-Wilson, Carl Cedarström and Peter Fleming, Annette Kamp, Michala Paludan, Olivia Plender and Hester Reeve, Ole Martin Rønning, and Kathi Weeks. See, too, Riccardo Bellofiore, “A Ghost Turning into a Vampire: The Concept of Capital and Living Labour”, in *idem* and Roberto Fineschi (eds), *Re-Reading Marx: New Perspectives after the Critical Edition* (Basingstoke [etc.], 2009), pp. 178–194.

efforts, in terms of identifying or creating an equivalent value amount. For Baronian, this Marxian dialectic between dead labour and living labour is fundamental in evaluating theories on value assessments. Living labour is the only aspect that can be defined as a non-value non-commodity in the capitalist process of production, and thus the only external acquisition for the capitalist class and the sole possible source of value and of capital. This is the “positive role” that living labour can play in the critique of political economy, and that the neoclassical economists in general fail to see.

CRISIS OF CAPITALISM AND LABOUR

As noted above, the three books under review are premised on the realization that labour is undergoing a historical crisis linked to the history and crisis of capitalism (Baronian and Fumagalli) and the history and crisis of modernity (Chaignot). As we have seen, for Chaignot contemporary modernity derives from the passage from unfree (slavery) to free forms of labour (wage labour). However, the fact that in today’s capitalist world free labour equates to “voluntary servitude” raises serious concerns as to the historical dichotomy between unfree and free and as to the “modernity” of our societies. For Fumagalli, the historical development of capitalism occurred in parallel with the rise of an “ideology of labour” that has contributed to creating insecurity and casual work conditions for many workers. For Baronian, the crisis of labour is a cyclical matter in capitalist systems, and in his work he concentrates in particular on the most recent crisis since 2007.

Baronian states that the current crisis results from a “basic contradiction of the capitalist mode of production” (LB, p. 173). According to him, this contradiction

[...] is not the one between production and consumption nor the one between the rise in organic composition of capital and existing surplus value, but the contradiction between the absolute development of living labour productive forces and the purpose of this development, namely the preservation and valorisation of the labour objectified in the existing constant capital [...]. (LB, p. 173)

In other words, Baronian questions the validity of the two elements for explaining crisis commonly discussed in the long line of political economists inspired by Marxism: the underconsumption theory on the one hand and the theory of a declining rate of profit on the other. Rising stocks of constant capital can, as Baronian admits, help to explain the decline in the rate of profit (or the growth of the organic composition of capital), as well as the over-production underlying the capitalist crisis (over-accumulation of capital). However, according to Baronian, even if these elements (decline in the rate of profit and growth of the organic

composition of capital) constitute the formal condition of the crisis, they do not explain the crisis itself. The same is true for the limited power of consumption by society, which is a general condition of capitalist production.

Fumagalli considers the crisis of labour as a crisis of the latest form of capitalism, or “cognitive bio-capitalism”.⁷ The historical passage from industrial to cognitive bio-capitalism determines a rupture with the past. Bio-capitalism means that life itself is put to work and produces value in capitalist terms – even when workers are not engaged in the process of work, i.e. during leisure time watching television at home. Cognitive capitalism implies the end of Fordism and stable industrial work. One of the consequences is the process of rendering labour more precarious in nature. This passage is irreversible, not cyclical, and it determines the crisis of labour today. Labour has become a “common bad”.

In order to highlight the idea of labour as a “common bad”, Fumagalli analyses the labour situation in Italy, in light of those transformations that are increasingly seeing value created from a knowledge base. According to the author, one of the principal consequences flowing from the passage to non-material labour is the embedded and structurally conditioned precarious nature of labour (AF, p. 48). This has occurred because Italy, in recent years, “has exclusively followed a flexible approach to work without any welfare support, in keeping with the new conditions workers are subject to, and without any adequate development in the high value-added cognitive sectors”. Thus, this flexibility has translated into a precarization of labour, which, in turn has become an “obstacle for growth” (AF, p. 60). Further on, Fumagalli adds that “today, the sectors with the greatest added value are those that increasingly exploit economies based on learning, precisely those economies that require work continuity, income security and net income, and investment in technology” (AF, p. 95). The far-reaching processes of organizational and technological restructuring have deepened levels of accumulation,

7. A definition of bio-capitalism is given by Fumagalli himself in an essay co-authored with Stefano Lucarelli. “With the shift from Fordism to cognitive biocapitalism, the social relationship embodied by capital from being a relationship between labor force and machineries becomes a relationship between body and mind, brain and heart, unfolding itself within human beings. But, far from being the capital that become human, it is individual’s life, with its multiple singularities and differences, to become capital”; Andrea Fumagalli and Stefano Lucarelli, “Valorization and Financialization in Cognitive Biocapitalism”, *Investment Management and Financial Innovations*, 8 (2011), pp. 89–100, 89. Elsewhere, Fumagalli has stressed the importance of “the shift [in bio-capitalism] from a production of money by means of commodity (M-C-M’) to a production of money by means of the commodification of *bios* [M-C(bios)-M’]”, i.e. the human life of the workers-consumers. See Cristina Morini and Andrea Fumagalli, “Life Put to Work: Towards a Life Theory of Value”, *Ephemera*, 10 (2010), pp. 234–252, <http://www.ephemerajournal.org/sites/default/files/10-3morinifumagalli.pdf> (last accessed 9 January 2015).

imposing – under the guise of necessity – the “valorization of life” (in biocapitalism all human activities are “labour”: from the act of labour itself to shopping, sport, leisure, etc.).

Chaignot offers a very different insight into the crisis facing society today. For him, as noted above, this crisis is revealed by the fact that, in reality, the passage from ancient and feudal slavery to modernity based on the universality of free wage labour has proved to be an illusion. Thus, capitalism has not resolved this dilemma between free and unfree labour and the present crisis does indeed result from the problematic permanence of voluntary servitude in the capitalist world. The crisis is one faced by the individual worker, who is subject to the tyranny of the capitalist mode of production and labour control. In a way, and perhaps unintentionally, Chaignot follows the steps of intellectuals such as Jeremy Rifkin and Dominique Méda, who pose major questions and describe extreme scenarios – “the end of work”, for example – without acknowledging that solutions to these problems could and perhaps should be as radical as the problems themselves.

LABOUR HISTORIES

Now, the question is: Why should labour historians care for these books and the debates related to them? What insights and points of departure do they offer for the historical study of labour? Although all three books are, admittedly, written more in the vein of theoretical studies and are in many cases highly concerned with matters contemporary, an interesting mosaic of labour history nevertheless emerges from the various strands intertwining them. Chaignot concentrates on the issue of slavery and servitude in the Western world from ancient times until today. Fumagalli gives an account, from an economic history point of view, of the history of the “ideology” of labour. His history of labour coincides with the history of ideas – including economic theories. Finally, Baronian’s interest in history is driven by his analysis of Marx, and he is principally interested in the “historical making of living labour as a commodity” – i.e. the transition to capitalism.

Chaignot’s analysis certainly speaks in many ways to one of the main concerns debated in labour history in general, and in the pages of this journal more specifically: what are the different realities of “slavery”, what are the interrelations and the many overlapping areas between different forms of free and unfree labour, and what are the continuities of slavery after abolition? Over the last fifteen to twenty years the Global Labour History research programme formulated at the IISH, the numerous studies from Brazil on slavery before and after “late abolition” in the nineteenth century, the prolific research by Indian labour historians on the manifold forms of coercion, and many other scholarly interventions

have contributed to question hitherto established notions of a clear-cut transition from slavery to free wage labour through the expansion of capitalism. In 2014 alone – to mention only the most recent venues of debate – Sven Beckert has, in his global history of cotton production, not only highlighted the compatibility of slavery and capitalism but restated in a new way the classic Eric Williams thesis on “capitalism and slavery”;⁸ the International Conference of Labour and Social History (ITLH) has, to mark its fiftieth anniversary, dedicated its annual conference to the topic of continuous forms of coerced labour since the official abolition of slavery;⁹ and Alessandro Stanziani has again questioned the idea of the unequivocal unfreedom of slaves and serfs vis-à-vis the freedom of wage workers.¹⁰

Chaignot, taking a more conceptual starting point, sharpens these viewpoints into an interpretation in which the history of labour is essentially a history of slavery and its non-abolition. The idea of modernity and the beginning of universal individual freedom is placed under the spotlight. In ancient Sparta, the state was the only proprietor of slaves; it could decide when to employ them as soldiers. In Athens, often considered a model of early democracy, slaves were mere commodities. In Rome, a hierarchy existed between slaves themselves, and the freeing of slaves was a common practice, thereby creating a further category. Contrary to the modern period, in all of these three historical situations the condition of a slave was not attached to other identifications such as race, religion, culture, or gender. For example, Chaignot discusses the French Code Noir of 1685, which attached to the condition of slavery the colour of a person’s skin (and which the author connects, by analogy, to the “Nazi horrors”; NC, p. 69). The same is true for the model of slavery that existed in the Americas. In the south of the United States, the slave system was based on race, and racism had therefore economic reasons linked to the exploitation and *mise en valeur* of the black slaves’ labour power (NC, pp. 74–78).

Chaignot’s provocation consists in the following reasoning: if abolitionism put an end to modern slave systems, other forms of unfree labour have succeeded slavery, such as those put in place in the colonial empires of Europe (the promulgation of the Code de l’indigénat in the French

8. Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York, 2014). See, too, the following considerations: *idem*, “Slavery and Capitalism”, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 12 December 2014, at <http://chronicle.com/article/SlaveryCapitalism/150787/> (last accessed 9 January 2015).

9. See the conference call and programme at http://www.ith.or.at/konf_e/50_index_e.htm (last accessed 9 January 2015).

10. Alessandro Stanziani, *Bondage: Labor and Rights in Eurasia from the Sixteenth to the Early Twentieth Centuries* (New York [etc.], 2014).

Empire being a special case in point for Chaignot). The “abolitionist” process, aimed at stopping these forms of unfree labour, continued in the anti-colonial struggles, but unfree labour did not cease to exist, and today, in the world of the *salariat*, we have “voluntary servitude”, which poses yet again another challenge to “modernity”. Today’s voluntary servitude is different from the one conceived in the sixteenth century by Étienne de La Boétie. Today, workers labouring under this system of work are persuaded that their actions are just and legitimate – in one word “free” – when the contrary is often the case. There are, however, a few gaps in his overview, such as the historical role of labour as a specific form of social mediation in capitalist societies,¹¹ or the conceptual hazards resulting from the persistent relationship between slavery and modernity – consideration of which might shed light on the specificity and complexity of this disputed phenomenon, free wage labour, in the social structures in modern capitalist societies.

For Fumagalli the history of labour is a history of the ideology of labour. Thus, Fumagalli, while pursuing his own conceptual and theoretical concerns, adds to a growing field of interest in recent labour history: the history of discourses on attitudes towards work.¹² In Fumagalli’s typology, the term “labour” derives from the Latin word *labor*, which means “fatigue” (*trabalium* also possesses a “negative” etymological origin). Its opposite is *opus*, which means work as activity for the realization of human creativity and genius. In ancient Athens, labour/*labor* was carried out by slaves (*banausoi*, or artisans and manual workers who were not citizens) and labour/*opus* was undertaken by those few who were indeed free citizens. Until the sixteenth century, in Europe, terms like *otium* (idleness as a sort of intellectual and non-manual activity) and *svago* (game, leisure) were positive and complex terms linked to activities of pleasure. In the last three centuries, Fumagalli explains, with the advent of bourgeois ideology and the decline of the power of the aristocracies we have witnessed a reverse in the ethical meaning of labour and leisure. The industrial revolution brought to the fore the centrality of manufacturing labour and its productivity. With it the alienation of workers reached a new degree and labour became a sort of “artificial” activity. For this reason, the work process had to be strictly regulated.

We can therefore assert that the capitalist system of production is characterized by a continuous evolution of the organization of labour, once it has been recognized and enshrined that “labour activity

11. See Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory* (Cambridge, 1995).

12. See, for instance, the following review essay on the recent literature: Josef Ehmer, “Attitudes to Work, Class Structures, and Social Change: A Review of Recent Historical Studies”, *International Review of Social History*, 59 (2014), pp. 99–117.

[*labor/fatigue*] is the main source of capitalist value (the value of exchange) and therefore of accumulation” (AF, p. 37). The labour ethic that has dominated the Western world since the eighteenth century is an attempt (a successful one according to Fumagalli) to subdue human nature to the needs of manufacturing production and to release it from the imperatives of a production driven by nature, such as in agriculture. This process continued until the beginning of the decline of the Fordist industrial system of production. Since the end of Fordism, in the last thirty years, time for work and time for life have become ever more interdependent. In the present-day era of what Fumagalli calls cognitive bio-capitalism, the distinction between labour activity and non-labour activity is increasingly vanishing. “In cognitive bio-capitalism, the creation of value is based [...] on the process of expropriation of individuals’ capacity for life (from what can be broadly defined as general intellect) for the purposes of private accumulation” (AF, p. 39).

In Baronian’s book the history of labour is essentially a history of the transformation of living labour into a commodity. It is a history of transition from feudalism to capitalism. This historical analysis in chapter 3 is probably the most readable section of Baronian’s otherwise very dense book. Baronian’s labour history is a restatement of Marx’s historical transition from the feudal to the capitalist system of production. This goes together with the progressive development and establishment of a class of workers both lawfully free to sell their labour power and at the same time dispossessed of the condition allowing them to reproduce themselves autonomously from those who hold the means of production. Among the three authors discussed here, Baronian is clearly the one who follows the most the classical account of the emergence of free wage labour as the decisive historical transformation. This not only does not reflect many of the central topics of labour history over the years – especially the coexistence of various forms of labour relations under capitalism – it also fails to see that the reproduction of labour requires labour that is historically conducted in the household and that does not fall into the free wage labour category.

Still, Baronian’s book is a strong reminder of two important points. First, labour history, in order to engage with the more general debates in global history, needs to study and rethink processes of macro-social change. Here the dynamics of dispossession of labour (mainly from its means of subsistence) and its transformations into a state of higher dependence (whether free or unfree) is of fundamental importance. Secondly, Baronian’s use of the concept of “living labour” can, like Fumagalli’s discussion of different forms of labour, remind labour historians that there are other kinds of activities to be taken into account behind and besides the (quantifiable) labour spent in each historically dominant labour relation. Also, labour should not be inferred only from

its products; the physical, bodily, dimensions of the labour process need to be acknowledged.

Fumagalli, in addition, offers a conceptual typology to differentiate between various dimensions of human activity – all of which might be subsumed under the notion of “labour” – and the way these have related to each other historically. Modern capitalist societies have evolved a specific set of paradigms that validate certain activities as “real” labour, making others invisible. At the same time, neither labour relations in capitalism nor the accompanying ideologies are static. They evolved, integrating in recent times, as Fumagalli argues, dimensions of “leisure” with those of “labour”. However, the hypothesis by Fumagalli and many others on “immaterial labour” as well as “cognitive” and “bio-capitalism” needs to be more thoroughly historicized – the diagnosis of these being fundamentally new has to be questioned and analysed in a longer-term perspective.

Chaignot, finally, makes a point very close to more recent debates in labour history about the many shades in between slavery and post-slavery, free and unfree labour. Labour, he reminds us, will always, in whatever relation, be under pressure from processes of further “subsumption”. Improvements in terms of conditions and compensations, as well as more degrees of freedom, have to be won through struggle. On this dimension of labour – conflict, resistance, movements – the three books, however, remain relatively (and conspicuously) silent. The historical study of labour, interested in concrete constellations beyond models, systems and grand processes, can contribute much by introducing these countervailing tendencies into the analysis.