

Slavery in the Modern Times: A theatre of the Absurd

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Rebellion, Camus had said, emerges from the conflict between man's ceaseless quest for clarification and the apparently chaotic and meaningless way the world functions. The absurd. The absurdist argued that when human existence has no purpose or meaning, all channels of communication disrupt, triggering a chaotic system where irrationality triumphs over logical construct, culminating ultimately in silence. Thus, the Absurd keeps pushing the boulder up the mountain only to see it rolling down, once again.

Slavery, as a cultural orientation institutionalises the triumph of the unreasonable world over the desire of human reasoning. However, it is quite possible that we can seek emancipation in our endeavour to reconcile the two. This article seeks to explore the absurdist road to freedom from economic slavery. The initial paragraphs discuss some possible interpretations of slavery in the modern context, eventually concentrating on its traits as internalised in the various economic models and organisations since the 18th century.

The transition to capitalism saw a rising consciousness about nations, territorial organisations reoriented into structurally transformed individualistic sovereign domains, the nation-states ('state' with a hyphen). This realignment of geographical equations was constructed and further consolidated through the emergence of

liberalist rhetoric of sovereignty, fraternity, democracy. Here lied the seed to modern day slavery. Slavery fed, if not by physical coercion, then through intellectual indoctrination. An induced illusion of freedom made people more willing to subscribe to the convenient jargon of those clinging in 'power'. Power, or for that matter echelons were never done away with, rather, they were legitimised. Instead of doing away with institutional inequalities, they were now validated through the 'law'. Modern day slavery isn't implemented through coercion (which in itself has been legitimised as when used by the 'state'), it's sustained, instead, by manufacturing consent.

They say back in 1992, USSR had descended into a chaotic frenzy when money became real. Alexievich had talked about the great dilemma faced by the residents of USSR tried to adapt to the ways of Russia. The trade-off between Gogol and denims was behind their comprehension. Slavery is a situation where you are reduced a state of helpless assent, where you are alienated from everything that singles you out as a rational being in the animal kingdom. You are alienated from your individualism, deprived of your right to self-determination, reduced to a faceless mass, commodified, and your capacity expressed in the cardinal figures of exchange value. I recently read an article that talked about not creating sentences, but music. I wonder what chord would the repeated application

of the word 'slavery' strike. Perhaps the redundant beats of a *madol*, a drum played by certain tribes of the Chotanagpur plateau, one of those peripheral groups so central to the growth of the core. However the fetters don't just jingle round the thoughts and the voices at the margin. It has seeped gradually into the conscience of those at the centre. A slave to the master that is themselves. Camus's Rebel is expected not only to be 'the slave against the master, but also man against the world of master and slave'.

Economic processes, when are sought to be understood independently, outside the realm of a society, ends up in de-humanising it. Marx, in arguably one of his most crucial contribution, the surplus value theory, sought to seek the origins of the internal contradictions of the existing relations of production, as well as place the capitalist mode of organisation in an historical perspective through instruments of sociological and historical analysis. In Mandel's interpretation of the surplus value, he argues that it is *ipso facto* an exploitation theory. He calls it the 'deduction theory of ruling class's income', where surplus value is the residual from the net social product after the ruling classes have received their compensation. The theory that underlies Marx's perception of exploitation equated the income of the ruling classes to the product of unpaid labour. This, more than being a question of ethical outrage, is a manifestation of economic exploitation. Marx had attached significant weight to the surplus value classifying it above profits, et al that explains both the existence of the ruling class as well as origins of class struggle under capitalism.

Earlier in the essay, I had mentioned how the slavish culture is manifested in modern times through a helpless assent. The gradual socio-political and economic transformation of the European nations, where from the rubbles of feudalistic societies rose capitalist mode of economic production, had in its wake alienated the labourers from all but their own labour power. Thus, to sustain themselves, they had to lend out the sole thing that they had 'rightful ownership' of, their muscles and their brains, to those owning the rest of the means of production, the capitalist. 'Right' is a tricky word. A word that has a very snug fit in the world of the Absurd, where the meaningless world is functioning aided by an array of terms and taxonomies, where institutional inequalities are camouflaged behind claims of juridical equality. Thus while negotiating the ideal price of the 'labour power', the capitalists invokes the clause of *justum pretium*. The role this clause plays, especially in easing the conscience of the capitalist is very vital. Had he bought the individual worker's 'labour', it would have been obvious that the compensation he is paid for it is lesser than the value he adds in the production process. Instead, the capitalist insists on buying her 'labour power', at its market value. Thus, the individual (since we are discussing social relations of production) is not only forced to commoditise his labour power, and sell it in an exploitative market, but also has to content himself with receiving whatever market price gets set for him irrespective of the difference between his wage and the value he adds to the production process. Convenient to this form of exploitation, where the worker isn't left with many options but have himself exploited is the institutional set up of capitalism with it's

generalized market economy. While it is not possible for the labourers to withdraw from the labour market as he is under economic compulsion to sell the only commodity he owns, the capitalist, with his pool of surplus can afford to withdraw from the production process. Mandel discusses how institutional differences make labour market a 'loaded dice', predictably biased against the working class.

Sweezy and Baran, in *Monopoly Capital: An Essay on the American Economic and Social Order* had discussed what could be seen as the spill over effects of surplus generation. As the existing channels of re-investment of the surplus dries out the capitalists seek to invest it overseas, for which they at times resort to coercion, thus giving rise to imperialistic desires and militaristic tendencies. This is an unsustainable path to resolving the contradiction, namely the driving force of capitalist production being maximising appropriation of surplus value (by 'economising on labour and other resources) and the eventual clogging of investment conduits and drying up of excessive domestic demand. Sweezy and Baran argues how the tendency of surplus generation rise further under oligopolistic or monopolistic economies, as can be seen by the level of unemployment, non-productive expenditure (say on advertisements) et al. Imperialism, as we are aware of, created a climate conducive for more overt manifestations of slavery, in fact of slave trade.

In Findlay's *Triangular Trade and the Atlantic Economy of the Eighteenth Century: A Simple General-Equilibrium Model* he had sought to link capitalism and

neoclassical economics with slavery. He had generated a small scale general equilibrium model with Africa supplying slaves to America against European manufactures and America obtaining slaves from Africa and manufactures from Europe against her raw materials exports to Europe (thus each continent is the sole supplier of one commodity), with the usual neo classical assumption regarding the production function, to examine the conflicting views on imperialistic exploitation as propagated by Adam Smith (who was of the view that it was inefficient and thus detrimental to the interest of the colonising nation), David Ricardo who contradicted Smith, Karl Marx who had stated that "the veiled slavery of the wage-workers in Europe needed, for its pedestal, slavery pure and simple in the New World", and Eric Williams, who had established links between African slavery and industrialisation in Britain. He concludes, "those who would dismiss slavery as essentially irrelevant ought at least to specify the necessary counterfactual experiments postulating the sources of tropical products and the markets for manufactured goods that the triangular trade provided." Slavery, as manifested in the initial phase of capitalism might have receded, proportionately, in the past century; traits of it continue to remain internalised in the growth trajectory of most nations. As Emile Zola had very aptly observed in *Germinal* that the actual point of equilibrium is the empty stomach.

The Marxist economists draw parallels between Marx's reserve army of labour and the increasing reliance on part time workers with a precarious status in the modern times, who while aren't completely

'unemployed' don't always earn sufficiently to sustain themselves. Marx had argued that as capitalism evolves, the organic composition of capital increases, thus constant capital rises disproportionately more than the variable capital, this generates another paradox, as the nation becomes wealthier, the wealth gets further concentrated in the hands of a few as now lesser people are needed to meet the society's production requirements.

The disrupted teleology of Soviet Russia had proven detrimental to a sustainable growth path. The Union, as it passed through phases of War Communism to the Vegetarian Communism, got socially conditioned to think in a certain way, to respond to externalities in a fairly unanimous manner and had accustomed themselves to the state prescribed way of life. They sang, and drank and loved in similar manners. While reading Alexievich's *Second Hand Time*, the emotion that could repeatedly detect was confusion. As they transitioned from a regime to another, there was not a sense of rebellion, but rather an effort to adapt. Like Frau Lomark in *The Giraffe's neck*, it was a matter of fundamental question, the survival of the fittest. Even if it is a mere transition from one mechanical way of living to another, a transition ushered in not through modest measures but a series of shock therapies. The disruption of conventional path of societal evolution had led to the fiasco that was Soviet Russia, or so is argued. But what if the fiasco wasn't the skipping of the necessary epoch of capitalism but rather of people's failure to sustain for the alternative to the kulak's, the centrality of state, as was sought to a uniformity that people were radicalized into subscribing to?

The anarchists seek to abolish the economy and economics and all that they entail, be it markets, or central planning. They believe that economies the need for accountability and personal responsibility, something that is integral to their school of thought. They argue against institutional structures that place the need to the economy before those of the individuals. Thus, they, in their nihilistic spirit feel that no matter how evolved the structure becomes, individuals, under all forms of economic organisation are subjugated to economic factors. While the anarchist case against economies and incidentally economic slavery sounds too radical, we can still explore the possibilities of the Absurd in our emancipation from the culture of economic exploitation. A possible way of the reconciliation that I had mentioned in the initial paragraphs could be by perhaps cultivating a culture of self-criticism. The seeds of absurdity, here, especially in the moderns, the use of rationale to manufacture consent for something as irrational as economic slavery, lies within. We seek clarity. Yet we feed into the system of meaninglessness. An article published in June 2016 in IMF's official magazine, Finance and Development, titled *Neoliberalism: Oversold?* Critically appraised policies advocated by the IMF. It acknowledged that growth under neo-liberalism is unsustainable owing the rise in inequality that it spurs. The paper, interestingly, discusses the need for state intervention through introduction of welfare measures to reduce inequality. It admits to the counterproductive effects of austerity policies pursued in several developed and developing countries alongside agreeing to the detrimental

impact of unrestrained privatisation as promoted by neo-liberalism.

The neo-liberal system sustains itself on exactly those promises which it's institutions negate. While there is a rising consciousness about this, there is also an increasing rigidity as can be seen through socio-political reorientation of many nations, a rise of nationalistic sentiment, inward looking policy restructuring and a revival of the rhetoric that had

accompanied the rise of nation-states. The chaos ensued by this ideological realignment has further consolidated the desire and the tendency to dominate, intellectually, socially and economically. This is where the Absurd must rebel.