



BONDAGE IN EURASIA, FREEDOM
AT WIKO
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Unlike many other final reports, mine will not evoke religious metaphors – paradise and the like – to describe my stay at Wiko, for I consider that it is too much a living and exciting place to be associated with paradise. And also because I do not intend to go back to hell.

My initial project aimed at studying the evolution of labour and labour institutions in Russia, Europe, Central Asia, China and the Indian Ocean between the 16th and the early 20th centuries. In doing so, I intended to question common ideas about the origin of labour institutions and market economies and their evolution and transformation in the early modern and modern world. In particular I wished to contest the clear-cut opposition between "free" and "unfree" labour and argue that these notions are historically embedded.

During my stay at the Wiko I have achieved this program beyond my best hopes. First, I decided to intervene as the first to give a Tuesday Colloquium in order to get useful suggestions as early as possible. I was not disappointed. During the Colloquium and/or after it, friends from history, social sciences, biology and philosophy suggested valuable corrections, integrations etc. I thus completed my manuscript and sent it to Cambridge in January. In contradiction to widespread arguments, my manuscript shows that Inner Asian and later on Russian bonded people were in fact part of a gradation of legal status and labour constraints that belonged to a wider Eurasian notion and practice of labour as service. This was partially true in Western Europe, as well, and gave rise to an extreme form of legal constraints in the colonies, not only under slavery, but especially after it (indentured labour). These institutions did not disappear with the French Revolution or the British industrial revolution, but only with the second industrial revolution and the rise of the welfare state, while in the colonies forms of coerced labour survived deep into the 20th century. I developed three main axes: Central Eurasia, Russia and the Indian Ocean.

In May I received a positive answer from Cambridge asking for just some minor revisions (including, of course, to the language). I never could have completed my manuscript, with such a result, without the splendid Wiko environment.

I also started or completed other works. First, I am taking part in the Cambridge Global History, several volumes under the direction of Kenneth Pomeranz and William McNeill. I have been asked to contribute a long chapter on the “abolitions” of slavery, serfdom and forced labour between the 18th and the 19th century. I completed this work between October and April. I did this work during the winter; I start with the intellectual and political debate on free labour in 18th- and 19th-century Europe and Russia; I then provide an original view of Russian serfdom and its abolition, before analysing the transatlantic slave trade and the abolition of slavery in European colonies in connection with economic and social dynamics in Africa, India, Europe and Latin America. Then I show that abolition in the US had impacts in such different areas as Brazil, Egypt, Russian Turkestan, India and, of course, Europe. I conclude with the abolition of slavery in Africa before WW I and a broader recall of persistent forms of bondage and coercion up through our days.

These achievements have pushed me to include Russian and Eurasian development in a broader historical perspective. After all, the history of serfdom and forced labour found one of its antecedents in the state and empire buildings in Eurasia during the early modern

and modern periods (16th through 18th centuries). I have thus developed a new area of research, already started the year before my coming to the Wiko, whose first outcome I reached last year. First, I have completed a book, in French, *Bâisseurs d'empires: Russie, Chine et Inde à la croisée des mondes, XVe–XIXe siècle* (Liber, 2012), in which I develop a comparative analysis of the way Muscovy, Qing China and Moghul India recruited and fed their armies. It is a way out of the concept of “Oriental despotism”, but also away from a purely ethnocentric perspective. The imperial dynamics of China, Russia and India and the way they organized their armies are related not only to fiscal structures, but also, starting from there, to the hierarchies between landlords, peasants and military elites.

Wiko offered me the possibility of testing and enlarging this work by contributing to finance a workshop precisely on the mobile frontiers of Asiatic empires. This workshop sought to analyse the way Eurasian empires such as China, India, Russia and the Ottoman Empire were built up. We thus put the accent on two related themes:

1) What is the core and what is the frontier of an empire? For example, for centuries under several dynasties, the northern part of China was the core and not necessarily a “periphery” of the southern area. Similarly, the steppe and the South played a major role in the development of the Russian Empire, well beyond the assertions made by conventional historiographies stressing the role of Moscow and Petersburg and overriding the Mongol heritage.

The same can be said of the Mughal Empire, which moved from Kabul and Afghanistan and certainly not from Delhi.

2) Mobile frontiers and decentralized empires lead us to rethink the role of the town in the process of growth. Towns have been conventionally seen as the engine of progress both politically and economically, not only in Europe but also elsewhere. Thus, the lack of towns or their qualification as “bureaucratic” areas has been considered a symptom and cause of backwardness. We suggest overcoming this view and considering the role of deserts, steppes and the ocean in empire building. As civilizational encounters, these areas were anything but the simple realm of illegal (pirates, brigands), nomadic, unsettled barbarians.

This workshop has encouraged me to develop some general reflections on comparative history. In particular, in April I took part in a workshop in Kazan, where I presented a paper on “Reciprocal comparatism in history: The Russian case”.

Indeed, when we evaluate the circulation of knowledge and imperial historical performances, we often operate under two paradigms:

- 1) Knowledge as power: the circulation of knowledge is mostly considered as going from the core to the periphery, within empires and between empires (from the West to Russia, for example). We suggest that hierarchical translation of categories and local practices by “core” powers, while important, is never unidirectional. Local practises reshape notions and practises in the “core” as well. In my approach, I stress the importance of mutual influences in historical dynamics.
- 2) We are still under the explicit or implicit influence of the notion of backwardness invented in the 18th century. Comparison is therefore made on the basis of an ideal type of a given (Western) economy and society, then looking for “missing factors” in local societies (lack of democracy, lack of private property, lack of the “bourgeoisie” etc.). This approach is ahistorical and deterministic: it conceives of one single scale of time and, to a certain extent (even if not necessarily), one path of development. It excludes historical bifurcations and contingency in history.

Is reciprocal comparison a tool for overcoming these limits?

Reciprocal comparison – as I see it – means that in both the circulation of ideas and values and in the evaluation of historical dynamics we do not hesitate to question the “West” from the standpoint of non-Western societies. For example, once admitted that common lands survived well into the 19th century in many European and non-European countries, why did Britain institute their privatization?

All the same: once admitted that the development of capitalism can be well obtained through forced labour (American and Brazilian slavery; at present, forms of bondage in South-East Asia) and also that democracy is not a prerequisite for market growth (the case of contemporary China), why did some empires seek to institute abolition (Britain since the 1830s) and/or liberal institutions?

Again, I owe my deep acknowledgment to Wiko for pushing me towards these methodological questions. Discussions of comparisons were constantly evoked during and after the Tuesday Colloquiums to the point that I was encouraged to organize with Samantha Besson a discussion group at the Wiko on “sources and evidence” in the social and natural sciences. We organized our discussion in four thematic meetings held between January and April, in which almost half of the Fellows took part. At each meeting, four speakers gave the impulse to the discussion. We selected four initial questions:

- 1) What is a source? The definition of a source is itself essential: written sources are not the only ones and, conversely, some written documents are not considered sources. Stones, fossils, empirical observation, art, icons and sounds can or cannot be considered

sources. Their identification, the reasons behind this and the implications of our choices should be clarified.

- 2) Sources appeal to be classified and qualified. Classifications in the archives reflect the origin of the archives and their evolution, that is, the authorities and powers at the origin of the documents and their classifications by one or another category. The general question behind this is: How are classifications of sources made, who makes them and how do they evolve? We take fragmented sources to mean incomplete sources, i.e. sources from which we have only pieces, excerpts or fragments. The question that arises, of course, is whether sources can ever be complete (singly or as a corpus) and what makes them complete.
- 3) Interpretations vs. evidence? Different fields make different uses of the source to validate an argument. An extreme position consists in saying that everything is discourse; at the opposite pole, history is opposed to literature and both are opposed to “real” sciences. Between one extreme and the other, intermediate positions are possible, although more difficult to express. This possibility or impossibility of moving between proof, evidence and description is what can be most appropriate to discuss here.
- 4) The temporality in and of sources. The construction of sources belongs to temporalities that have to be elucidated in order to make a correct interpretation of the source. The context of production is central, and, starting from this, historians can use sources to reconstruct appropriate temporal dynamics.

Now that I am about to leave the Wiko, I have to mention still other projects that I have started this year. First, I have written some chapters of what will probably become a second volume of my global history of bondage, this time on the period between 1870 and 1939 and including Russia, the Indian Ocean, part of Africa and Europe. In the chapters already written, I show that the history of labour in Europe and colonial history can no longer be kept as separate fields, as if the history of labour in the “West” was independent of labour relations in other parts of the world. In particular, I show that indentured labour in the Indian Ocean would have not been possible if working people in Europe had not been servants. Europe did not export a generic “wage-earner” or proletarian, but a specific historical form of these roles. This institution was filtered by colonial elites and interacted with specific values, forms of labour and institutions in the Indian Ocean.

All the same, at the turn of the 19th century, slavery was abolished in colonial Africa at the same moment that a “new” labour contract and the first form of welfare state emerged in Europe. This link is missing in current historiography; yet, without it, it is

impossible to understand why new forms of bondage emerged in colonial Africa and why tensions rose in the aftermath of WW I between Europe and its colonies.

The next chapters, still to write, intend to link the dynamics of Russia between 1861 and 1914 to those of Europe, in particular by showing the direct link between these economies and the good performances of the Russian economy as a whole until WW I. Then, after developing the major role WW I played in the use of new forms of militarized labour in both Europe and its colonies, I will develop a detailed analysis of the evolution of labour and forced labour in some European colonies in Africa and India between 1914 and 1939; I will link this evolution to that of the states (welfare) and the economies of Europe during this same period. Finally, special attention will be devoted to Soviet Russia and the old/new conceptions and use of labour until WW II (forced collectivization, Gulag, industrial labour).

I cannot but be grateful to Wiko for pushing me so much and above all for putting me in a position to carry out this work. I must mention not only the working splendid environment, but also the efficiency of the library team. My kind of working on so many topics absolutely depends upon efficient access to sources. Wiko cannot give me the archives, but it provided me with massive secondary bibliography. It would have been impossible elsewhere.