

CHAPTER 12

Goodbye iSlave: Making Alternative Subjects Through Digital Objects

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1. Introduction

Since the arrival of the ‘digital revolution’, we have been repetitively reminded about the emancipatory power of technological objects. Apple’s iconic ‘1984’ commercial was a good example, showcasing that their new Macintosh computer could liberate human subjectivities from the tyranny of Big Brother. However, more than 30 years later, when the iPhone turns ten years old in 2017, we look back and see a very different, even opposite picture: digital objects such as smartphones have not only failed to deliver their emancipatory promise (Qiu 2016a), but have created instead new conditions of enslavement, so much so that I would contend that the abolition of digital slavery, or iSlavery, is an imperative duty we have no choice but to take on.

The keyword ‘iSlave’ was originally a slogan invented during a transnational campaign in 2010 by labour activists in Hong Kong and Switzerland (see Figure 4), which I picked up and fleshed out in the 2016 volume *Goodbye iSlave: A Manifesto for Digital Abolition*. The book title is thus a salute to those working on the frontlines of digital labour activism, to their bravery and creativity. The subtitle of the book contains the word ‘manifesto’, which was something much

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bolder than the original idea I had when I started this book. However, I think it suits my goal pretty well, because I hope to make two provocations: first, digital media has done much more damage to the world and to humanity than most of us would like to realise; second, we can and have to use the same technological objects to resist and abolish new and old modes of slavery, to regain human dignity, and to create new subjectivities of a post-capitalist era.

In this essay, I will first discuss ways to define slavery in the twenty-first century, which I will apply to conditions of digital capitalism from the assembly line to the data mine. Then I will briefly introduce two basic modes of iSlavery: one is the ‘manufacturing iSlave’ or production-mode iSlavery, such as Chinese migrant workers at Foxconn – the world’s largest electronics producer, known for its notorious sweatshop conditions, which are comparable, arguably, to the trans-Atlantic triangular trade. The second mode is ‘manufactured’ or consumption-mode iSlavery, such as Facebook free labour and people who are addicted to digital gadgets. Section 2 will focus on antislavery struggles and openings for digital abolition through collective resistance, creative memes, and social media on the picket line (Qiu 2016b), which can be observed abundantly in the Chinese factory zones and online. My goal is not only to criticise the status quo but also to illuminate hope for our collective digital future.

But let me confess upfront: I have been a user of Apple’s products for more than three decades. I am as complacent in what I’m about to critique as every i-gadget consumer who happens to read this essay. Frankly speaking, to arrive at the theme of slavery marks a point in a completely unexpected journey for myself. Yet I’m now presenting this unlikely idea because I see great utility in connecting slavery with things digital. To me, slavery is much more than a past condition or a provocative metaphor for contemporary reality. It is, more precisely, a comparative method that re-historicises our thinking about digital media and labour, China and the world. This is crucial because I happen to possess too many scattered empirical observations from my work on Foxconn since 2010, for which I need a larger and more coherent analytical framework, and because studies of digital media in China have suffered increasingly from methodological nationalism or Chinese exceptionalism. But with a comparative slavery framework, we can re-connect China with world history, reconstrue trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific struggles as one continuous *longue durée* process. This conceptual enlargement can be a theoretical breakthrough. After all, slavery is about the reduction of human subjects into inhuman objects, an ultimate form of objectification and alienation, a process always accompanied by resistance, recalcitrance, and the re-making of subjectivities.

2. Conceptualising Slavery

Borrowing from the scholarship of history, sociology, anthropology and legal studies, I have constructed a conceptual framework, as shown in Figure 1, to

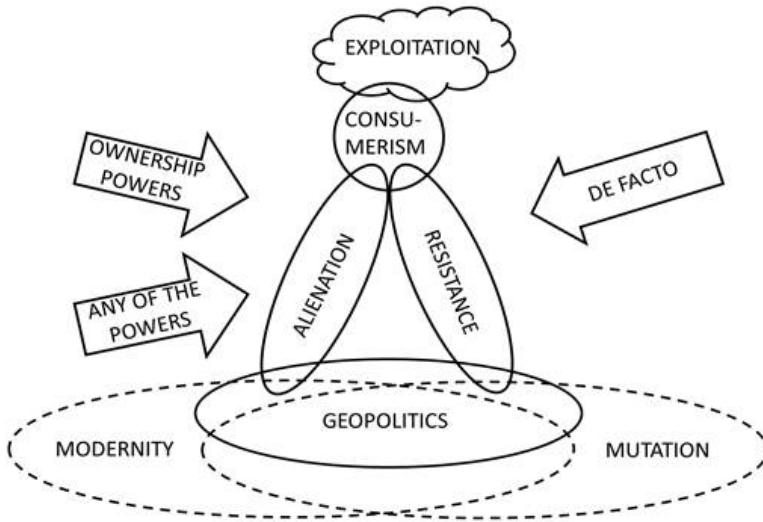


Figure 1: A conceptual framework illustrating ways to define slavery.

define slavery in the modern era. The Figure shows that there are two deep foundations for enslavement, one being capitalist modernity, the other the capacity of slave regimes to mutate over time. Slavery is surprisingly resilient. It transforms as capitalism takes on new forms (Blackburn 1997). Standing on the quicksand of capitalist modernity, the immediate and tangible foundation for slavery is geopolitics, by which I mean the politico-economic and military complex of empire, expanding over oceans and continents, and now into the New World of cyberspace, smart devices and Big Data.

Slavery has two pillars, one of which is alienation or, more precisely, ‘natal alienation’ as Orlando Patterson (1982, 7) calls it. The other pillar is resistance by the enslaved, whose revolutionary spirits inspire us to re-imagine a better digital economy and a more humane world. While conventional wisdom often focuses exclusively on suppressive slave regimes and alienating experiences of enslavement, it is important to stress that slave resistance has always been part and parcel of the social reality in conditions of slavery, past or present (Linebaugh and Rediker 2013; Rediker 2007).

The ultimate goal of slavery is to exploit the body or body parts of the enslaved under conditions of abnormal labour-capital relationship (Fuchs 2014). In order to reach this goal, surplus value from alienated labour has to be extracted from processes of consumption, dominated by hegemonic cultures of consumerism – which are now coded in corporate algorithms, the latest instruments of enslavement through the manipulation of social media platforms.

Finally, borrowing from legal scholarship, especially the 2012 Bellagio-Harvard Guidelines on the Legal Parameters of Slavery, I define iSlavery as *de facto*

conditions instead of *de jure* status. If any ‘powers attached to ownership’ are found to exist – such as possession, transfer, or disposal – then this suffices to indicate ‘institutions or practices similar to slavery’ (Allen 2014, 213, 220).

The first global regime of modern slavery, as I shall submit, was the seventeenth-century trans-Atlantic system. Although there were Africans being trafficked to the Caribbean in the 1500s, it was only in the 1600s that the racial structure, the mode of production and transcontinental trade centred on sugar, became stabilised. This regime expanded tremendously in the 1700s until its demise in the 1800s, bookended, for instance, in the British Empire by the 1807 Slave Trade Act and in the USA by the conclusion of the American Civil War in 1865.

But slavery still exists in the twenty-first century. Since the year 2000, the International Criminal Court in The Hague and the High Court of Australia have both used slavery charges to successfully indict former militia and gang members. In so doing, both courts recognised that the criminal offences constituted slavery, despite this term’s usual historical application, because they looked at *de facto* conditions as summarised in Figure 1. The question is: can we further extend this framework of understanding about modern slavery into the world of digital media and smartphones?

A few conceptual clarifications are in order. For one thing, the type of slavery that I’m critiquing here differs from the ‘slave society’ in classic Marxist theory, which Marx and Engels understood as an archaic mode of production that took place before feudalism. In its present shape, twenty-first-century slavery is a techno-social novelty. In other words, iSlavery in its current shape never existed before.

Furthermore, we know from historical studies that slaves are not just poor labourers toiling in plantations or factories, but that there is also a high-class category of what Patterson calls the ‘ultimate slave’ (1982, 299), such as *familia Caesaris* – pardon my Latin – the so-called ‘families’ of Caesar, who served as surrogates of the emperor. They could be extremely wealthy and powerful. But they could be executed without legal procedure when the emperor disliked them. These ‘ultimate slaves’ also sometimes rebelled, even turning themselves into kings and queens, for instance, when Turkish slaves founded Mamluk kingdoms in medieval Egypt. This was able to occur because the surrogate had become the sole means of communication for the emperor, and ‘the control of communication is power. Sublation of the relationship immediately becomes a possibility’ (1982, 333). In other words, in this case the slave-master intersubjectivity was subverted, first in thinking and the realm of symbolic interactions, then in the real world of society and its institutions.

The third clarification is that the notion of iSlavery is *not* racially defined: over and over again, we have learned this lesson from history: interracial resurrection of the ‘motley crew’ often serves as arguably the most formidable form of antislavery struggle (Linebaugh and Rediker 2013, 211). Because of this I would submit that an effective movement of digital abolition – an effective global class

struggle indeed – can only succeed when it transcends identity politics, when the enslaved form solidarity on the basis of their common exploitation, not the colour of their skin.

This is my main thesis based on the above conceptualisations: digital capitalism revives slavery, but it also spurs new antislavery movements that hold the premise of emancipation. Developing this thesis, we possess a conceptual lens that opens new vistas and brings in fresh thinking. It enables us to travel back and forth between the seventeenth and twenty-first centuries.

More specifically, my comparative analysis follows the three models of triangular exchange that are schematically outlined in Figure 2. On the left is the seventeenth-century trans-Atlantic triangular trade between Europe, West Africa, and the New World. This needs no belabouring because it is a classic formation based on the flow of African slaves, sugar and money.

At the bottom is twenty-first-century iSlavery. Here Apple is singled out due to its close affinity with Foxconn. However, it applies not only to Apple but other major gadgets brands as well, such as Samsung, Huawei, Sony and Amazon Kindle. Structurally speaking, the Apple-Foxconn relationship is comparable to the Europe-West Africa exchange four centuries ago. Together they expand to the New World of digital consumption and social media, where user-generated content (UGC) is the new ‘sugar’, so to speak.

On the right is a new model of antislavery exchange, where organised ‘network labour’ functions as a third pillar of network society, forming dialectical relationships with network enterprise and network state. The cultural capital and social innovations of network labour materialises through working-class information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Qiu 2009), which are

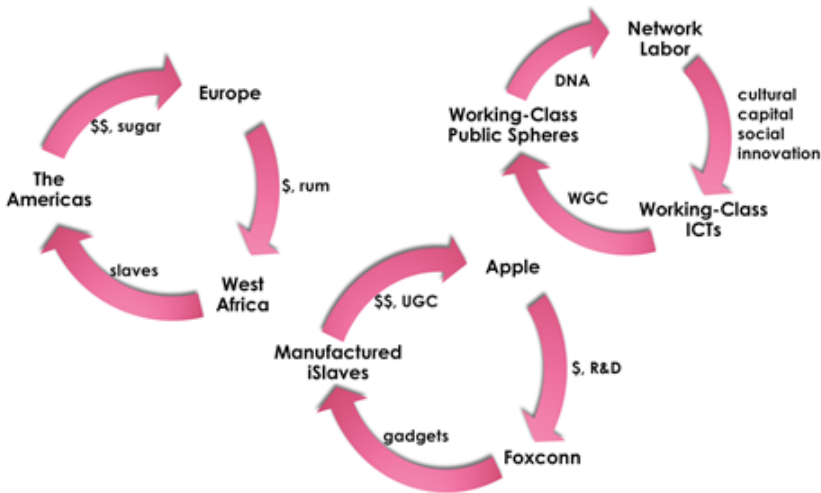


Figure 2: Three circuit models of slavery and antislavery.

used to create collective and activism-oriented worker-generated content (WGC). WGC converges in working-class public spheres, leading to digitally networked action (DNA), which produces new meanings and a new praxis for network labour, thereby contributing to an alternative circuit of antislavery, regionally and globally.

The rest of this paper compares the two circuits of objectification, commodification, and capitalist accumulation on the left and the bottom of Figure 2. We will then zoom into the circuit of antislavery and new subject formation on the right, which is but one model of re-subjectification and re-humanisation toward genuine, sustainable, systemic change.

3. Two Modes of iSlavery: Manufacturing and Manufactured

There are two modes of iSlavery: the manufacturing or production-mode iSlave on the one hand, and manufactured iSlave or consumption-mode slavery on the other. In the manufacturing domain, the story starts in the bowels of the earth, in places like the Democratic Republic of Congo, where 'blood minerals' such as coltan are extracted by miners including child labour, who are under warlords' control, even under gunpoint (Van Reybrouck 2014). These minerals are essential to the electronic components in our smart devices. The components are assembled in massive factories such as those operated by Foxconn.

Foxconn is the world's largest electronics manufacturer. According to *Wall Street Journal*, it employs approximately 1.4 million workers in mainland China (Mozur and Luk 2013), an army more numerous in number than all the armed forces of the US military combined. What are the labour conditions in Foxconn? The company first came under media scrutiny in 2006, when reporters sneaked into Foxconn 'Peace' dormitory in Shenzhen, South China, and were astounded by what they saw: up to 300 workers sleeping on three-level bunk beds in one huge room without air conditioning. According to a worker living there: 'The odour of sweat and dirty feet was suffocating' (Zhang and Li 2006). This reminds us of the lower deck of the slave ship in the Middle Passage, with African bodies being packed together, suffocated in the packed space with extremely poor ventilation.

Another parallel is the transfer of labouring bodies, who are unfree and cannot escape. The auction of African or African-American slaves is well recorded in archives and recent films such as *Twelve Years a Slave*. In Foxconn, we encounter the so-called 'student interns' sent by vocational schools in the Chinese hinterlands to the factory. These are usually youngsters in their late teens. Without working at Foxconn for three months, they simply could not graduate. At school they majored in accounting, English, or pharmaceuticals. At Foxconn, they are assigned to the most tedious of assembly line work – making iPhone back cases, for instance (Chan Pun and Seldon 2015).

As I learned from my interviews with their production line-leaders in 2012, each day these ‘interns’ had to stand for ten hours while making iPhone cases. In the first week, all female students would break down in tears; in the second week, all males would cry due to excruciating pain in their legs. Yet they could not leave, because otherwise they wouldn’t be able to receive their graduation diploma. Both the schools and the factory benefit handsomely from this transfer of enslaved bodies.

What happens if a worker gets sick due to vocational diseases, like leukaemia? What about cases of work injury, when the employees can no longer work? Will the factory take care of them, as required by China’s labour law? No. In the 2016 book, I documented several sad cases of workers being disposed of, such as the case of Zhang Tingzhen, who lost half of his brain due to a work injury sustained at Foxconn (Qiu 2016a). This is not essentially different from the discarding of African bodies when they became liabilities during the Atlantic trade.

The most horrifying tragedies took place in 2010, when 15 Foxconn workers jumped to their death from tall buildings within six months (Chan and Pun 2010). Never before had such a series of suicides been recorded in the history of industrial capitalism. However, if we go back to the trans-Atlantic trade, we find a surprisingly similar device of labour discipline and social control against the attempts of the enslaved population from taking their own lives: the anti-jumping nets (see Figure 3, below).

According to Olaudah Equiano, a slave boy who survived the Middle Passage in the 1700s, he witnessed fellow Africans jumping through that netting

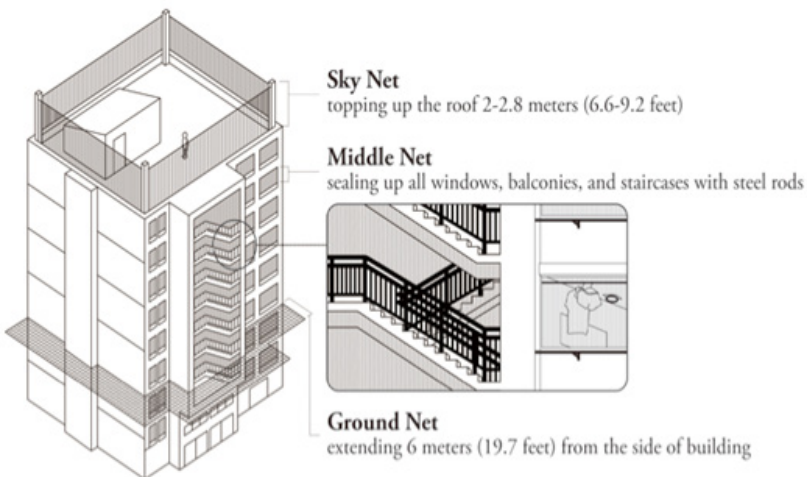


Figure 3: A typical Foxconn building being sealed off with anti-jumping nets.

because they wished to die and free themselves from the miseries of enslavement (Equiano 1789/1995). At the time, anti-jumping nets were a standard feature of slave ships. These nets became obsolete when the trans-Atlantic trade was abolished in the nineteenth century. But in 2010, they re-appeared on top of Foxconn buildings where i-products are made. There are three levels of netting: the 'Sky Net' at the top, the 'Ground Net' at the bottom, and the 'Middle Net' sealing the windows and corridors in between. Foxconn claims to have taken down the anti-jumping nets, although I still see them when I visit the factory facilities in the Pearl River Delta and the Yangtze River Delta.

Due to China's media censorship, we do not have a full account of suicides in Foxconn since 2010. But they have continued, as indicated by the suicide of Xu Lizhi, now a famous worker-poet in China's literary scene, who leaped to his death from Foxconn Shenzhen in 2014 (Tharoor 2014). In August 2016, in Foxconn Zhengzhou, where most of the latest iPhones are made, we still had reliable information about a worker leaping to their death after assembling iPhone 7s.

This is why we call it 'manufacturing iSlave': because along the assembly line and around it, there are many parallels between the electronics sweatshops of the twenty-first century and seventeenth-century slavery of the Atlantic system, seen through a global and *longue durée* perspective. The culprit is not a single company or a single country. It is rather a planetary system I term 'Appconn', i.e. a new global regime that not only produces gadgets but also fatal alienation, objectification, enslavement, the disposal of 'useless' labour, and the anti-jumping nets.

We turn next to 'manufactured' or consumption-mode iSlavery. It starts with the real case of a Chinese teenager, from a working-class family, who in 2011 sold one of his kidneys to buy an iPhone and an iPad. This was an extreme case of voluntary servitude, an extreme tragedy of a human subject being deprived of his soul. Why on earth would anyone be so fanatical as to trade his health for gizmos? He did it because of peer pressure. Why, then, are so many people devoted to their i-devices in such a fanatical way?

The historical comparison is with the addictive substances of the Atlantic system centuries ago, such as tobacco and alcohol, although the real driving force of the seventeenth-century triangular trade was sugar, including rum that was the by-product of sugar production. Today we have the functional equivalents in our digital gadgets: Facebook, WeChat, Candy Crush (even the name sounds sugary!).

The result of addiction is not just about hardware or software but about a fundamental shift in lifestyle toward what Sidney Mintz calls 'desocialized eating,' when consumption is regularised and individualised in order to meet the rhythm of consumer goods production and marketing rather than the sociocultural needs of communities and families (1985, 121). This is the crucial revelation: historically, the increase of slave production in the New World had to be matched by the rise of consumption in the Old. A hegemonic culture of consumerism is key to the domination of Appconn, when system-generated

consumption markets serve as a pillar of the New World System, which is as indispensable as its production apparatus. A strong addictive substance comes from the games and social media platforms – as much as it was for those who are addicted to sugar, alcohol, and tobacco. We lost our freedom when we became addicts (Schull 2012).

Another angle to assess addiction is to look at how much time the Appconn regime has been able to extract from us. Time is a key dimension for the Marxist analysis of exploitation. For Marx, capitalist accumulation of surplus value is ultimately about the acquisition of socially-necessary labour time – either by extending work hours or by the intensification of production processes (Marx 1867/1992). According to Robin Blackburn (1997, 581), all the slaves under the control of the British Empire contributed 2.5 billion hours of labour time in 1800, mostly by working in sugar fields and associated factories. If we apply the same calculation to Foxconn, by my calculation the modern factory of digital gadgets extracted 4.8 billion hours of labour time in 2014. That is, about two British Empires in 1800. How much time has Facebook extracted from us? My conservative estimation for 2014, using only the total number of daily active users is 653 billion hours, a truly mind-boggling amount equivalent to approximately 261 British Empires or 137 Foxconnns.

‘The “i” word is practically an intoxicant,’ writes Judy Wajcman (2015, 178) in *Pressed for Time*. One way to recover our humanity, she continues, is to restore our ‘temporal sovereignty’ – to use the same digital tools as instruments of antislavery, to recover and re-invent human subjectivities.

4. Antislavery: Resistance Through and Beyond WGC

With the darkening of the sky, we see brighter stars of hope. iSlavery is not the end of the world. It is, rather, a fresh start for the constant struggle of the human species to regain subjectivities and reconstruct intersubjectivities, which also constitutes a broad class struggle toward liberty – liberty for all working people and their families, who now have their own digital devices.

Among historians, there are two strands of thought about antislavery. One emphasises abolition – by the elite, the educated, lawyers, religious groups and the middle class, including white saviours – from the top down (Clarkson 1839; Eltis and Walvin 1981; Drescher 2009). The other strand sees antislavery through the eyes of the oppressed – Africans and Afro-Americans, the indigenous people, the women, the illiterate, the black Jacobins, who resist the powers that be at the grassroots level and from the bottom up (James 1938/2001; Linebaugh and Rediker 2013; Reynolds 1981). While I am an abolitionist, my work leans more towards the second strand that stresses the resistance of the enslaved.

Most important are three insights from the historical literature that throw light on my analysis. First, antislavery takes many forms: singing & dancing, stealing, sabotage, hunger strikes, suicide – the list goes on (Rediker 2007).

Second, slavery and antislavery, accommodation and resistance, coexist in global and regional contexts. Third, bloody confrontations are exceptional; more common forms of resistance took place in culture, in daily work and life, and in the constant process of subject making, un-making, and remaking (Genovese 1976).

With these historical patterns in mind, one must admit that China today is also unique, especially the central part played by the Chinese state in moulding Appconn through the provision of cheap labour, land and infrastructure (Pun Lu Guo Shen 2011). Another factor, a geopolitical one, is Beijing's attempt to fold in Taiwanese capital in order to achieve its goal of re-unifying the 'Great Chinese Nation'. This makes local state agencies – in the form of city governments competing with each other in desperate endeavours to win corporate favour – stand out above and beyond the conventional power centres of Beijing, extending deep inside the country. The Chinese state, be it national or subnational, remains a key arena for social struggle and power contestation (Zhao, 2008). This means Appconn is not invincible if the authorities such as ACFTU (All China Federation of Trade Unions) can be pressurised into carrying out its basic duties. ACFTU is a strategic institutional space that is often better understood by Chinese workers than by intellectuals.

Another vital development in China today is the wide diffusion of the Internet and the rise of the information 'have-less' (Qiu 2009), a category between the so-called haves and have-nots of the digital divide, providing a crucial techno-social basis for the making of network labour – a new working class of the digital era. These are groups such as migrant workers with less income and resources, but they are also less committed to the politico-economic status quo. A crude indicator for the have-less is educational attainment. When China's official Internet statistics unit released its first survey results about user demographics in 1998, those without a Bachelor's degree (roughly, the have-less group) accounted for 41.1% of all Internet users in the country, a figure which climbed to 78.8% in 2008, and 88.4% in 2016 (CNNIC 1998; 2008; 2016). Nearly nine out of ten Chinese Internet users belong to the working class and lower classes. What would they communicate, online and off?

Western media and Chinese commercial media alike routinely portray Chinese workers as docile and obedient. When the Foxconn 'suicide express' occurred, the tragedy received sensational coverage. But when workers fought back in the immediate aftermath of the 'suicide express', the media looked the other way as if there were nothing newsworthy. The struggle continues on a daily basis though, and is often livecast online via Weibo, China's Twitter-like digital platform. Factory workers, including in Foxconn, use online videos to document their collective resistance, for instance, against violent guards. The most commonly used images, however, are stills, such as those taken at the Yuyuan shoe factory strike in 2014 (Qiu 2016b).

In retrospect, we see not only myriad ways of using 'social media on the picket line' (Qiu 2016b), but also at least three phases of working-class subject

formation facilitated by digital media. Before 2004, actions centred on QQ, the instant messenger. Between 2004 and 2009, the online forum Weblog, along with podcast and video sites, attracted more attention. Since 2009, Weibo and WeChat have been the dominant players. The technological platforms accumulate on top of existing ones, as do workers' collective experiences; the most interesting developments are probably Maoist and neo-Maoist online formations, and these deserve more study in the future.

Against such a rich backdrop of worker resistance, it makes sense to consider WGC (worker-generated content) as an alternative route, apart from UGC, that leads to subjectivities other than those constrained by neoliberalism. In many ways, WGC circulated via China's working-class social media can be compared with African singing and dancing during the Middle Passage. To unacquainted observers, it may appear to be meaningless and chaotic. But to insiders, it can be immensely spiritual and poetic, gratifying and powerful, defiant and fun.

I would, however, contend that, although Chinese WGC is indeed impressive, today's acts of social media on the picket line are still less remarkable than that of revolutionary Atlantic history. (Linebaugh and Rediker 2013). The famous Wedgwood antislavery medallion on the left side of Figure 4 is but one remarkable symbol from the eighteenth-century abolition movement. Its cameo design of an African image with the Christian message – 'Am I Not a Man and a Brother?' – was reproduced in various material forms: fine porcelain, watches, gold pins. This 'meme' of abolition travelled across the social classes, beyond geographical and historical limits. It inspired and joined forces with a plethora of antislavery endeavours, from literary interventions such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to the 'free produce store' taking the blood out of agricultural products,



Figure 4: Wedgwood abolition medallion (1787) and the iSlave meme (2010).

especially cotton and sugar (essentially nineteenth-century Fair Trade). Comparatively speaking, the digital abolition movement of twenty-first-century China, and globally, has not yet developed such impactful memes. Nor has it been successful in building coalitions and transforming broader society. Much, therefore, remains to be learned across the historical span.

5. Concluding Remarks

The main message from this essay is about historical continuity, despite the racial specificity of African or Afro-American versus Chinese or Asian labour. Yes, the two enslaved groups are oceans apart and centuries away from each other. Yes, there was a gender shift from male to female as the most quintessential form of the enslaved body. But they are both objectified and exploited, weighed down by the capitalist world system and the colonial masters, old and new. It is this subjugation, alienation, objectification and violent suppression that constitute their strongest bond – across racial categories, across national boundaries, across history.

At this point it should be clear that digital media remain in the shadow of slavery, now cast from China and Congo to the New World of Appconn and Big Data algorithms. It is therefore imperative to conceive of an alternative system and help it materialise. To achieve this goal we need a more holistic conception of digital labour. It is imperative to see through digital capitalism, and to understand the worsening of contemporary labour conditions along the assembly line and inside the data mine, as anything but coincidental.

Chinese workers, intellectuals and activists have much to learn from the Atlantic theatre of African resistance and the lessons of American abolition. One of them is the centrality of cultural resistance, where objectified labour joins the antislavery struggle through processes of re-subjectification and where consumer advocacy can play a central role in reclaiming our intersubjectivities in the production and consumption mode, converging in the creation of new revolutionary subjects.

The other lesson is an immensely empowering revelation. That is, historical slavery, despite its formidable appearance, has been and will be defeated, if we know how it works. This paper starts with a note on the resilience of slave regimes under conditions of pre-capitalism and capitalism itself. Let us end on a different note: the forces of antislavery and efforts to recover our collective humanity are even more resilient – if we look back on how abolitionists have succeeded in the past against all odds then we can indeed imagine an alternative, post-capitalist world.

By my understanding, the global slave system of the 1780s, with its harnessing of political, cultural and religious forces, was probably the most powerful ever known. Today's Big Data capitalism, or twenty-first-century iSlavery, is not nearly as powerful as that world order of the 1780s. Yet it only took a generation

after the 1780s for the trans-Atlantic trade to start to crumble; the first modern antislavery legislation in human history was passed in 1807, in the Palace of Westminster, London. Bearing this historical note in mind, we really have no reason to despair and feel hopeless. We indeed shall act together with confidence and our collective optimism of the will.

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