

CHAPTER 13

Wage-Workers, Not Slaves: Reflections on Jack Qiu's Chapter

Peter Goodwin

Jack Qiu's chapter, like his book *Goodbye iSlave: A Manifesto for Digital Abolition* (Qiu 2016), is a powerful exposé of some of the appalling labour conditions which lie behind the glitz of the 'digital revolution', and of the resistance to these conditions by those who suffer them. Equally powerful is his comparison of the position which Foxconn and Apple occupy in the globalised capitalism of the early twenty-first century, with that occupied by the Atlantic slave trade in the international capitalism of the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Given the huge social, political and, indeed, moral importance of the issues he so effectively raises, it seems almost indecent to quibble.

But for all its power – and truth – I think we have to question the notion of iSlavery in this context. Is Qiu perhaps sacrificing some important analytical rigour for undoubted – and welcome – polemical effect?

As Qiu outlines in this chapter, and at far greater length in Chapter 2 of his 2016 book, slavery has taken various forms at various times. It has historically been an important part of the development of capitalism, rather than a hangover from pre-modernity. And it has always generated various forms of

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resistance among the enslaved. But if slavery can be part of capitalism, what distinguishes a slave from a wage-worker or proletarian? Surely it is that a slave is owned by a capitalist and can be bought and sold (along with the totality of her or his labour power), while a wage worker retains possession of her or his labour power which s/he sells to one capitalist or another. The distinction is an important one, socially, politically, economically and historically. If it were not important, then neither would be Lincoln's 1863 Emancipation Proclamation in the American Civil War, or the 1865 thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution.

Karl Marx, in the manuscript 'Results of the Immediate Process of Production' (written when the abolition of capitalist slavery in the US was very much a current event) was clear on the economic difference:

The slave is the property of a particular master; the worker must indeed sell himself to capital, but not to a particular capitalist, and so within certain limitations he may choose to sell himself to whomever he wishes; and he may also change his master. The effect of all these differences is to make the free worker's work more intensive, more continuous, more flexible and skilled than that of the slave, quite apart from the fact that they fit him for a quite different historical role.' (Marx 1976/1864, 1032-1033).

I doubt whether Qiu would disagree with any of this. But the distinction between worker and slave has always been unclear, both in reality and in discourse. One grey area is that much wage labour has involved extra-market elements of coercion, from gang-masters to company police, to tied housing or company dormitories, to the truck system, and so on. It is this real – and horrible – grey area that Qiu describes. The discursive grey area is that, from the very arrival of the modern working class on the scene, labour organisers and socialists – including Marx and Engels – have frequently referred, generally rhetorically, to 'wage-slavery' or 'wage slaves'. And in the period when capitalist slavery in its purest form in the United States fed the textile mills of Europe, socialists sometimes chided factory-owning abolitionists for ignoring 'their own' wage slaves, while supporters of real slavery sometimes made the same accusation of hypocrisy in support of their own reactionary cause. It is in exploring both these real and rhetorical grey areas that the strength of Qiu's argument lies. But one cannot avoid the fact that the workers Qiu is talking about are wage workers, not slaves in the pure sense, and will remain exploited wage workers even when the battles are won to remove the grotesque abuses which Qiu documents.

Qiu stresses one side of the history of anti-slavery – the history of slave resistance and slave rebellion – as against the other, and still better known history, of morally motivated white abolitionists. So alongside exposing the abuses, he focusses on the acts of resistance and rebellion by the Foxconn workers.

The other side of Qiu's picture of iSlavery is altogether less plausible, at both an analytical and a rhetorical level. Qiu distinguishes between two modes of iSlavery: 'the manufacturing or production-mode iSlave on the one hand, and manufactured iSlave or consumption-mode slavery on the other'. What we have just been talking about (the workers of the giant Foxconn factories) are Qiu's 'manufacturing or production mode iSlaves', and although I have criticised Qiu's technical conflation of worker and slave, on this 'production-mode iSlavery', I have absolutely no quarrel with the thrust of his argument. But Qiu's second 'consumption-mode iSlave' seems to me to be both analytically thin and to have exactly the opposite of rhetorical power.

Qiu gives the example of a 'Chinese teenager, from a working-class family, who sold one of his kidneys to buy an iPhone and an iPad in 2011'. He notes that this was an 'extreme case' of what he calls 'voluntary servitude', by which he seems to mean addiction. 'The historical comparison is with the addictive substances of the Atlantic system centuries ago, such as tobacco and alcohol, although the real driving force for the seventeenth-century triangular trade was sugar, including rum that was the by-product of sugar. Today we have the functional equivalents in our digital gadgets: Facebook, WeChat, Candy Crush.' He concludes, 'we lost our freedom when we become addicts'.

I would question whether the term 'addiction' is a helpful characterisation of the general use of social media or of digital devices (and Qiu himself, remember, states that his example of selling a kidney to buy an iPhone is an *extreme* one). But even if one accepts that it is helpful, then that does not make those of us who today need our iPhones or Facebook accounts 'slaves', any more than it made into 'slaves' the eighteenth-century white Europeans of all classes who needed their regular fix of sugar.

References

- Marx, Karl. 1976/1864. *Capital Volume 1*. Translated by Ben Fowkes. Harmondsworth and London: Penguin Books in Association with New Left Review.
- Qiu, Jack. 2016. *Goodbye iSlave: A Manifesto for Digital Abolition*. Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press.

