

LABOR SYSTEMS

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Hunting and Gathering. There was relatively little formal organization of work in hunting and gathering bands. Gender was the main determinant. Men hunted, women gathered; both contributed considerably to the group economy and both enjoyed status on that base. Child labor was rare. Contemporary studies suggest that when children accompany their mothers in gathering, production is lower than when they are kept back. Older people might lose the capacity to contribute widely, but these situations developed ad hoc.

Agriculture. Agricultural societies increased the need for work, requiring more hours per day or week than had been involved in hunting and gathering (but particularly for men). Peasant producers formed the key labor group in most agricultural settings; only occasionally were scattered individual farms emphasized. Obviously, some workers were also identified for manufacturing. And both countryside and city depended on groups of more occasional laborers, for example in transportation and hauling and in unskilled construction work. In many agricultural societies some unskilled workers drifted to cities in wintertime, seeking occasional work, and returning home for planting and harvesting. Even some skilled groups, like stonemasons, developed seasonal patterns.

“Free” Labor. Agricultural workers could be arranged in several different systems. In many cases villages were economically fairly independent, with peasant families producing mainly for their own needs, possibly with a bit of surplus for trade or sale. Confucian philosophy accorded a relatively high status to peasant farmers, for their contributions to the social good. Some peasants – for example, younger sons and daughters who could not inherit land – also contributed work for wages or for household support, providing assistance in agriculture or some domestic service. Peasants in these situations were technically free. They might also, if manufacturing expanded, participate in domestic production, again for a wage. But governments might also conscript peasant labor, requiring service on projects like building the Chinese Great Wall, or the pyramids in Egypt.

Slavery. Slave systems were also common in agricultural societies. They existed in early civilizations like Mesopotamia (though not, initially, in Egypt). Slavery existed in early China and India but then diminished, without disappearing entirely. The Indian caste system displaced slavery in organizing people into different occupational groups with the lowest (involved in dealing with the dead, or human waste, or leather) clearly scorned as untouchable but not enslaved. Slavery however flourished in the classical Mediterranean and later in Arab and Ottoman society, despite Muslim concerns about holding other Muslims as property. Slavery also developed in Russia. And of course massive slave systems emerged in many parts of the Americas from the 16th century onward, and also within Africa.

Causes. Some slavery began through conquests in wartime. Many societies, like Rome, expanded partly in search of new slaves. Many Europeans were seized as slaves as a result of naval warfare in the Mediterranean. Slave trading was also common, with both merchants and governments providing slaves for sale in Africa. But some slave systems were also fed by volunteers, particularly parents who sought owners for some of their children. This was a pattern in classical Rome, where slavery might provide greater job security and support than “freedom”; after all, owners had some interest in making sure their investments did not starve to death. And most slave systems featured a range of occupations. Slaves in the Middle East served as government officials, soldiers, tutors, domestic servants, as well as providing workers for some of the harshest labor assignments, for example in the mines. A few even ran shops, sometimes earning enough money to buy their freedom. This diversity was also true in the Roman Empire. Islam provided some further protections for slaves, if they were Muslim – encouraging the freeing of slaves on the death of a master, discouraging sales that would divide families. Without much doubt, Atlantic slavery from 1500 onward proved to be an unusually harsh version, beginning with the forcible seizure of young people by merchants, extended through horrible conditions on the slave ships, and confirmed by frequently harsh work on sugar or, later, cotton plantations under cruel overseers. The profits sought in the sale of slave produced goods, in the increasingly commercial atmosphere of the early modern world, generated greater work pressures, though of course some slaves had milder, household assignments and some did some manufacturing tasks as well.

Serfdom. Here was another common agricultural labor system. When governments could not protect ordinary people, many farmers might seek help from a local landowner, surrendering part of their labor freedom in the

process. This sat at the origins of serfdom in Western Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire. Later in Russia, serfdom was encouraged as a governing system as the empire expanded, again with serfs serving under landed aristocrats. Serfdom also developed at several points in Chinese history, in premodern Japan, and periodically in the Middle East. Under Spanish colonialism, a form of serfdom developed widely in Latin America, with landowners gaining control over several villages, particularly in the hacienda system. With serfdom, peasants gave part of their produce – or equivalent money rent, in more market-based settings – to their landlords. They also worked directly on the landed estate; work service was a vital part of the system. And they might have a few other obligations. They were not, in principle, free to leave the land, though some did manage to escape, for example to cities; serfdom deliberately discouraged labor mobility. But serfs were not slaves. Normally they could not be evicted if they met their obligations; their land in this sense was jointly owned by them and their landlord. And they could not, usually, be bought and sold. Their landlords were supposed to protect them against attack, and in some cases (along with village governments themselves) helped regulate disputes – serving in this sense as part of a local government. Some serf systems were harsher than others; Russia, by the early modern period, allowed increasing powers to landlords, even the right of capital punishment for crime or rebellion. In many areas, including Russia from the early modern period to the mid-19th century, periodic serf rebellions surfaced, as peasants disputed landlord control and estate ownership. And serf systems might decline for several reasons, as in Western Europe after the 15th century; new production needs encouraged some landowners to offer better conditions, and population decline might spur substantial conversion to freer peasant labor in compensation.

Transitions: The 18th Century. New kinds of attacks on unfree labor developed in 18th-century Europe, echoed in some cases in North America and spreading to reform advocates in Russia as well. Serfdom and slavery were attacked as unproductive: freer labor, with people producing and earning for themselves and their families, would be more efficient. The systems, and particularly slavery, were also attacked as simply unjust: people should not own other people, and examples of brutal treatment were widely circulated. This kind of abolitionist sentiment, reflecting new economic thinking but also a new kind of humanitarianism, created new pressures against several traditional labor systems, sometimes combining with risings by serfs or slaves themselves. Petitions and other activities against slavery and the slave trade were widely circulated in Britain and elsewhere. While the American Revolution did not abolish slavery (though some northern states did so soon thereafter), the French Revolution ended serf obligations and created a substantially free peasantry. Revolution in Haiti, in the 1790s, fueled by abolitionist thinking, abolished slavery as well. While most Latin American independence movements did not touch social institutions, slavery was abolished in places like Mexico (in 1819).

Industrial Labor. The industrial revolution quickly created a growing class of factory workers. Most factory workers were in principle free wage laborers. But they often had relatively little bargaining power, at least in the early decades of industrialization. Many were forced off the land by population growth. They had few skills: factory work favored the semi-skilled, training on the job but also specialized on a few tasks. Labor by women and children was common, a source of lower wages; while both groups had normally worked in agricultural economies, factory labor imposed new burdens, including more frequent accidents and molestations. Most important, factory work left workers little voice over their own daily activities, with shop rules and foremen providing detailed oversight; it greatly increased the pace of work, causing new kinds of nervous distress in some cases. Some of these conditions might later ease, particularly when hours of work were limited (a trend by the late 19th century in Western Europe, as early industrial pressures eased). Union organization and government regulation might help, for example in promoting greater safety on the job, and limiting child labor. But some new features of work proved very durable. Some also extended to the growing group of white collar workers—sales clerks, bank tellers, secretaries – that began to proliferate in more advanced industrial economies.

Emancipations. The same 19th century that saw the rise of factory labor also saw more sweeping attacks on slavery and serfdom, and there was some irony in this combination. Britain effectively abolished the Atlantic slave trade in 1808, though some exchanges persisted. Slavery was abolished in the British colonies after 1833. Russia abolished serfdom through a tsarist edict in 1861, the United States ended most slavery two years later. Abolitionism would later spread to Brazil and Cuba. European imperialists worked to end slavery in Africa. Remaining slave systems, particularly in the Middle East, continued into the 20th century, but ultimately all were ended at least officially. Here was a historic global change in some of the most traditional labor systems of the Agricultural Age.

Causes. Continuing abolition movements, increasingly attacking slavery on a global basis, help explain the new developments. So did beliefs that slavery and serfdom impeded labor mobility and so retarded industrialization (a

key factor in Russia's emancipation, after the Crimean War ended in defeat by industrial powers). In some cases, slave rebellions contributed. But it was also important to note that global population growth provided alternative sources of wage labor, and often cheap wage labor. Immigrants often had little bargaining power. Indenture contracts or other arrangements, while not lifelong, limited bargaining power – for example, for many Asian immigrants. Other devices, like company stores that put workers in lifelong debt, limited the free market as well. In Africa, for example in the Belgian Congo, physical punishments forced many workers into the mines, in conditions little different from those in slavery. At the same time, emancipations did not always bring systematic improvements for the former slaves – though legal freedom was truly significant. Some had little access to land and/or, as in the southern United States, encountered new forms of racial oppression. Assessing the long-term, global effects of the sweeping legal changes in labor systems is a complex task.

The Contemporary Period. Continued efforts to restrict some labor freedom marked the past 100 years in world history. Some slavery has persisted, though estimates of numbers are difficult. Some children were seized for work or sexual exploitation, often exported to different parts of the world. Other societies pressed immigrant workers by controlling their passports, not only firing them but deporting them if they did not perform well or protested. This was true in parts of the Middle East, and also in some United States Pacific colonies. A second important trend, however, involved efforts, particularly in communist societies, to create alternative labor systems. Many peasants were pressed into collective farms in Russia, where they worked for wages but under tight government control. The expansion of factory labor was accompanied by efforts to provide fuller welfare protection, including state-sponsored vacations. On the whole most of the alternative systems were reduced or dismantled as part of fuller participation in the global economy – as in Russia after the collapse of communism in 1989. A third trend, affecting even more workers, was simply the spread of industrialization. Growing factory working classes, created from former peasant migrating to cities, marked key social trends from Mexico to China in the later 20th century. In some cases, foreign companies looked to some of these areas for cheap labor, but the wider process of industrialization was more important. In many cases, the results duplicated some of the problems of early industrial labor that had cropped up earlier elsewhere; also, low-wage competition might threaten jobs or worsen conditions in more established industrial regions. Here were key sources of debate about the labor impact of globalization. Finally, in many societies and to some extent globally, reform efforts, promoted internationally by organizations such as the International Labor Office (former under the League of Nations, now operating under the United Nations), encouraged greater regulation of hours of work, limits on child labor and other protections.

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Villagers and Lords in Eastern Europe, 1300-1800. By Markus Cerman (Palgrave MacMillan, 2012).

Confronting Historical Paradigms: Peasants, Labor, and the Capitalist World System. By Frederick Cooper, Florencia E. Mallon, Allen F. Isaacman, Steve J. Stern, and William Roseberry. (University of Wisconsin Press, 1993).

From Alienation to Addiction: Modern American Work in Global Historical Perspective (U.S. History in International). By Peter N. Stearns (Paradigm Publishers, 2008).

Discussion

1. What was the impact of agriculture on the nature of work?
2. What is meant by a peasant economy? What was the nature of peasant labor?
3. Why did slavery spread in the Mediterranean region? What was it used for? How did it change over time?
4. What are the similarities and differences between serfdom in Europe and slavery in the Atlantic World compare?
5. How did early modern Japan organize labor? How did culture impact this division of labor?
6. What has the role of the state been in organizing labor systems? Have there been major regional differences? Have there been major changes over time?
7. Did the end of most slavery and serfdom improve the lives of workers?
8. What was the impact of industrialization on work? What were the main new problems, and what responses developed?
9. What are the main labor trends under industrialization?