

Footnote: The Employee And The Slave

Most people today seem to believe slavery to be a thing of the oppressive past. But a closer look at the capitalist free market system soon shows slavery to be alive and well and oppressing all, except of course the favoured few. [PDF]

The Slave

A slave is unconditionally bound to his master. He is not free to leave his master's estate without his master's permission. He must do his master's bidding at all times.

In return, his master is obliged to furnish him with all his needs of life. His master must do this for as long as he is his slave. His master will be aware of the physiological fact that if he does not feed his slave, then his slave cannot work. If he feeds his slave well, then his slave will work well. If he feeds his slave badly, then his slave will work badly.

In a society based on the master/slave system, a master is obliged to provide his slave with what is, in effect, life-long economic security. If the master ever expels his slave from his service, then the slave is free.

If then he be captured and enslaved by another master, then he receives his needs of life. If no master wants him, then he is unemployed and destitute. Nevertheless, in the world of the past, in which the population was much lower, and in which many lands were as yet unclaimed by civilisation, the rejected slave always had the option to go to a land where he could commandeer some virgin ground and thus - albeit through much tribulation - turn his own labour into his own needs of life.

The Employee

An employee is not unconditionally bound to his employer. He is bound only by the terms and conditions of his contract of employment. He is essentially free to leave one employer and join another of his choosing.

In return for his labour, his employer must pay him a wage. How this compares with the needs of life supplied in kind to a slave by his master depends on the ups and downs of a free market. The employee may fare better than the slave when the labour market favours the seller, but worse when it favours the buyer. Under capitalism, the labour market always [favours the buyer](#), namely the employer.

False Freedom

Nevertheless, despite his market disadvantage which tends to drive his wage down to [the minimum amount](#) able to sustain him, the employee does at first appear to be free. This, however, is merely an illusion.

Like the slave, the employee is dispossessed of the terrestrial resources he needs to transform his own labour into his own needs of life. In this most fundamental matter, employee and slave are equally deprived. Consequently, like the slave, the employee *absolutely needs* his employer in order to gain his needs of life, without which he and his dependants will surely die.

But no employer is actually obliged to employ him. Furthermore, all employers within his national economy have no collective obligation to employ him. He has no tangible [right to employment](#). So if no employer wants him, he is denied the opportunity to turn his labour into his needs of life.

Hence the modern subject of the capitalist state is still a slave. He is not free. He may not be the slave of any individual master, but he definitely is the slave of all masters as an economic collective. The ancient slave was perhaps like an electron permanently bound within the shell of a single atom. An employee is like a 'free' electron within the lattice of a metal. It is free to roam and exchange places with other like electrons in any atom within the lattice. But it is still firmly bound to the lattice as a whole.

In past eras of slavery, masters actively captured slaves to work for them. In today's world of free market capitalism, employers reject and exclude the unemployed. To my mind, a rejected employee is in a worse state than a rejected slave. The unemployed have nowhere to go and no means of getting there. They can't afford to travel. Though the law may leave them free to go and seek their fortunes, economic deprivation keeps them bound just as surely as would martial law.

Modern corporate employment is simply slavery by another name. It is still slavery - only in a slightly less obvious form. From the [point of view](#) of the average individual, the form of slavery he is under matters little. All that makes a difference is whether he is in the service of a good master or a bad one; a benign employer or an oppressive one. Certainly a good master is better than a bad employer.

Conclusion

A slave is simply one who is [denied sovereign possession](#) of the means of transforming his work into the necessities of life. In today's economy this description fits most of us. Whether one is called slave or employee is a question of mode not principle. A slave is provided with his keep in kind: an employee is paid his keep in cash. A slave is bound to his master by force of law: an employee is bound to his master by force of economics. Law lets the employee choose his master: economics takes away that choice. Legally he's employed: economically he's a slave. But whether slave or employee, he must work when his master tells him, where his master tells him, and in the way his master tells him; no matter how inconvenient, disruptive or harmful this may be to him or his family and their quality of life.

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