

(Un)Freedom in Global Perspective

Actors – Perceptions – Agencies



Innsbruck, 3–4 February 2025

Volume 37 of the "Innsbrucker Historische Studien" and the preliminary workshop in Innsbruck address the perceptions, agency, and strategies of people who in research have been characterized as *unfree*, especially in connection with slavery, captivity, serfdom, and other forms of oppression. The aim of the workshop is to undertake a critical examination of the historical analysis of *(un)freedom*s, locating the topics within an open geographical framework (local, regional, global histories) and chronologically with a focus on the modern age (c. 1450–1920). The workshop encourages participants to submit contributions that overcome a dichotomous juxtaposition of *freedom* and *unfreedom* and a static idea of these concepts in order to facilitate a more nuanced understanding of different agencies.

The following questions may be helpful to shed light on the various nuances between *freedom* and *unfreedom* from a global perspective: What characterizes *(un)freedom* of individual actors or collectives? How is this *(un)freedom* perceived? Which strategies are used to render these individuals and collectives *(un)free* or to portray them as such? What possibilities and strategies do individuals and communities find to revolt against this *unfreedom*, to break out of it, or to escape it? Which effects does *(un)freedom* have on personal and collective identities? Can *unfreedom* in certain situations and contexts also become a resource from which people might obtain personal, social, economic, or political capital? Do slavery and other forms of *unfreedom* and bondage really mean "social death"¹ for those affected or can the status or attribution of *freedom* and *unfreedom* be changed? How, when, and why can transitions from *freedom* to *unfreedom* and vice versa be made? Are such transitions temporary or permanent, linear or abrupt, reversible or irreversible? Which forms of interaction and conflicts can be found between *free* and *unfree* people and between people under different forms of *unfreedom* (e.g. enslaved Africans, European indentured servants, and Asian *coolie* workers on the plantations)? Is *(un)freedom* a permanent condition or can it be interrupted temporarily? In which forms does dependence persist after the transition from *unfreedom* to *freedom* (e.g. in the case of escaped prisoners, ransomed slaves, exchanged hostages)? Which correlations exist between *(un)freedom* and decisions about the own body and lifestyle?

Topics may include but are not limited to:

- Slaveries (Transatlantic slavery, Mediterranean slavery, Trans-Saharan slave trade, slavery in the Indian Ocean World, Intra-African slavery, slavery in the Ottoman Empire, indigenous slaveries, ...) and human trafficking; agency of enslaved people in different geographical, social, and structural contexts (plantation slavery, domestic slavery, palace slavery, forced sex work, ...)
- Escaping *unfreedom*: *runaways* (runaway slaves), *freedmen* (manumitted and ransomed slaves or former slaves who achieved their freedom through reforms and revolutions), *freedom seekers*, *maroons*, *cimarrones*, escaped prisoners

¹ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death. A Comparative Study*, London 1982.

- Hostage-taking, kidnapping, hijacking, and war captivity (hostage-taking in the context of political, dynastic and religious conflicts, extortion of ransom, exchanging of hostages and prisoners of war, maritime hijacking, piracy, privateering, war captivity, negotiations for the ransom, release and exchange of hostages/prisoners)
- Debt bondage, pawnship, indentured servitude (within Europe; indentured servitude and colonialism; continuities with indigenous forms of labor, e.g. *encomienda* and *mita*; *blackbirding* in the Pacific Ocean)
- Serfdom, servitude, bonded labor, corvée, robot, manorialism (e.g. Habsburg Empire, Russian Empire, Ottoman Empire)
- Imprisonment (reasons for imprisonment, prison conditions, forms of coercion, prisons and penal labor houses as economic enterprises, death sentences)
- Religiously motivated forms of *(un)freedom* (e.g. hermitage, enclosure, extreme forms of asceticism)
- other forms of *(un)freedom* ...

We invite applicants to **submit an abstract** (max. 350 words) and a **short CV** (max. 150 words) to florian.ambach@uibk.ac.at **by 20 June 2024**. We also encourage PhD students and early career researchers to contribute in the workshop and the volume. The workshop will take place in person at the University of Innsbruck. However, participation in the workshop can also take place online. Accommodation costs will be covered by the University of Innsbruck if possible.

Conference date: 3–4 February 2025

Conference languages: German & English

Organization: Florian Ambach and Elena Taddei (Department of History and European Ethnology, University of Innsbruck)