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Labour and Coercion in the Nordic Region in the Early Modern Period: Connections, Ambiguities, Practices

Johan Heinsen[a], Vilhelm Vilhelmsson[b] and Hanne Østhus[c]

[a]Department of Politics and Society, Aalborg Universitet, Aalborg, Denmark; [b]Institute of Research Centres, University of Iceland, Reykjavik, Iceland; [c]Department of Historical and Classical Studies, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway

ABSTRACT

This introduction discusses the constitutive role played by various practices of coercion within a range of labour relations across the Nordic region in the early modern period. In recent years a growing body of international literature has worked to re-conceptualize histories of labour coercion. Current trends in global labour history have emphasized the interrelational nature of labour regimes, eschewing traditional boundaries of free and unfree labour, productive and unproductive labour, wage labour and unpaid labour, and focused rather on the entangled history of labour and coercion in its various guises. Based on a critical discussion of the teleological frameworks and essentialized analytical categories that have largely characterized the historiography of labour in many of the Nordic countries, we argue for shifting the focus of attention to study the actual practices of labour and coercion in order to establish a more inclusive, contextual and historicized historiography of Nordic labour.

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Introduction

In the early modern period (ca. 16th–19th centuries) practices of compulsion played a constitutive role in a range of labour relations across the Nordic countries. They might be distinguished by varying modalities of coercion ranging from outright slavery to prison labour to serfdom to compulsory service. Historians have studied these subjects for decades but have yet to systematically explore how practices of labour coercion intersected and overlapped. This special issue aims to initiate that discussion by exploring a few (among many) possible zones of overlap. Traditionally, labour coercion has been treated as a subject belonging to specific historiographies, such as agricultural history, military history or colonial history, each with their separate interpretative frameworks and chronological signifiers. With its enthralment to the male proletarian, traditional labour history has done little to bridge these distances.[1] The resulting fragmentation means that the wide-ranging prevalence of varied and complex practices of labour coercion across the early modern labour market has been neglected, if not outright misinterpreted.

CONTACT Hanne Østhus hanne.osthus@ntnu.no

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Moreover, the few studies that have attempted to leave the historiographical siloes have favoured perspectives that interpret normative and legal frameworks of labour coercion principally in their relation to arenas of religion, politics, or the economy, rather than considering coercion as part of lived and contested relations.[2]

This special issue will address this gap by examining labour coercion in practices of everyday behaviour. It grows out of a session organized by Vilhelm Vilhelmsson at the European Labour History Network conference in Amsterdam in September 2019 entitled 'Ambiguous boundaries: Varieties of unfree labour in the Nordic countries in the early modern period'. Following the conference, the participants became involved in the COST Action-funded project Worlds of Related Coercions in Work (WORCK), the purpose of which is to shift the focus of labour history by studying 'the persistence and transformations of coercion and bondage across gender orders, geographic regions and historical eras'.[3] An online seminar held under the auspices of WORCK in November 2021 gathered the contributors to the special issue in further discussion on the topic which led to the articles contained within the issue. They cover a wide range of topics from various parts of the Nordic region. In this regard, we operate with a historicized version of the term 'Nordic'. It includes all geographical regions that were linked politically to the kingdoms of Sweden and Denmark-Norway in the early modern period regardless of the longevity of those linkages and regardless of present-day nation-states.[4] The introduction serves as a theoretical intervention in Nordic labour history, rather than an all-encompassing overview of its historiography, and is limited by our fields of knowledge and expertise. This explains the relative lack of discussion on the labour histories of Finland, Greenland, Åland and the Faroe Isles.[5]

By shifting the focus of attention to study the actual *practices* of labour and coercion, as well as forms of resistance to such practices, recent research in the Nordic region has suggested multifarious connections as well as ambiguities within and between divergent forms of coerced labour.[6] The Special Issue will build on and advance this scholarship. It will also take advantage of a growing international literature re-conceptualizing histories of labour coercion. Current trends in global labour history have emphasized the interrelational nature of various labour regimes, eschewing traditional boundaries of free and unfree labour, productive and unproductive labour, wage labour and unpaid labour etc., and focused rather on the entangled history of labour and coercion in its various guises.[7] This adds to the dismantling of the binary between productive and unproductive work by feminist and gender historians, which had been a postulate within economics since the eighteenth century.[8] This research has abandoned the idea of an evolution from bonded to free wage labour beginning with the Industrial Revolution, and the idea that 'modernization' entails the absence of coercion. Current developments clearly demonstrate that contemporary societies and economies are far from devoid of labour coercion.[9] These recent trends, therefore, place coercion as a starting point of labour histories.

The frameworks of older histories of labour were built on the notion of a clear separation between, for instance, wage labour and slavery, or tributary and convict labour. [10] We might think of this as a kind of analytical essentialism. For instance, the assumption of stable and distinct labour relations allows for an argument that some forms can be labelled as 'forced labour' while others are not, which in turn allows for a narrative of modernization as a transition towards 'free labour'. The emergence of global labour history has facilitated a sustained debate about such analytical practices.

Part of the emergent field has hinged on broadening the categories.[11] While emphasizing overlap, this approach, ultimately, remains orientated towards an analytically defined labour relation that might be measured in terms of 'degrees of coercion', which, consequently, produces a 'spectrum' at whose two extremes we find slavery at one end and modern wage labour on the other. Others have argued for a more radically contextualizing and empirical approach in order 'to study modalities of domination and dependence, allowing for a more articulated conceptualization of social formations across time and space'.[12] This implies a thorough rejection of the analytical value of beginning from a binary divide between free and unfree. The alternative is to start from the study of individual sites, institutions, experiences, and trajectories and to insist on a complexity that implies both (spatial and temporal) entanglements and historical specificity. In this view, coercion can be understood as an assemblage of generative practices that help produce asymmetry in labour relations, but also produce more than just a labourer working for others. At a given time, the practices that are part of coercion might include elements that are both ancient and new, or even entirely specific to a particular site. Think for instance of the practice of branding which has existed throughout recorded history but was in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Denmark-Norway combined with chaining (another ancient practice), incarceration (at that time a much more recent practice) and forms of systematic recording of appearances (just emerging) in a highly specific way. This set of practices served the needs of the military state and its efforts to render convict workers identifiable when they escaped. Thus, such practices can be understood as modular, while the important question becomes which processes produce a specific assemblage of coercive practices in a given site. Understood in a processual perspective, coercion might be connected to multiple, converging or diverging processes of immobilization, punishment, valorization, state- or empire-building etc.

Further, while this focus on the processes that produce a specific assemblage of coercion often implies the continual production of a 'category' of worker ('servant', 'convict', 'tenant' etc.), a contextualizing perspective shifts focus from such states conceived as abstract and stable and seeks, instead, to historicize their specific and evolving meaning. This historicization hinges on a reading of sources that is attentive to a broad range of voices. Crucially, there were more than just elites articulating what it meant to be a worker. And while sources never afford the historian an unfiltered 'subaltern' voice, they often testify to the presence and impact of such voices in past realities. The focus on processes implies that negotiations and conflicts always need to be factored in. Workers were not passive recipients of their own subjugation, but actors who contested the social worlds in which they lived and worked, helping to produce and alter those worlds. Understanding the 'generative' element to practices of coercion hinges on taking their tactics, individual or collective, into account.[13] Coercion should not be taken as a simple placeholder for 'structure' set against 'agency' – but rather as a productive configuration that is shaped by multiple actors, including workers themselves.

Challenging teleological frameworks tied to understandings of modernization is particularly pertinent in a Nordic context, where the narrative of a Nordic 'Sonderweg' in the form of the emergence of the Nordic welfare states in the twentieth century is powerful.[14] Labour, through strong union organization and models of collective bargaining, has played a prominent role in that context. This history of the 'success' of free, politically

organized labour meant that Nordic labour history became very much a historiography focused on industrial wage labour, neglecting the period before 1850.

This special issue abandons this view of work and labour relations in the early modern period as an ahistorical precursor to the 'proper' history of the 'rise of labour'. Instead, it tackles the diverse forms of coercion that defined labour in the period. That also means that it leaves behind inherited notions of exceptionalism. In certain respects, the Nordic region might even have had harsher labour regulations compared to many other European countries. Adscription among Danish farmers is a well-known expression of this, but regulations on compulsory service in Iceland, Sweden and Norway, for example, also seem to have been particularly restrictive compared to comparative regulations in any number of other European regions.[15] Similarly, recent research has revealed how the Danish state by the seventeenth century had an unusually centralized prison system with pools of convicts ready to be used when particular labour needs arose.[16] Finally, traditional frameworks resting on the misconception of a benevolent form of Scandinavian colonialism has become apparent as a form of racist self-adulation.[17]

Perhaps the most advanced re-conceptualizing of the meanings of coercion in the Nordic Region comes from the studies of medieval historians who, unencumbered by the tantalizing pull of the factory floor and the male proletarian, have thoroughly investigated free and unfree labour, and among other things, shown how the idea of a mostly free peasantry during the medieval period is a fiction that can be traced back to the eighteenth century.[18] With the exception of the recent surge of studies on colonial slavery (though still often framed as a historiographical niche), the early modern period is in dire need of similar revisiting. That rewriting starts from the awareness that legal, social, and cultural distinctions between the various forms of coerced labour in the early modern Nordic region were often ambiguous and unclear, with repeated efforts by the State to enhance regulatory regimes of labour relations adding further entanglements. These connected and overlapping regimes of labour created opportunities which working people could – and did – make use of, which in turn emphasizes the importance of studying the everyday practices of coercive labour relations and their multifarious ambiguities.

In order to identify such ambiguities, we propose to abandon conceptualizations of 'coerced labour' resting on legal definitions of enslavement, conscription or imprisonment. Instead, we embrace contextual and historical understandings of labour coercion. In doing so we follow global labour historian Marcel van der Linden who proposed dissecting coerced labour into specific 'moments' of coercion.[19] A worker might enter a legal and nominally free labour relation but find him- or herself forced to submit to the discipline and authority of their employers or landlords, or they find themselves forced to change their labour relations by local authorities on the basis of differing interpretations of labour legislation, as Carolina Uppenberg, Peeter Tammisto and Vilhelm Vilhelmsson discuss in their contributions to this special issue. In contrast, an imprisoned labourer might enjoy legal or illegal autonomies through the nominally coerced labour in a prison as discussed by Johan Heinsen and Emilie Luther Valentin in their contributions. Or, as demonstrated in Hanne Østhus' essay, the trafficking of people from the Americas, where different labour regimes were emerging, at times forced Europeans to consider the specificities of localized ideas on labour.

This need for contextual understandings serves to highlight why labour coercion benefits from a study of actual practices. By extension, this also means that the study of labour coercion is intrinsically linked to a wider social history of agency.

Labour coercion in Nordic historiographies of the early modern period

In historiographies of the early modern Nordic countries, labour and labour coercion have often been disconnected conceptually. In some areas, historiographical nationalism has added to the development of specific traditions with their own interpretative frameworks and emphases. In Danish rural history, the question of *corvée* has dominated, and continues to do so, while compulsory service has been a more prominent subject in Swedish, Icelandic, and Norwegian historiographies. In all these places the living conditions, including labour obligations, of crofters have been addressed, although with differing intensities and at different times. In Norwegian historiography, for example, crofters have been a popular theme of research since the 1970s but that popularity has recently abated somewhat while the opposite is the case for Sweden.[20] In military history, the systems of conscription and recruitment deployed by the military states have enjoyed continuous attention, though the burden placed on the general population plays a more pronounced role in Norwegian and Swedish historiographies than elsewhere.[21] Historians focusing on colonial entanglements, especially in the Atlantic, have studied Scandinavian involvements in slavery and the slave trade, but have remained mostly sequestered in their distinct (uncharacteristically international) historiographical niche.[22] Elsewhere, labour coercion has been a central theme in smaller historiographies such as those focused on urban production, systems of poor relief or institutions of punishments.[23] Yet, despite this ubiquity, any broader understanding of how labour coercion shaped social relations in the period has largely failed to emerge. The insights on the centrality of labour coercion produced in studies of distinct social groups or localities have remained disparate. The reasons for this are manifold, but a few deserve consideration.

While labour has long been a prominent theme for scholars working on the period, the period has not been of equal interest to labour historians. Rather, labour historians have for a long time concentrated almost exclusively on the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, on processes of modernization, industrialization and the coming of the labour movement as a historical actor shaping both factory floor and political arenas.[24] That labour historians have had this bias is not surprising. Across the North, the organization of labour proved decisive in shaping society on multiple levels. Further, labour historians in the region have enjoyed a close relationship to the labour movement and a narrative of struggle, but also of triumph.[25] Unfortunately this meant that other kinds of workers, in other times, were seen as much less interesting. Even as labour historians began expanding their interests beyond the male proletarian, they tended to expand outwards from the factory gates, shifting their attention to those, often gendered, relations that were part of the same social world, but often fit less clearly in the traditional narrative of a unionizing male industrial worker.[26] Diachronic perspectives are much less prevalent and the few ambitious attempts at synthesis across periods and experiments in writing labour histories of what came before the political organization of labour have predominantly been written from the perspective of what came later, producing narratives centred on what might be identified as forerunners to organized labour.[27]

This bias is tied to the prevalence of narratives of modernization, especially those concerning the coming of Nordic welfare states with their purportedly universal principles. Undoubtedly, the Nordic 'Sonderweg' owes to strong union organization and distinct models of collective bargaining. By contrast, the states of early modern Scandinavia have been seen as oppressive, both politically and socially – and fundamentally not shaped by the interests of workers. As a result, the history of the nineteenth century becomes one of radical discontinuity, allowing historians of labour to represent the early modern social world as something fundamentally other than modernity and to especially portray the latter half of the nineteenth century as a historical break between the 'old world' of unfree labour and the 'new world' of the self-conscious working-class. Already biased towards organized labour, this notion of discontinuity afforded labour historians with the comfort that they did not have to consider the early modern more than a prehistory that was sufficiently different that it did not have to be studied as part of the same picture as what came after.[28] Typically, labour coercion came to live in that other world, while the pressures on the modern worker were political and economical and were therefore compatible with or even central to a history of labour organization.

The dissociation became easier because social and economic historians tended to adopt universalized legal definitions of status in asserting such difference. The 'free' proletarian could be contrasted to the legally bound subjects of feudal social relations, or to the abstracted image of the black slave. In the interest of crafting taxonomies, historians have used a universalized understanding of slavery, derived from the Atlantic theatre, to contrast the statuses of workers. In some instances, this instals a clear conceptual dichotomy between 'slave' and 'free' (and by extension often 'old' and 'new', as well as 'black' and 'white').[29] In other cases, the de-historicized notion of a black slave living outside of any particular historical process of enslavement was installed at the far end of a spectrum with the unionized and self-emancipated worker at the other end and a spectrum of positions in between, in which certain historical actors could be asserted to be more or less like slaves.[30] This essentialising abstraction of labour relations, and of slavery especially, is far from peculiar to Nordic historiographies, but has perhaps been especially easy to operate, because black workers were, until quite recently, not understood as integral to any project of building modernity. Thus, already out of history, slavery could be divested of meaning and rendered as an analytical archetype.

Together, this conceptual matrix has worked to disengage many labour historians from questions of early modern labour coercion. Crudely speaking, they have left it to specialists of other periods and their social relations and done so, in the firm understanding, that they were writing narratives about something inherently different. The historiography of servant labour is a poignant example, where many studies have been more concerned with its role in demographic life-cycle patterns of marriage and childbirth, of cultural ideas on family, education, and household discipline, on citizenship and the maintenance of social order and continuity. With a few notable exceptions, much less attention has been paid to servants as workers and on service as an integral part of the organization of labour in the Nordic countries in the early modern era and the array of coercive practices that, possibly, undergirded service.[31]

Just as critically, biases towards specific subjects, narratives of modernization and essentialized understandings of status have provided frameworks for the specialized historiographies of the early modern. There, however, it is also possible to identify

a series of parallel shifts in the role played by labour and coercion. In various ways, these shifts have undone much of the rationale for seeing labour coercion as belonging to specific historiographies that are largely divorced from labour history. It is worth considering a few examples that inform the contributions to this volume specifically.

The historiographies of rural social relations provide an example of specialized fields in which coerced labour has been integral, yet strangely confined. The Danish historiography is perhaps the most extreme case of this. Traditionally, Danish historians have focused on the farmer, who was in most cases a tenant to an estate whose owner, in turn, held legal rights to discipline and extract labour from the rural population. Effectively, tenancy entailed *corvée* labour with varying intensities across Denmark and the King's duchies. Elsewhere in the region, independent farmers were a lot more common, and where farm tenancy existed, rents were often paid in money or kind. In the Danish historiography, the legal construction of adscription added further interest in the coercive aspects of the relation between tenant and lord. Adscription, which came into being in 1733 and ended in 1788, built on earlier arrangements to formally bind the male rural population to the estate on which they grew up. At the same time, they came to form a conscripted militia available as a kind of reserve to the state. The resulting immobilization has framed discussions on whether the Danish peasantry should be understood as 'serfs' reminiscent of models common to parts of Central and Eastern Europe.[32] Further, the liberation of the peasant forms a canonized part of national historical narratives in which the farmer becomes a political factor in the nineteenth century and whose self-managed labour forms the backbone of Denmark's export economy.[33] Though not tied directly to a narrative of 'liberation', the political ascendance of the peasantry also provides the grounds for a bias in other Nordic historiographies towards those who owned (or came to own) land. In this way, historiographies of rural society have hinged on a celebratory notion of modernization in which the independent farmer is the main protagonist and in which the coercion faced on his path gains primacy.[34] While this is a quintessentially liberal narrative, traditional Marxist understandings of modes of production also constructed the social relations of rural communities based on the question of landownership and, in a Danish context, therefore place the peasantry centre-stage in the historical analysis.[35]

These historiographical biases still linger. For instance, Danish scholars discussing adscription often remain fixed on the tenant farmer as coerced by the estate lord. Yet, social historians of the rural past have, over the last 40 years, worked to bring in a wider set of actors and social dynamics. This has taken many forms. Some have focused on the labour obligations of tenant farmers and found that they were rarely as taxing as assumed, in large part because the tenant farmer himself often did not perform this labour but sent his servants instead, a process which highlights the interrelational aspect of early modern labour coercion.[36] Others have carried out extensive prosopographical research finding that, for most, the end of adscription did not usher in a period of social mobility.[37] Such insights rest on a general revision: there were other, often more important, lines of demarcation than that between farmer and estate lord. In many instances, the farmer was himself an employer to servants and day labourers. He was a head of a household, and therefore held the right to chastise its members, including the above-mentioned employees. Fundamentally, this meant that the social histories that started to

emerge from the 1980s and onwards focused on a wider range of relations and that the old protagonist was no longer (only) the subjugated party.[38] Rural servants especially have come into view as a subject of social history paving the way for narratives that have focused on continuities in practices into the nineteenth century.[39] This means that the coercion exerted is no longer tied only to the labour performed for the landowner, but extends to the relations of the household.[40]

The household, household labour and household authority have received considerable attention in all the Nordic countries.[41] Much of this research has been influenced by gender history and has increasingly been studied from the vantage point of practices, exemplified clearly by the verb-oriented method promoted by the Gender and Work project led by Maria Ågren at Uppsala University.[42] Thus, the tradition of studying rural relations on the basis of the legal status of the peasant is (in varying tempos) giving way to scholarship open to the variegated practices and relations that made the early modern economic, social and cultural worlds tick. The contributions to this special issue follow this trajectory.

Another prominent analytical trend tied to the abovementioned interest in the early modern household has stressed the importance of Lutheranism as a religious and cultural frame and set of coercive practices. Lutheranism saw the household as one of society's three estates and a fundamental building block that scaled to a number of social relations, including that between farmer and lord, and even subject and monarch.[43] Crucially, these understandings of the household naturalized disciplinary measures across a range of settings, but also meant that authorities were imbued with a dual religious obligation to both care for and coerce the members of their household. In fact, care and coercion were two elements of the same coin, as demonstrated by the early modern concept of 'tugt'.[44] Cultural historians have stressed these understandings as the basis of institutions such as poorhouses and prison workhouses which sought both to punish and care for their inmates.[45] Some have even argued that Lutheranism formed the foundation of the emergence of the Nordic welfare state by creating and institutionalizing a culture of trust in state authority.[46] While this argument can be taken to an unfortunate extreme in which thoroughly coercive practices are interpreted as benevolent, there is merit to the attempt at historicization of coercion and the meanings it carried.[47] Scholars should take seriously the way in which the legitimation of labour coercion embedded such practices in relations that were about more than just the extraction of labour. However, the notion that Lutheranism formed the basis of some sort of Nordic exceptionalism is challenged by the fact that the institutions highlighted as particularly Lutheran, such as hospitals and prison workhouses, had parallels across all of Christendom, and in some instances even further abroad, in the early modern period. Paternalism married to statecraft spurred on entanglements of care and coercion all over the early modern world.[48]

The turns in the historiographies on rural relations and the emergence of the household as an object of study in social and cultural history, have been the result of ongoing scholarly debates sustained by the relative size of the scholarly communities working on these subjects. Yet, the theme of labour coercion has also emerged in a number of smaller historiographies relevant to this volume. This includes the study of military labour.[49] For instance, Danish scholars have in the last two decades studied the worlds of mercenary soldiers contractually bound through the mechanism known as 'capitulation' and constituting the lowest strata of early modern urban society. Interestingly, this tradition has

foregrounded mechanisms of labour coercion, but has not connected such practices to other ways of creating and binding a workforce.[50] Meanwhile, in the historiography of punishment, the question of labour coercion has until very recently been pushed to the background by a pervasive Foucauldian influence that focused on technologies and discourses of discipline, but somehow failed to take actual labour into account.[51] However, a handful of recent studies has bucked this trend to produce histories of early modern punishments in which labour coercion has returned as a focal point. The contributions of Heinsen and Valentin to this volume are part of this turn.[52]

Evidently, some of the historiographies touched upon have turned slowly in their rejection of older biases, while others have turned suddenly. Perhaps the best example of the latter is colonial history. There one witnesses a dramatic shift away from older biases, and an emphatic and concerted historicization of coercion as a result. Where colonial history was anything but a vibrant tradition in the Nordic countries 15 years ago, it has taken an increasingly prominent role in Denmark and Sweden especially. In Denmark, part of the recent interest owes to the centennial of the Danish sale of its Caribbean possessions that transpired in 2017 and ignited a surge of interest in colonial matters and in the Transatlantic slave trade especially, both inside and outside of academia. Thus a wave of research has largely supplanted an older historiography in which slavery was condemned as an evil, but in which the enslaved themselves were typically only studied as figures in accounts of trade and commodities or as subjects of administration.[53] While this older historiography always acknowledged coercion, the subjects studied were, effectively, the coercers. The new historiography follows international trends and, often, puts the enslaved centre-stage.[54] As a result, the colonies have started to come into being as historical worlds in their own right. When a group of prominent Danish scholars put out a national history of Denmark's colonial past in 2017 it was with the express aim of putting the colonial subjects themselves in the foreground.[55] The result is, again, a history that hinges on a shift from legal and economic understandings of coercion to one about multi-dimensional social relations in part created through practices of coercion. Effectively, Transatlantic slavery and plantation economies are being historicized as lived social realities. This includes considering the agency of the enslaved to shape those realities.

Often scholars have emphasized the peculiarity of colonial society, something that is underpinned by the specialization of the research area, populated by scholars who often work exclusively on colonial societies. This means that the historicization of slavery has often not happened in dialogue with the ongoing historicization of other experiences of labour coercion, either in Scandinavia or in other Nordic colonial settings, such as in Greenland and Sápmi.[56] Inroads are being made, however, for a more integrative history where connections, or lack of such, are explored explicitly. Examinations of connections have a longer history when it comes to investigations of trade, investment and economic impact. More recently, scholars have also tied colonial and metropolitan histories together via the prism of consumption.[57] However, we argue that there has been less focus on labour coercion that included both colonial and metropolitan social practices, although there are a few notable exceptions.[58] We propose that focusing on labour coercion rather than on an a priori difference between a 'slave' and everyone else, can help further both the push to historicize colonial society and to integrate the histories of colonial social realities into broader social histories.

Importantly, the history of Greenland and Northern Scandinavia has also increasingly been framed as colonial history.[59] Substantial work has been done to investigate how and what people lived off in these areas and the effect the intrusion of Scandinavian people and states had on these livelihoods. For the Sami in what came to be Norway, for example, tax exemptions for the Non-Sami along the coast from the seventeenth century and the inland from the mid eighteenth-century along with immigration from the south affected what work the Sami could perform and where they could perform it, although there were substantial differences from place to place and over time.[60] The far north, Finnmark, was, like the Danish West Indies, a place for deportation of prison labourers. Thus, in 1763, a total of seventeen Icelandic prisoners, male and female, from the various prisons in Copenhagen were granted release and regained their honour on the condition of being transported to Finnmark as part of a repopulation strategy for the fisheries of this territory.[61] How often such strategies were used is, however, still unclear.[62]

The state of these historiographies suggests the potential of foregrounding labour and practices of labour coercion to build new understandings of social relations in the early modern period.

The contributions of this special issue

Everyday practices lie at the heart of Vilhelm Vilhelmsson's investigation of rural labour in early nineteenth-century Iceland. Vilhelmsson challenges the picture presented in much previous research of compulsory service, *vistarband*, as severe and rigid. Instead, Vilhelmsson argues, first, that while the laws and regulations on labour certainly included coercive elements, they also contained previously ignored ambiguities, opening up for a degree of flexibility. Secondly, through an exploration of two specific cases where authorities alleged that two men were illegal casual labourers, Vilhelmsson shows how the rural poor themselves formulated arguments where they embedded what should be permissible in a discourse of moral obligation that would allow them to sidestep compulsory service in order to care for themselves and their families. In sum, these findings lead Vilhelmsson to argue in favour of a bottom-up approach that prioritizes a focus on practices when studying labour and social relations of the past.

In the next paper, we stay in the countryside but move to Sweden and the Swedish crofter institution from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. Carolina Uppenberg underscores the intermediate position inhabited by crofters: they were obliged to perform corvée labour for the landowner but were also independent householders, circumstances that set them apart both from live-in servants and Marx's 'double free workers'. Uppenberg specifically investigates three aspects of the crofter institution: land agreements, labour agreements, and the physical integrity of crofters. She finds that gender was of particular importance, first, because the access of the landless poor to a croft privileged the married couple, and second because marriage complicated the right of the landowner to demand labour. When it comes to the third aspect, the crofters' physical integrity, Uppenberg observes that crofters were subject to some of the same demands of obedience from their landowners and masters as servants and that such demands were not repealed before the twentieth century. This again leads her to question the narrative of nineteenth and twentieth centuries as the story of liberalization of labour and modernization.

In the third paper of this special issue, Peeter Tammisto also focuses on the realm of the Swedish state but takes us further east; to runaway serfs in seventeenth-century Estland and Livland. This territory, which approximates today's Estonia, was characterized by a version of serfdom that relied on *adscripti glebae*, a provision that legally bound peasants to a particular estate. Serfs, however, ran away, and Tammisto points to a number of reasons why peasants would choose this route, such as abuse, war, epidemics, famine, avoiding punishment for crime, or to seek out land better suited for farming or with concessions when it came to labour dues and rents. In the 1680s, Tammisto shows how the king attempted to liberate the crown's peasants, but the nobility was strongly opposed and *adscipiti glebae* remained in force. Tammisto argues that running away was a type of peasant agency. He uses court records of runaway serf extradition cases to show how the nobility denied peasant capacity for agency by ignoring the serfs' reasons for running away and reducing the litigation to the level of a simple property dispute. Expanding upon what Vilhelm Vilhelmson has found for Iceland, Tammisto concludes that peasant supplications are clearly the primary records of subaltern voices. Embedded in exceedingly deferential and servile rhetoric, these supplications often convey direct threats to run away if their grievances are not addressed.

The last three papers take us away from rural labour, but back to Denmark-Norway. Taking the case of Adam Jacobsen, a slave who had been brought to the small Norwegian town of Arendal as a starting point, Hanne Østhus investigates the legal status and experiences of people who were trafficked from America, Africa and Asia to what was called 'the king's realm and lands in Europe', i.e. the European part of Denmark-Norway. The paper seeks to employ a micro-spatial perspective, as suggested by Christian De Vito, in order to connect microhistory and global history, and looks at connections – and lack of connections – between the local, the regional and the global.

Johan Heinsen and Emilie Luther Valentin examine institutions of punishment, with Heinsen studying two military penal labour institutions known as 'slaveries' (*slaverier*) and Luther Valentin looking at the prison workhouse in Christianshavn. Heinsen argues in favour of more empirically grounded research on early modern prisoners, and his own paper is based on information on almost 7000 prison-stays, an illustration of how one can use complex sources to gain information on people's experiences in the past. This diachronic perspective ties experiences of convict labour to labour in other spheres, most notably the military. Inspired by Marcel van der Linden's 'moments of coercion', Heinsen examines the prison population of *Trunken* at the naval shipyard from 1680 to 1741 and *Stokhuset*, which came to replace *Trunken* in 1741, along four trajectories: first, the different pathways to penal slavery; second, entry into the institutions; third, extraction of labour from the penal slave, and fourth, exit from penal slavery.

In the last paper of this special issue, Emilie Luther Valentin takes us to the prison workhouse at Christianshavn in Copenhagen, the largest institution of this kind in eighteenth-century Denmark-Norway. Luther Valentin has surveyed over 300 statements written by the workhouse authorities in the years between 1769 and 1789, all made when inmates petitioned for early release. These statements, primarily written by the warden, centred around the connected issues of rehabilitation and maintenance: had the inmate learned his or her lesson and would (s)he be able to support himself or herself outside the prison workhouse? Using sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild's concept of emotional

labour, Luther Valentin argues that inmates were aware of these ideals, what she calls 'feeling rules', and behaved in ways that would convince the warden of this. They performed such 'emotional labour' in order to enhance their chances of a positive evaluation from the warden when they requested release.

The articles in this special issue thus explore practices of labour coercion in various parts of the Nordic region in the period from the 16th to the 19th centuries from the abovementioned perspective of interrelated coercive labour regimes. Taken as a whole, the papers focus particularly on how those caught within different levels of this broader framework of labour coercion worked to exploit those ambiguities to their own advantage and how their practices influenced and shaped the historical trajectories of coercive labour relations in Nordic history. Their collective aim is to place the coerced worker, whether a slave, a servant, a corvée peasant, a serf or a prisoner, centre-stage in their own histories and in the historiography of the Nordic countries.

Notes

1. The multiple biases of this historiography have been interrogated, thoroughly, by feminist historians. This literature is sizable. A starting point is offered by Nilsson, Mazumdar and Neunsinger (eds.), *Home-Based Work and Home-Based Workers*.
2. See for example Andersson et al., *Oppdaginga av fattigdomen*; Jacobsen, *Husbondret*; Koefoed, "Authorities who care"; Koefoed og Holm, *Pligt og omsorg*; Róbertsdóttir, *Wool and Society*; Seppel, "The semiotics of serfdom".
3. See https://worck.eu. Accessed 6 July 2022.
4. For further discussion of the epistemological value of a contextual notion of the Nordic in historical analysis, see Gustafsson, *Nordens historia*, 13–7.
5. For a more encompassive historiographical overview of Nordic labour history, see Hilson et al., "Introduction" and Andersen et al., "Longer, broader, deeper and more personal".
6. Johnsson, *Vårt fredliga samhälle*; Vilhelmsson, "Tactics of Evasion"; Heinsen, *Mutiny in the Danish Atlantic World*; Heinsen, "Penal Slavery"; Uppenberg, "I husbondens bröd och arbete".
7. van der Linden, *Workers of the World*; Stanziani, *Bondage*; De Vito, Schiel, and van Rossum, "From bondage to precariousness?".
8. There is much scholarship on this, but for a recent assessment, see Whittle, "A critique".
9. See Andrees and Belser (eds.), *Forced Labor*. On the International Labour organization's webpage the search term "forced labour" gets 2084 hits, https://www.ilo.org/Search5/search.do?searchWhat=slavery&navigators=languagesnavigator%1dlanguage%1den%1den%1eilosubjectnavigator%1dilosubject%1dA.40%1d%5eA.40%24&sortby=default&lastDay=0&collection=&offset=0 (accessed 26 June 2022).
10. Brass and van der Linden (eds.), *Free and Unfree Labour;* van der Linden and García (eds.), *On Coerced Labor*. For a critical discussion of this "coercion turn" in labour history, see Brass, "(Re-) Defining Labour Coercion?".
11. This is perhaps most pronounced in the large-scale project *Global Collaboratory on the History of Labour Relations* led by Karin Hofmeester. See https://iisg.amsterdam/en/research/projects/global-collaboratory-on-the-history-of-labour-relations-1500–2000 (accessed 17 June 2022).
12. De Vito, Schiel, and van Rossum, "From Bondage to Precariousness," 649.
13. A number of studies have employed the notion of "tactics" as conceived by Michel de Certeau. See, Vilhelmsson, "Tactics of evasion" and Valentin, "Feelings of Imprisonment".
14. Cf. Stråth, "The cultural construction of Norden".
15. Whittle, "Introduction. Servants in the economy and society of rural Europe," 11–5; Whittle and Lambrecht (eds.), *Labour Laws in Preindustrial Europe* (in press).
16. Heinsen, "Scandinavian Empires".

17. On this conception across Scandinavian historiographies, see Naum and Nordin, 'Introduction: Situating Nordic Colonialism". See also Brimnes, "Offer, subject, aktør," 22–4.
18. Poulsen, "A Classical Manor," 451–65.
19. van der Linden, "Dissecting Coerced Labor," 293–322.
20. For a bibliographical overview on literature on crofters in Norway, see "Bibliografi: Husmannsvesnet" at lokalhistoriewik.no, https://lokalhistoriewiki.no/wiki/Bibliografi:Husmannsvesenet (accessed 28 February 2023). For Sweden, see Carolina Uppenberg's project at Stockholm University, "Challenging the domestic. Gender division of labour and economic change studied through 19th century crofters' households", https://www.su.se/english/research/research-projects/challenging-the-domestic (accessed 27 June 2022).
21. See discussion in Hallenberg, "Bönder, krig och klass". See also Johannessen, "Kampen om mannskapet".
22. See for example Müller, Weiss, and Rydén (eds.), *Globala historia*; Weiss, *Slavhandel*; Weiss (ed.), *Ports of Globalisation*; Naum and Nordin (eds.), *Scandinavian Colonialism and the Rise of Modernity*.
23. See for example Bergkvist, "En Haard og Dyr Tid"; Gunnlaugsson "The poor laws and the family"; Henningsen, *Patrioter og fattigfolk*; Henningsen, "Tiggernes by"; Hansen, "Den strafværdige gavmildhed"; Rahikainen, "Compulsory Child Labour"; Seip, *Sosialhjelpstaten blir til*; Vedel-Larsen, "Kampen om de uværdige fattige". On punishment, see references below.
24. See overview in Hilson, Neunsinger, Vyff, and Kristjánsdóttir, "Labour, Unions, and Politics". For a critical discussion see Uppenberg and Bengtson, "Klass i Sverige". In a recent overview of the state of labour history in Denmark after 2000, Knud Knudsen observes a tendency that interests have become increasingly focused on the period after 1945. Knudsen, "Dansk Arbejderhistorie efter 2000," 108. In parallel with an increasing focus on political questions, including but not limited to the changing welfare state, as well as a surge in interest in the cultural histories of workers, Knudsen argues that there has been a recent shift away from the history of the labour movement towards other perspectives, geared more towards workers themselves and the social relations of the sites they worked. Knudsen frames these shifts in light of the decline of the labour movement and its political influence. Knudsen's recent monograph, *Danish Trade Unionism 1870–1940* (2021), however, demonstrates that the focus on the labour movement as an actor of modernization, remains.
25. See for example Magnusson, *Från arbetare till arbetarklass*; Jansson, *Manufacturing consensus*; Friðriksson, *Við brún nýs dags*; Guðmundsson, *Öryggi þjóðar*.
26. See for example Waldemarsson, *Kvinnor och klass*.
27. Engberg, *Dansk guldalder*; Engberg, *Det daglige brød*; Fridberg, Magnusson, and Isaacson, *Industrialismens rötter*; Winberg, *Folkökning och proletarisering*; Grjetarsson, "Upphaf og þróun"; Jónsson, *Vinnuhjú*, 79–85; Magnússon, *The Hidden Class*.
28. See for example Christiansen, *Arbejderbevægelsens Forhistorie*; Sørensen, *Under herrer og mestre*; Jónsson, "Agents and institutions".
29. A thorough deconstruction of such frameworks in labour history is provided by van der Linden, *Workers of the World*.
30. A recent example is found in Henningsen, *Stavnsbåndet*, 18. The book's promotional blurb, printed on its back, even begins: "Adscription meant a life under slavelike conditions". A curious example in which an abstracted notion of slavery is derived not from Transatlantic slavery, but from penal slavery, is found in Engberg, *Det daglige brød*, 19–20. This twist is all the more curious since Engberg explicitly argues that convicts and criminals were not part of the 'underdanmark' that his book focuses on, because their labour and its tensions did not contribute to historical change. Furthermore, elsewhere in the book, an abstracted 'slave' that does not seem to be a penal slave is present as a measuring rod, when he argues that peasants were part of an 'unfree estate', but were not 'formally [. . .] slaves or thralls'. (ibid., 117) Yet he concludes, that their status was that of 'almost slave'. (120) It is similarly common to equate compulsory service with slavery in Icelandic historiography, particularly in

popular history. See for example the repeated references to slave-like conditions of servants in Gröndal, *Fólk í fjötrum*, 7–20. A celebrated but hotly contested television documentary film in the 1990s even chose to refer to it as *vistaránauð* (service slavery) rather than the more established *vistarband* (compulsory service) to illustrate the supposedly slave-like conditions of servants. See discussion in Pétursson, 'Tortímandinn'. Some academic historians have used a similar, if less hyperbolic, language to describe the condition of servants in rural society. See for example the misleading discussion on the supposed 'involuntary celibacy' of servants in Gunnarsson, 'Fátækt á Íslandi'.

31. For an overview of the literature of servants in the Nordic countries, see Uppenberg and Østhus, "Servants in the early-modern Nordic countries".
32. A recent overview that revisits this discussion is found in Løgstrup, *Bondens frisættelse*, 32–43.
33. As part of the 'history canon' it is mandatory curriculum in elementary schools, the other two eighteenth-century themes carrying a similar teleological weight: the storm of the Bastille and the Danish prohibition against Transatlantic slave trade.
34. On the 'long roots of the Swedish model', an equal peasant society with free peasants making consensus decisions being the roots of the 'Swedish model' of labour market negotiations, see: Österberg, "Compromise instead of conflict?"; Stråth, "The cultural construction of equality in Norden". For a critique, see Harnesk, "Den svenska modellens tidigmoderna rötter?"; Bengtsson, "The Swedish sonderweg in question".
35. Engberg, *Det daglige brød*.
36. Skriver, *Den værste straf?*
37. Thomsen, *Lykkens Smedje*.
38. Tyge Krogh, *Staten og de besiddelsesløse på landet*.
39. An early example that re-interpreted adscription on this basis is Birgit Løgstrup, *Bundet til jorden* (1987). As a consequence of a focus on what bound servants, she reaches the conclusion that the 'liberation' of farmers made little difference in the lives of young men. Similar conclusions are reached by Holmgaard though from the perspective of military obligations. Holmgaard, *... uden at landet besværes*.
40. Lyngholm, "Pligten til lydighed".
41. The literature is vast here, but see for example Gunnlaugsson, *Family and Household*; Guttormsson, *Childhood, Youth and Upbringing*; Harnesk, *Legofolk;* Jónsson, *Vinnuhjú á 19. öld*; Larner, "The Good Household Gone Bad"; Lundh, "The social mobility of servants"; Koefoed and Holm, *Pligt og omsorg*; Ojala, "Opportunity or Compulsion?"; Prytz, "Life-cycle servants and servants for life," 95–11; Sandvik, "Tidlig moderne tid i Norge," 114–22; Sogner (ed.), *I gode og vonde dagar*; Sogner and Telste, *Ut og søkje teneste*; Uppenberg, "I husbondens bröd och arbete"; Uppenberg, "Masters writing the rules," 238–56; Vilhelmsson, *Sjálfstætt fólk*; Østhus, "Consteted Authority"; Østhus, "Servants in Rural Norway," 113–30.
42. Ågren (ed.), *Making a Living, Making a Difference*.
43. Guttormsson, *Childhood, Youth and Upbringing*; Koefoed, "Authorities who care"; Koefoed, "Den lutherske husstand"; Jansson and Lindström, "Pigan i fadersväldet"; Pleijel, *Hustavlans värld*; Marklund, *I hans hus*; Þórisdóttir, "Heiðra skaltu föður þinn og móður".
44. Koefoed, "I Trust you with my Child".
45. Larner, "The Good Household Gone Bad"; Pedersen, "En kristen forsørgelse"; Koefoed, "I Trust you with my Child".
46. Koefoed and Holm, *Pligt og omsorg.*
47. This is, for example, demonstrated in a recent article on Danish estate hospitals which unfortunately attempts to rewrite the historiography of power relations in rural society wholesale on the basis of that narrow analysis. See Jakobsen and Knudsen, "De ædles almisser".
48. e.g. Spierenburg, *Prison Experience*; Spierenburg: "Prison and Convict Labour"; Sarti, Bellavitis, and Martini (eds.), *What is Work?*
49. Johannessen, "Kampen om mannskapet"; Johannessen, "Military service in Northern Norway"; Johannessen, *Skjærgårdsflåte i solnedgang*.

50. Krogh, "Larcenous Soldiers"; Petersen, *Geworbne krigskarle*. Inspired by the work of Petersen, Petri Talvitie has drawn similar conclusions about mercenary life in eighteenth–century Helsinki. See Talvitie, "Black Markets and Desertion".
51. Smith and Ugelvik (eds.), *Scandinavian Penal History*. The question of labour was much more prevalent in the histories that went before this turn. e.g. Engberg, *Dansk guldalder;* Snare, *Work, war, prison and welfare*.
52. The ongoing project "Lived, Layered, Locked Up: Rethinking Women's Prisons in Finland in the Long Nineteenth Century" by Johanna Annola promises a similar shift.
53. Somewhat recent examples of history writing that reduce the enslaved to numbers include Gøbel, "Danish Shipping"; Klas Rönnbäck, "Power, Plenty". For a recent example of writing colonial history primarily as the history of colonial administration, see Pålsson, "Our side of the water".
54. In Denmark, the pioneering studies are Sebro, "Mellem Afrikaner og Kreol" and Simonsen, *Slave Stories*. In Sweden, Fredrik Thomasson's work and the ongoing research and digitization project Swedish Caribbean Colonialism, presents a similar shift.
55. Brimnes et al. (eds), *Danmark og kolonierne*.
56. For example, see Nordin, *The Scandinavian Early Modern World*, 118.
57. Pedersen, *Luksus*.
58. Sennefelt, "Runaway Colours"; Østhus, "Slaver og ikke-europeiske tjenestefolk"; Heinsen, "Stemme og flugt"; Simonsen, "Racisme, slaveri og marked"; Christensen, "At sammenligne metropol og koloni"; Brimnes, *Slaveejerens død.*
59. Andresen, Evjen, and Ryymin (eds.), *Samenes historie*, 82–4; Gulløv, *Grønland;* Rud and Ivarsson (eds.), *Globale og postkoloniale perspektiver*.
60. A recent overview of much of the literature can be found in Andresen, Evjen, and Ryymin (eds.), *Samenes historie*, 80–2, 85, 89–92, 94–107.
61. Jörundsdóttir, "Þjófar og annað ógæfufólk," 49; Engberg, *Det Daglige Brød*, 51; Björnsson, *Haustskip*.
62. Næss, "Fiskeværet omgang".

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Notes on contributors

Johan Heinsen (b. 1984) is a historian and associate professor at Aalborg University. He holds a PhD from Aalborg University. His research deals with the social histories of colonial and penal societies. He is vice-chair of the COST-Action Worlds of Related Coercions in Work (WORCK).

Vilhelm Vilhelmsson (b. 1980) is a historian and director of the University of Iceland Research Centre Northwest and editor of the journal *SAGA*. He has a doctoral degree in history from the University of Iceland. His research focuses on the power relations of everyday life in pre-industrial Iceland. He is the WG leader of the COST-Action Worlds of Related Coercions in Work (WORCK) Working Group 3: (Im)mobilization of the Workforce. https://uni.hi.is/vilhelmv

Hanne Østhus (b. 1980) is a social and labour historian. She is interested in relations of work, gender, power and patterns of consumption and has done research on domestic service and slavery in the Danish kingdom in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Currently she works as Associate Professor at Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU). She is the WG leader of the COST-Action Worlds of Related Coercions in Work (WORCK) Working Group 4: Intersecting Marginalites.

ORCID

Johan Heinsen http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9823-9009
Vilhelm Vilhelmsson http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6220-7849

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