

# Neo-Slavery as Instrumentalization: Amazon, Surrogate Motherhood, and Mobile Phones

Bülent Diken, Lancaster University, UK & Kadir Has University, Turkey

Tuğba Göçer, Kadir Has University, Turkey

Mesut Uçak, Kadir Has University, Turkey

## Abstract

Despite being perceived as a remnant of the past, slavery persists in today's increasingly economized and bio-politicized world. To thematize the actuality of slavery, we initially return to Aristotle's discussion/justification of slavery as instrumentalization of human beings. Then we revisit Plato's allegory of the cave through three distinct readings. This three-fold reading enables us to frame three present-day cases/examples to reconsider slavery: the Amazon, surrogate motherhood, and the cell phone. The concept of use is suggested as a pivotal concept for such reconsideration. Finally, we propose the concept of neo-slavery. While the classical literature understands slavery through its triangulation with property relations and force, we suggest, in a counter-classical move, another, emerging triangulation: neo-slavery, instrumental use and consent. In this way, the examination of the three cases cast the classical tradition in a new light, revitalizing the concept of slavery by putting it into a different use.

**Keywords:** Amazon– cell phone– instrumental use – neo-slavery– slavery – surrogacy

## Introduction

‘The Devil’s most skilful trick is to convince you he doesn’t exist.’ (Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen*, 2010: 61)

Today slavery appears to be a marginal concept that merely designates a remnant, an exceptional, archaic form of subjectivity. Paradoxically, however, it is easy today, in an increasingly economized and bio-politicized world, to come across new, late-modern forms of slavery which are not only overlooked and legitimated as exceptions but also tend to become normalized. But because it re-invents itself every time it re-appears, slavery is bound up with obscurity. Therefore, present-day slavery remains invisible and unspeakable in our political culture. It is as if slavery is defined once and for all, as this or that actual past phenomenon, with the eery consequence that on this account slavery no longer exists, or exists only as extreme, ‘rogue’ phenomenon somewhere distant. Yet, as we will discuss, slavery is with us in economy, in politics, and in everyday life, and it is not showing any sign of disappearing soon.

But who is the slave? As is well known, the ancient Greeks defined the human as an actual form, as a ‘political animal,’ excluding from the *polis* those not considered worthy of human-political life. The slave is someone banned from politics. Aristotle justifies the logic of this abandonment with reference to an interesting concept, the ‘use of the body’ (Aristotle, 1995, 1:1254b.16-27). Just as the soul makes use of the body as an instrument, the master uses the (body of the) slave as an instrument, as an extension of his own body. (Agamben, 2015: 9) In this way the idea of slavery

brings with it a constitutive split within the human between a body reduced to others' instrumental use and another, properly human one. As such, the slave is defined not so much by ownership or property relations as by the lack of autonomy: the slave is one that exists for another, and for another's instrumental use (11).

Recall Herman Melville's *Confidence-Man*, where we meet a slave owner on the 'soot-streaked' deck of a steamboat. The narrator 'marvels' at how his hands 'retained their spotlessness.'

But, if you watched them a while, you noticed that they avoided touching anything; you noticed, in short, that a certain negro body-servant, whose hands nature had dyed black, perhaps with the same purpose that millers wear white, this negro servant's hands did most of his master's handling for him; having to do with dirt on his account, but not to his prejudices. But if, with the same undefiledness of consequences to himself, a gentleman could also sin by deputy, how shocking would that be! But it is not permitted to be; and even if it were, no judicious moralist would make proclamation of it. (Melville, 2007: 51)

In the following we consider contemporary slavery in this prism, as instrumentalized action 'by deputy.' We start with discussing Aristotle's *Politics* with a view to explicating the role of instrumental reason in the justification of slavery. Then we return to another foundational text of political philosophy, *The Republic*. Plato's allegory of the cave, particularly, is interesting for our purposes and we briefly read it in three different prisms: as a literal narrative on slavery as an actual phenomenon, as a patriarchal account that marginalizes the female capacity for speech and action, and as a description of everyday life as it is colonized by apparatuses of power. This three-fold reading frames our discussion of three empirical cases: Amazon, surrogate motherhood, and cell phones. Through these three cases we investigate how slavery re-appears and represents itself in political, economic, technological and emotional contexts today.

Following Kuhn (1970), Foucault (1977) and Agamben (2009), we define each case as a ‘paradigm’ or as an ‘example,’ that is, as a single element within the set of possible forms of slavery. But to be able to turn a case into an example, its normal function must be suspended. Foucault, for example, uses the ‘panopticon’ as an example in this sense. Although Bentham’s panopticon is originally a prison, in Foucault (1977) its normal use is de-activated and the panopticon becomes an example/model/paradigm that explains the governmental logic of modernity. In the same way, we suspend the normal/immediate context of our singular cases and treat them as examples which make intelligible other objects of study of slavery. The pivotal idea that organizes our discussion is that slavery is a virtual idea that cannot be reduced to its actual, empirical forms. Slavery, in other words, is a generic concept that expresses itself differently in different times and spaces, a metaphysical problem that cannot fully actualize itself in concrete situations. Thus, it is necessary to keep an eye on its permutations, tracing its resurrections even when it appears as its opposite, refusing to recognize itself as slavery. Our aim is to revitalize the concept of slavery as a tool for social diagnosis, to contribute to new conceptions of slavery in line with the contemporary society by shifting the focus from property relations to instrumentalization (of human beings).

What is at stake in this discussion is human freedom. Importantly, slavery appears in contemporary culture as something that cannot be symbolized. While it does not cut a ‘normal’ term in politics (no regime, no society, no community identifies itself with it), it comes into view either as an excrescent term (existing only in the manner of a spectre, as a name, while its actual existence is projected onto other times and spaces) or as a singular phenomenon (being present without being named as slavery). The consequence is a double reduction: time after time slavery is condensed to something unmeasurable and un-representable, on the one hand, or its persistent presence is

denied, on the other. Therefore, the article seeks to articulate a measure of slavery as an excess, illuminating the ways in which it persists despite being continuously overlooked. Freedom from slavery can only occur based on recognizing slavery as slavery.

## **How to use your slaves**

there is ... a form of knowledge belonging to the master, which consists in the use of slaves: a master is such in virtue not of acquiring, but of using slaves. This knowledge belonging to the master is something which has no great or majestic character: the master must simply know how to command what the slave must know how to do. (Aristotle, 1995: 7.1255b)

To appreciate what is involved in Aristotle's definition here, we must first remember Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, which is, arguably, the first scientific treatise on economy. *Oeconomicus* deals with economy, the management of the household, in two senses, as knowledge and as an art of making money. It defines economy as a science, an art, which can be applied to one's own or to somebody else's household. That is, owning property is not a prerequisite for economic management. What matters is not one's possessions but knowing how to use them (Xenophon, 1998: 1.10). For while 'not even money is wealth if one doesn't know how to use it,' one can benefit even from one's enemies if one knows how to use them (1.12,15).

So, what does 'using a slave' involve? Using a slave implies a capacity to command. Power is the ability to give orders with a view to capturing, dominating and enslaving. The existence of the slave, on this account, presupposes the command. The master-slave relationship is a relationship based on sheer force. But can it be justified? Aristotle's *Politics* is *locus classicus* in this context. He asks, initially, whether people are masters or slaves 'by nature' (Aristotle, 1995, I: 1254a17). But he can find no justification for naturalizing slavery. Then he comes up with another, more

sinister justification of slavery based on the concept of use. He posits that every household must be ‘furnished with its appropriate instruments’ to be able to function (1253b23). Then he differentiates two kinds of instruments: ‘inanimate’ instruments, simple objects, and ‘animate’ instruments, that are alive. The claim is that ‘the slave is an animate article ... and subordinates, or servants, in general, may be described as instruments, which are prior to other instruments’ (1253b23). The slave is an instrument who can use other instruments, which cannot act, do their work, without a command.

However, the slave is not an instrument of production (*poiesis*) but an instrument of action (*praxis*). In production, there issues a product which exists apart from the instrument employed. But in the case of the slave there is no such product. Aristotle’s example here is the consumption of ‘garments or beds’ the use of which results in no different product. Similarly, out of the use of the slaves there comes only the fact of their use (Aristotle ,1995, I: 1254a7; Agamben, 2015: 11). A slave is a human being (1254a13) who is ‘an instrument intended for the purpose of action and separable from its possessor’ (1454a16). The slave *is* a human being, but a human being whose capacity or potential for action is separated from herself. Thus, he or she can be moved by command like an ‘automaton’ (Agamben, 2015: 11).

Apropos of ‘use’ a detail might be relevant to recall here: in contrast to the modern understanding of use as utilization of an object by a subject, the term in Greek points toward an intermediary zone in which the subject itself is influenced by the action. To use something, one must be affected by it, constitute oneself as one making use of it. Thus, in use, the human being and the world are in a reciprocal relationship (Agamben, 2015: 30). Slavery signifies the disappearance of this reciprocity, that is, the transformation, or rather reduction, of free or reciprocal use into instrumental use. Instrumentalization allows for the capture of living bodies into economic and

political apparatuses. The ‘master,’ consequently, can be defined as the one who can mobilize others in line with one’s own desire and reduce them to the position of an instrument by capturing their power of acting (Lordon, 2014: 3–4).

## **Plato’s cave: three readings, three cases**

In *The Republic*, Plato (2003) describes the condition of some prisoners chained and immobilized in a fictional cave. Behind the prisoners there is a fire, in front of them a wall. On the wall they can see the reflections of some objects because of the fire. But they mistake these shadows, illusions, for reality. However, one of the prisoners escapes the cave and sees the reality outside. Yet, when he comes back to the cave to tell them about the truth of their condition, the other prisoners try to kill him.

Who are the ‘prisoners’ in the cave? As Castro (2017: 86) draws attention to, Plato’s Athens made extensive use of slave labour and contained a significant number of prisoners of war, future slaves, in the mines. Thus, the cave in the allegory can be seen as a space of slavery and colonization, a place where speech and political rights do not exist, a non-political space juxtaposed to the *polis*. While the *polis* is inhabited by the citizen, a political animal (*zoon politikon*), the cave confines the enslaved whose lives are reduced to bare life. By the same token, Plato’s cave is marked by the absence of the three forms of *techne* that define the existence of the free citizen: artistic reflexivity (the prisoner-slaves cannot distinguish fiction and reality), political consciousness (they try to kill the only one who can save them), and philosophy (they do not love wisdom). As such, as an exceptional space of unlaw created by the law, the cave signifies the ground zero of Greek politics, an apolitical formlessness. The distinction, however, is not clean-cut for, as is well-known, slavery is also the structural condition of the Greek city: what is excluded from the *polis* is what

holds it together. Precisely because it appears to be the negation of politics as such, slavery highlights the hidden kernel of Greek politics, its internal antagonism: the *polis* versus the slave. Thus, the first step in the understanding of the politics of the cave is understanding this antagonism, its colonial or bio-political dimension that always lurks behind ‘normal’ politics. In the following, we read our first case – the Amazon workers – in this light.

If, secondly, one reads the allegory of the cave in a feminist prism, Plato’s rhetorical choices might appear in another light. Luce Irigaray, for instance, argued in *Speculum of the Other Woman* that Plato’s cave can be taken as a reference to the womb (1974: 243-364). Thereby, the movement from the dark cave to the enlightened outside, from ignorance to wisdom, can be read as a movement from the feminine realm of the ‘  
frames our second case, surrogate motherhood.

But this second reading is not the whole story either. Already in *The Republic* Plato’s Socrates emphasises that the process of enlightenment, the exit from the cave, is not exclusively a male privilege. ‘All I have said about men applies equally to women’ (Plato, 2003: 540c). On this reading, there is no necessary dichotomy between the ‘sensible’ and the ‘intelligible.’ Following this, in the allegory of the cave, we do not move from the sensible domain (the women) to the intelligible domain (the male) or ascend from everyday life to the level of ideas in a straightforward way that simply devalues the sensible or everyday life. As far as it is impossible to grasp the truth of the cave from the standpoint of the sensible, the fugitive slave (the philosopher) wants the salvation of the intelligible, the abstract domain of ideas. But this is also a desire for the salvation of the sensible, of everyday life, for virtual ideas can only actualise themselves by appearing in the domain of the sensible, in actual life.

What is ultimately at stake in the allegory of the cave is therefore not a conflict between everyday life (the sensible) and philosophy (the intelligible). On the contrary, philosophy and everyday life are on the same side vis-à-vis the apparatuses of power that enslave them both. We use the term apparatus in the sense of ‘anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, or discourses of living beings’ (Agamben, 2009: 14). On this definition, Plato’s cave would appear as an apparatus which captures the prisoner-slaves and regulates their movements by making it possible for them ‘only [to] look straight’ (Plato, 2003: 14a-b). Power is a cave that seeks to capture humans. A ‘cage’ that goes ‘in search of a bird’ (Kafka, 2015: 16). And anything, from a cave or building to a text, even a computer or mobile phone, can function as an apparatus. What is decisive is the fact that human life is governed by apparatuses. Hence our third case: the ‘cell’ phone as an instantiation of enslavement in late modernity. In this case, particularly, slavery appears not as an exception but as a norm generalized throughout everyday life. Only, the modern cave, as Nietzsche observed, appears to be a cave within, a ‘labyrinth,’ in which power is internalized (Nietzsche, 1972: 214).

### **Case I: Amazon: from the wolves to the foxes**

Amazon has significantly expanded its operations in recent years. However, its real success lies in its ability to hide from its customers the working conditions of its employees. According to a report published by the Strategic Organizing Center, the rate of serious injuries to workers in Amazon’s warehouses in 2020 was 80% higher than the industry average (Sainato, 2021). The injured workers complain about not having their medical expenses covered, being blamed by their superiors, and not receiving compensation for accidents. Besides, the company implements very comprehensive surveillance and micromanagement mechanisms on its warehouse and delivery workers. So much so that in early 2024 Amazon was found guilty in court due to the three-

dimensional surveillance system implemented on warehouse workers in France (Gruet, 2024). If, for example, a product is scanned in less than 1.25 seconds, the system records a warning and workers who receive three productivity warnings can be fired from Amazon (Gruet, 2024). Constant surveillance creates a constant climate of fear among workers. The situation is made worse using AI-coded human resources systems that are authorized to hire, evaluate the performance of workers, and even terminate their employment with respect to frequently changing performance criteria (Crispin, 2021). Those fired by AI cannot find an authority to appeal to, or even human to talk to. Their absent masters, the Amazon executives, are invisible and unreachable. In the *oikos*, the slave was seen to be an extension of the master's body; in Amazon, the worker seems to be reduced to an extension of the master's extension (AI), an (animate) instrument of an (inanimate) instrument.

Amazon Flex, an Amazon unit, is a contract-free work area. There have been numerous reports of Flex couriers being unable even to take a toilet break and using empty bottles to urinate to avoid being fired without compensation by the AI-coded system and to make enough deliveries during the day (Hamilton, 2023; BBC News, 2021). It has been revealed that Amazon is aware of this situation, despite its denials (Paul, 2021), suggesting that the company knowingly walks its employees on the line between humans and tools, depriving them of basic human rights.

To be sure, workers work at Amazon of their own free will. But insofar as Amazon can bypass the laws and moral codes protecting workers' dignity as human beings, free will comes to function as an apparatus of power. For instance, in 2021, 54 Nepalese workers were recruited through a third-party agency, Rove International, to work at one of Amazon's warehouses in Saudi Arabia. They paid brokerage fees ranging from \$1,000 to \$2,300 to Rove International, far exceeding the \$85 upper limit set by Nepalese law (Acharya and Hudson, 2023). However, after working for a while,

the workers realized that they were not Amazon employees but rather contract workers for Rove International at the Amazon warehouse. The working conditions and wages in the warehouse were not as promised. In addition, due to the kafala system that regulates the working conditions of foreigners in the Gulf countries, their passports were confiscated and their movements outside working hours were severely restricted. When the workers wanted to return after working under these difficult conditions for seven months, they were forced to pay a penalty of around \$1,300 for breaking the contract they had signed with Rove International. They had almost worked for nothing.

In *Das Kapital* Marx shows that, although the capitalist market has freed the individual from the yoke of the despotic master-slave relation originating in the *oikos*, this did not prevent the re-emergence of despotism as ‘the despotism of capital’ (1976: 526). The notions such as ‘despotism of capital’ or ‘despotism in the factory’ point, in the context of Amazon, toward the formation of a limit zone, a zone of indiscernibility between the human and the instrument. In this sense, today, we are witnessing the resurgence of non-democratic patterns of domination in the workplace (see Davis, 2018). Certainly, we live in a society that has the appearance of a realm of freedom and equality, of ‘a very Eden of the innate rights of man’: both buyer and seller of labour power as a commodity participate in the exchange as ‘free’ persons and they enter an ‘equal’ relation with one another (Marx, 1976: 280). Though one is *not* free not to sell one’s labour power. Hence the antagonism between capital and living labour in modernity reflects in many ways the bio-political rift between the slave and the ancient Greek or Roman society. It is therefore telling that the first truth that occurred to the ex-slaves in Haiti, the first country in which slavery was abolished, was that the documents granting them freedom were in fact ‘empty-handed’: even though nobody

legally had a right to force them into work, the ex-slaves still had to work for their maintenance, which in many ways reproduced their status as slaves (see Buck-Morss, 2009: 73).

What needs to be ascertained here is that such reproduction does not operate through ownership. What is at issue in contemporary slavery is not ‘owning people in the traditional sense of the old slavery, but about controlling them completely. People become completely disposable tools’ (Bales, 2012, 4). And ‘control’ here does not only aim at increasing efficiency. On the contrary, tiring the worker and causing them to leave their job is among the primary goals. The fact that the average working period in Amazon warehouses is only eight months is indicative of this situation (Greenhouse, 2022). In this way the worker is prevented from forming a stable subjectivity and enduring inter-subjective relations with others, making collective struggle infinitely difficult.

More than 60% of the 400,000 lowest-wage workers hired by Amazon between 2018 and 2020 were Black and Hispanic, while most of the company's highest-paid personnel are White (Long, 2021). This confirms the claim that modern capital keeps the colonial nucleus of power alive (Quijano, 2000). Recall Susan Buck-Morss’ analysis of the four illustrations created by the artist Jean-Michel Moreau le Jeune for Voltaire’s *Candide*. One of them is particularly noteworthy. A slave, crippled in the Dutch colony of Suriname for trying to escape, says: ‘[I]t is the custom. ... When we work in the sugar mills, and we catch our finger in the millstone, they cut off our hand; when we try to run away, they cut off a leg. ... It is at this price that you eat sugar in Europe’ (Buck-Morss, 2009: 80). How about the cost of expecting a delivery on the same day, being able to return a product without a reason, having consumer products safely delivered to our hands? To be sure, Amazon does not cut off legs, it does not repeat the horrors of the plantations, but it still creates human-instruments and does so in ways that are subtler, and more sinister.

## **Case II: Commercial Surrogacy**

The practice of surrogacy has always been related to slavery. Recall the biblical story of Sarah and Abraham: as they were unable to conceive a child of their own, Sarah turned to her servant Hagar to carry Abraham's child (see Zucker, 2021). But today surrogacy has taken the form of a consent-based commercial transaction between formally free individuals. Typically, it involves in vitro fertilization to create an embryo using the intended parents' genetic material, which is then transferred to a gestational carrier. The surrogate mother has no genetic connection to the child. It is an increasingly popular reproductive option for individuals or couples unable to conceive naturally, women facing fertility challenges, and same-sex couples. According to Global Market Insights, this industry is expected to grow exponentially, from a \$14 billion market in 2022 to a projected \$129 billion by 2032 (Gilchrist, 2023).

While commercial surrogacy is prohibited in many countries, it is legal in certain USA states and countries such as Ukraine, Georgia, and Mexico, making these locations popular destinations for intended parents. Overall, the sector is marked by a lack of adequate legal regulations, which is why it is often accompanied by baby and human trafficking, fierce competition among surrogacy agencies seeking profit, and ambiguous relationships between the baby, the legal parents, and the surrogate mother. Ukraine, for example, was home to an average of 2,500 babies born through commercial surrogacy each year until 2022, accounting for a quarter of all such births worldwide (The Economist, 2022). Leading surrogacy service providers in Ukraine include New Life Global and BioTexCom, both of which have branches in other countries. The approaches of both agencies to surrogacy and their marketing methods are truly noteworthy. Albert Tochilovsky, the owner of BioTexCom, was convicted of baby trafficking and tax fraud and spent some time under house arrest before the pandemic (Klimchuk and Cheretski, 2020). According to information on the BioTexCom website, an assisted reproductive technology agency, surrogacy services are available

for prices ranging from 35,000 to 70,000 euros. An additional 3,000 euros is charged if the surrogate becomes pregnant with twins. One can choose between Standard Plus package, the VIP package, and so on. BioTexCom is not shy about creating a wide variety of marketing campaigns, including Black Friday discounts, to increase sales (Cook, 2021). Such campaigns code the surrogate mother and the unborn child in exclusively commercial terms, and the legal parents as customers, constructing the human body as a product (the child) and as an instrument (the surrogate mother).

The issue here is the tension between the choice to have a child and the perceived right to have a child through another woman, literally turning her body into an extension of one's own. The tension becomes evident in surrogacy becoming increasingly popular among celebrities and the wealthy (Juneau and Schonfeld, 2023). On the other hand, thousands of women struggling financially due to the ongoing global wars and conflicts and years of economic crisis have started to see surrogacy as a source of income (Gilchrist, 2023). What is more, surrogate mothers are categorized and classified based on criteria such as family and genetic history, beauty, fitness, eye and hair colour, earning differentially depending on these characteristics. The existing inequalities are exacerbated by the fact that there is a large, unmeasurable, and inaccessible underground structure in the sector. Concomitantly, surrogate motherhood is related to cases of women and child trafficking (Gilchrist, 2023). As such, the commercialization of surrogacy and the lack of global legal frameworks demarcate surrogate motherhood as a paradigmatic case of a 'culture of exception' (Diken and Laustsen, 2005) where the law and unlaw are indistinguishable. Thus, Seery Kearney, a senator who is working to legalize surrogacy in Ireland, states 'there are no rules' in the sector, which has a 'wild west' or 'gray zone' image, especially when it comes to commercial surrogacy (quoted in Webber, 2022).

To be sure, many legal parents do not intend explicitly to take advantage of the surrogate mothers in terms reminiscent of slavery. The statement of a Suffolk couple can be read along these lines: ‘We didn't go into this to abuse or take advantage of anyone ... We entered into an agreement with a person to change our lives - and financially we can change Hers’ (quoted in Kale, 2022). The naïve and problematical aspect here concerns, again, consent, which legitimizes the instrumentalization of human beings with reference to financial support and contractual relations while ignoring that the contract is not one between equals (see also Salecl, 2010). This is perhaps why a surrogate mother, Yana Blezor, describes her experience in the following way: ‘I was treated like an animal’ (quoted Kale, 2022).

However, new biopolitical selection processes are being institutionalized thanks to developing medical technologies. New Life Global Network, another agency providing surrogacy services, is a subject of debate in this context because of the controversial options it offers its clients. Among these options are determining the sex of the unborn baby and leaving the decision of what to do in case of possible illness or disability to the legal parents (Das et al., 2022). According to an investigation conducted by the Observer, the company has been applying illegal and unethical medical procedures and taking advantage of local legal loopholes for years. Sex selection, for instance, is being carried out in countries like Georgia and Ukraine by exploiting legal loopholes while it is forbidden in other countries (Das et al., 2022). Moreover, the company’s ‘guarantee’ of a baby to its customers requires the transfer of not one but four or five embryos to the surrogate mother, which increases the rates of twins and triplets. For this reason, the surrogate mothers often experience extremely painful processes such as miscarriage, stillbirth, high blood pressure, and hypertension during pregnancy.

Reminded of such excesses, the company's owner, David Bezhuashvili, defends himself by referring to charity: 'We have assisted many people to overcome poverty and earn a living,' adding that his company has contributed to 'the cause of human importance' (quoted in Das et al., 2022). But is this not the very language of the slave trader? Recall *The Confidence-Man*, where we meet a businessman who, on several occasions, passionately emphasizes how important trust is for social interactions (Melville, 2007: 178). Shortly afterwards, however, we realize that the man is a slave trader. Our sociological experience confirms Melville's intuition: ours is a world in which new forms of slavery can flatten colourful idea(l)s such as consent, trust, charity, and so on, and turn them into means for dark ends. Sometimes it does this in a straightforward manner, through silence. Often, though, and paradoxically, it undermines 'human importance' by advocating it. In our terminology, though, New Life Global reduces the surrogate mother's body to a profit-making tool, a bio-political dimension which, on occasions, bordered on eugenics when New Life Global's Ukrainian branch offered the legal parents a right to leave the baby in an orphanage in Ukraine if the baby was born sick or disabled (Das et al, 2022).

### **Case III: the cell phone**

The liquid modern equivalents of the Utopias of yore are neither about time nor about space – but about *speed* and *acceleration*. (Bauman, 2002: 241)

The cell phone is literally everywhere today, integrated into every sphere of life, and reshaping the relationship between subjective experience and power. It is an instrument of self-exemption from a locality and connecting to another simultaneously. However, this connectivity, which is often experienced as freedom, is prone to several paradoxes that reveal some essential aspects of contemporary slavery. For instance, while the cell phone increases accessibility, providing its user

with certain privileges such as communicational mobility, it paradoxically creates a ‘culture of availability’ (Hunt, 2021) where one can be reached and responsabilised all the time. Thus, receiving a message or email at any time of the day creates the perception in employees that ‘it just makes it feel like you’re permanently at work’ (Hunt, 2021). As such, the cell phone is instrumental to uneven relations of power. While the bosses, the businesses, the authorities can reach the users in no time, most users need to wait in a line for excessive amount of time or can never reach them. ‘To an extent never achieved by the “absentee landlords” of yore, capital has cut itself loose from its dependency on labour through a new freedom of movement undreamt of in the past’ (Bauman, 2000: 25).

It is important to emphasize that, as the ‘private’ cell phones are getting more and more user-friendly today, they are also becoming an imperative, an essential token of inclusion in larger networks. Indeed, one simply cannot access most public and private services in the contemporary society without them. The cell phone functions as a meta-apparatus that enables the co-functioning of other apparatuses that govern the differentiated aspects of contemporary everyday life (such as work, entertainment, education, tourism...). As Michel Foucault (2008: 283) has shown, liberal political economy traditionally sought to separate the political and economic spheres. Neoliberalism, in contrast, seeks to extend the powers of economy into political and social contexts. Neoliberalism involves ‘economization,’ the extension of the economic logic into domains that have hitherto been noneconomic (219; see also Brown, 2015). The cell phone is indispensable to this process, which involves the increasing instrumentalization of human beings in virtual networks where inclusion and exclusion take place through continuous, mobile forms of governing, advertisement, control and surveillance targeting the digital conduct of mobile subjects.

In this mobile world, it is free to share one's data but often not free not to share it. One can for instance be deprived of using mobile health applications if one does not give consent to sharing information. Thus, according to a study published in the British Medical Journal, which included over 20,000 applications in its sample, nine out of every 10 health applications collect and use user data. But this data can be used for various purposes, from creating profiles to serving personalized ads, through data mining without the user's consent (Tariq, 2022). That is, consent can lead to unconsensual use or rather abuse of personal data.

Therefore, it is necessary to consider the cell phone in terms of network. It is often argued that in the 'new spirit of capitalism' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007) the activity of the mediator in establishing and extending networks is becoming 'a value in itself' irrespective of the specific goal or substantial character of the mediated entities (107). 'In a connectionist world, a natural preoccupation of human beings is the desire to *connect* with others, *to make contact*, so as not to remain *isolated*' (111). But connectionism can always be used in the networks in an opportunistic way. This opportunism, of course, is not justified in the new spirit of capitalism: one should be acting in search of the 'common good', that is, to engage with others, inspire confidence, be tolerant, respect differences and pass information to others, so that everyone in a network can increase their 'employability' (115). In this sense the new capitalism has an ethical scheme of evaluation. In networks everything 'belongs' to everything else, 'everything may be allied to everything else', but 'nothing can be reduced to anything else, nothing can be deduced from anything else' (Latour, 1988: 163). That is, networking is, ideally, an 'irreductionist' affair which cannot be thought of in functionalistic, systemic terms.

There is, however, an elephant in the room. Networks can always be abused, a networker can always reduce others in a network to a commodity. Insofar as the pursuit of profit remains the

fundamental horizon of networking, that is, insofar as the distinction between ‘disinterested’ sharing in the interest of the ‘common good’ and the strategic-instrumentalist utilization of network relations is blurred, the intermediaries start to behave as if they have ‘a property right over the person of the one whom he puts in contact with a third party, who anticipates an advantage from this liaison’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007: 456). And such networking coincides with exploitation in its strongest, biopolitical sense, which involves the instrumentalization of human beings (364-365). The risk of networking is falling back upon biopolitics, and since this risk is an inbuilt, structural risk, the world of networks is always prone to become a despotic world. Herein lies the ultimate risk that pertains to the cell phone: despite all the freedoms it offers the cell phone is an apparatus of capture, which puts human life into instrumental use.

Many people feel uneasy when they are separated from their phones. Many are anxious for not being available when contacted. Others cannot find out not to respond automatically, and so on. These impulsive patterns of behaviour reveal a paradoxical situation in which people become enslaved by apparatuses they imagine they master. This complementarity between capture and captivation condenses a problem specific to contemporary slavery, perhaps *the* problem of slavery today: the disappearance of the right *not* to participate in networks. Armitage (2018) has aptly called it ‘the doctrine of compulsory appearance,’ that is, denying people the right *not* to participate in networks. While technology is supposed to be an extension of the human, the human, in many cases, becomes an extension of technological networks in practice. Through this instrumentalisation, one finds oneself in an uncannily close proximity to animal captivation. Just as an animal, a cat for instance, cannot *not* come if one opens the fridge, the networked person cannot *not* take the phone, respond to messages, check one’s emails, prefer not to get involved, etcetera, and more often than not demonstrates automatic responsiveness to the call of the

technological spectacle, which is reminiscent of the instinctive behaviour that pertains to the animal. In so far as what distinguishes the human from the animal is precisely its potential not to behave automatically, to suspend its animal captivation (Agamben 2004: 65), the technological networks tend to erase the distinction between the human and animal as the citizen borders on the slave. And so, although condemned, archaic forms of enslavement return in an informational-technological variant and are voluntarily assimilated into the contemporary spectacle-democracies. However:

To be free is not simply to have the power to do this or that thing, nor is it simply to have the power to refuse to do this or that thing. To be free is ... to be capable of one's own impotentiality, to be in relation to one's own privation. (Agamben, 1999: 183)

The exercise of freedom often occurs in the form of opting out, an abstention or withdrawal. This is why Walter Benjamin describes 'revolution' not merely as the 'motor' of history but also as its 'emergency break,' as that which makes it possible to arrest the bare repetition of pseudo-history (Benjamin, 2003: 402). This is why Herman Melville (2016) invented, almost simultaneously with the Communist Manifesto, his character *Bartleby*, the passive clerk who answers his boss' demands systematically by saying 'I would prefer not to.' In the context of contemporary consent-based forms of slavery Bartleby's gesture of abstention has an ethical and anthropological precedence for it is a rem(a)inder of the experience of possibility or potentiality, which demarcates the thin line between the human and the animal.

## **Instead of Conclusion: Neo-slavery?**

Slavery exists in many shapes; it has many faces. So is the use of it. The classical literature understands slavery through its triangulation with property relations and force. In a counter-

classical approach, which is forced by the reading of our three cases, the focus seems to shift to another, emerging triangulation: neo-slavery, instrumental use and consent. The two triangulations are not identical, but they are allied. Precisely because they do not overlap completely, they produce differences. Thus, the reading of the three cases cast the classical tradition in a new light, revitalizing the concept of slavery by putting it into a different use.

In both classical slavery and neo-slavery, though, there are common themes. In both, it is the apparatuses of capture that reduce the human being into the position of bare life or instrument. Our contention is that the consent-based instrumentalisation is what needs to be thought as neo-slavery today. Today, as before, capacities of some human beings are captured and instrumentalised by others. Nevertheless, what is new today is that voluntary servitude misrecognizes itself as freedom, all the while it is still slavery. The ancient slave knew that s/he was a slave. The new slaves, in contrast, misrecognize themselves as free subjects. But such misrecognition is where the abuse of power, a function of misrecognition, begins. Along the same lines, today consent emerges as an apparatus of abuse. Just as the ancient slave-instrument incarnated the abuse of use, the manufacturing of free will, the mechanism of voluntary servitude, is animated here by technology. Automata, after all, is what happens when you achieve voluntary servitude. Voluntary servitude, in this sense, is a function of the system of counting, of a despotic account, regardless of whether it is implemented by an individual despot or a technical system of automated counting.

Let us, to end with, rethink what has been said above, intensifying and radicalizing it with a different vocabulary, that of the two *Blade Runner* films by Ridley Scott (1982) and Denis Villeneuve (2017). Both *Blade Runner* films present a de-politicized society that oscillates between two extremes: the spectral (the eye, optics) and the biopolitical (the body, haptics). On the one hand, recognizing the subject only as a sign, the society of the spectacle registers, identifies,

produces and reproduces the subject as a code. At the same time, though, the subject is constantly reduced to a naked body, to bare life, for biometric technologies to scan it as a biological body or body parts. Being simultaneously a pure code (word without body) and an instrument-slave (body without word), the replicants are thus the paradigmatic subjects of this society.

However, the replicants are a little too perfect, or rather too human: they turn unmanageable and revolt in a way reminiscent of Spartacus in Scott's film. The perfect commodity, in Marxist terms, becomes the gravedigger of its producer. But in Villeneuve's sequel, such politicization is foreclosed in advance. Despite both films depict a relation between masters and slaves, that is, a despotic relation in the sequel the idea of freedom appears to be emptied out. The replicants, now endowed with 'free will', misrecognize voluntary servitude as freedom. The concept of 'free will,' as Nietzsche insisted, was 'fabricated' to make humanity 'accountable' to a transcendent God (1969: 53). In the first film, the replicants have no notion of free will and thus can directly politicize their condition in an apolitical society. In the latter, they do not revolt for they consider themselves already free. But freedom has nothing to do with feeling free. True freedom requires recognizing oneself as a slave in the first place, identification with the position of slave, saying that I am a slave (see Žižek 2018: 204). Tellingly, therefore, only when K., the protagonist of the sequel, identifies himself as a slave, he can act politically.

## **Funding**

This paper is written as a part of Conceptualizing Slavery in the Twenty-First Century project funded by The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Türkiye.

## **References**

Acharya P and Hudson M (2023) Revealed: Amazon linked to trafficking of workers in Saudi Arabia. *The Guardian*, 10 October.

- Agamben G (1999) *Potentialities. Collected Essays in Philosophy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Agamben G (2004) *The Open. Man and Animal*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Agamben G (2009) *What Is an Apparatus?* Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Agamben G (2015) *The Use of Bodies*. Stanford: Stanford University Press
- Agamben G (2019) *Creation and Anarchy. The Work of Art and the Religion of Capitalism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Aristotle (1995) *Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Armitage (2013) A Google home inspector calls: on the rise of the doctrine of compulsory appearance. *CTheory Theory Beyond the Codes: 2010-2014*. (accessed 27 November 2024)
- Bales K (2012) *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Baudelaire C (2010) [1869]. *Paris Spleen*. Richmond: Alma Classic Ltd.
- Bauman Z (2000) *Liquid Modernity*. London: Polity.
- Bauman Z (2002) *Society Under Siege*. London: Polity
- BBC News (2021) Amazon apologises for wrongly denying drivers need to urinate in bottles. 4 April.
- Benjamin W (2003) *Selected Writings, vol. 4 1938-1940*, ed. H. Eiland and M. W. Jennings, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.
- Boltanski L and Chiapello E (2007) *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Verso.
- Brown W (2015) *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. New York: Zone.
- Buck-Morss S (2009) *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*. PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Castro AFH (2017) Slavery in Plato's allegory of the cave: Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière, and the militant intellectual from the Global South. *Theatre Survey* 58:1
- Cook M (2021) Commodification chronicles: black friday discounts on babies from Ukraine. *Mercator*, 22 November.

- Crispin J (2021) Welcome to dystopia: getting fired from your job as an Amazon worker by an app. *The Guardian*, 5 July.
- Das S, Bowers S and Politzer M (2022) Global surrogacy agency accused of putting women at risk with ‘unethical’ medical procedures. *The Guardian*, 18 December.
- Davis M (2018) *Old Gods, New Enigmas: Marx's Lost Theory*. London: Verso.
- Derrida J (1981) *Positions*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Diken B and Laustsen CB (2005) *The Culture of Exception. Sociology Facing the Camp*. London: Routledge.
- Foucault M (1977) *Discipline and Punish*. London: Penguin.
- Foucault M (2008) *The Birth of Biopolitics. Lectures at the College de France, 1978–79*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gilchrist K (2023) The commercial surrogacy industry is booming as demand for babies rises. *CNBC*, 7 March.
- Greenhouse S (2022) Amazon chews through the average worker in eight months. They need a union. *The Guardian*, 4 February.
- Gruet S (2024) Amazon fined for ‘excessive’ surveillance of workers. *BBC*, January 23.
- Hamilton K (2023) Delivery drivers sue amazon for being forced to pee in bottles. *Forbes*, May 30.
- Hunt E (2021) ‘It just doesn’t stop!’ Do we need a new law to ban out-of-hours emails?. *The Guardian*, June 29.
- Hyland AD (2004) *Questioning Platonism: Continental Interpretations of Plato*, New York: State University of New York.
- Irigaray L (1974) *Speculum of the Other Woman*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Juneau J and Schonfeld A (2023) Famous families who’ve welcomed children through surrogacy. *People.Com*. June
- 28
- Kafka F (2015) *Aphorisms*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Kale S (2022) Will the babies be left in a war zone? The terrified Ukrainian surrogates – and the parents waiting for their children. *The Guardian*. 10 March.

Klimchuk O and Viktor C (2020) Ukraine's unregulated surrogacy industry. *Dw.Com*, 24 May.

Kuhn TS (1970) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Long KA (2021) Who does and doesn't make big bucks at Amazon: new data indicates sharp split along race and gender lines. *The Seattle Times*. September 24.

Lordon Frederic (2014) *Willing Slaves of Capital. Spinoza & Marx on Desire*. London: Verso.

Marx K (1976) *Capital*. Volume I. London: Penguin.

Melville H (2007) *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*. Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press.

Melville H (2016) *Bartleby*. London: Penguin.

Nietzsche F (1969) *Twilight of Idols. The Anti-Christ*. London: Penguin

Nietzsche F (1972) *Beyond Good and Evil*. London: Penguin.

Paul K (2021) Leaked memo shows amazon knows delivery drivers resort to urinating in bottles. *The Guardian*, March 26.

Plato (2003) *The Republic*. London: Penguin.

Quijano A (2000) Coloniality of power, eurocentrism, and Latin America. *Nepantla: Views from South* 1 (3): 533–80.

Rogers K (2023) Teens are exhausted by phone notifications but don't know how to quit, report finds. *CNN*, 26 September.

Sainato M (2021) 'I'm still in pain': Amazon employees say climate of fear has led to high rates of injuries. *The Guardian*, 30 December

Salecl R (2010) *Choice*. London: Profile Books.

Tariq S (2022) Nine out of 10 health apps harvest user data, global study shows. *The Guardian*, 15 December.

The Economist (2022) The war has thrown Ukraine's surrogacy industry into crisis. *The Economist*, September 8.

Webber J (2022) The Irish rush to help Ukrainian surrogate mothers. *Financial Times*, 21 March.

Xenophon (1998) *Oeconomicus*. In Xenophon's Socratic Discourse: An Interpretation of the Oeconomicus, by Leo Strauss, 1–80. South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press.

Žižek S (2018) *Like a Thief in Broad Daylight: Power in the Era of Post-Humanity*. London: Penguin

Zucker JD (2021) (In)Voluntary surrogacy in genesis. *The Ashbury Journal*, 67(1), pp. 9-24.

## Author Biographies

**Bülent Diken** is Professor Emeritus in Social and Cultural Theory, Lancaster University, Department of Sociology.

Currently he teaches at Kadir Has University, Department of Radio-TV and Cinema. His research fields are social theory, political philosophy, cinema, and urbanism. His publications include *The Culture of Exception* (2005), *Sociology Through the Projector* (2007), *Nihilism* (2009), *Revolt, Revolution, Critique* (2012), *God, Politics and Economy* (2015), and *The New Despotism* (2022).

**Tuğba Göçer** is a Research Assistant at the Faculty of Communication of Kadir Has University and a PhD candidate in Communication Studies. Her research focuses on the discursive production of the poor and poverty in Turkey and the social assistance system under the emerging affective governmentality.

**Mesut Uçak** is a Teaching Assistant at the Faculty of Communication of Kadir Has University, Istanbul, and a PhD candidate in Communication Studies. His research topic is 'Slavery in the 21st Century'. He teaches communication and advertising theories with a focus on governmentality and power.