


Chapter 3

Chains of Inequality and Human Commodities: The Sociology of Exploitation and Modern Slavery in Logistics Network and Global Supply Chains

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ABSTRACT

Supply chains are the lifeline of the modern economy, ensuring the seamless movement of goods. However, beneath the efficiency of these networks lies a hidden architecture of exploitation, coercion, and systemic inequality. This chapter critically examines the intersection of sociology, modern slavery, and logistics/supply chain systems to unravel how structural power imbalances and capitalist imperatives perpetuate the commodification of human labour in contemporary global commerce. The chapter also delves into the logistics sector, analysing the working conditions of warehouse labourers, transporters, and delivery agents. These roles, often characterized by extensive, surveillance, and hyper-productivity, highlight how modern technologies (e.g., algorithmic management, tracking systems) can reinforce control and reduce worker autonomy.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary era, the logistics and supply chain sector has emerged as both the backbone of international commerce and a contested terrain of labour dy-

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namics (Cowen, 2014; Schouten et al., 2019; Anderson, 2022). Undoubtedly, supply chains emphasizes efficiency, speed, and technological optimization, however, a more insidious reality remains hidden, exploitation and modern slavery (Arnold & Hewison, 2005; Gold et al., 2015; Berg et al., 2020; Meehan & Pinnington, 2021; LeBaron, 2021; Ishaya et al., 2024; Fayezi et al., 2025). The logistics sector, often lauded for its role in catalysing global connectivity, warrants critical scrutiny. From last-mile delivery agents subjected to algorithmic control to port workers and long-haul truckers working under exploitative conditions, the sector epitomizes how technological rationality can coexist with deep labour precarity (Moore & Joyce, 2020). Digital surveillance, performance tracking, and real-time data monitoring not only optimize logistical flows but also extend managerial control into the bodily rhythms and temporalities of workers, transforming them into mere nodes in a cybernetic system of extraction (Zuboff, 2019; Chua, 2022).

The issues with capitalism can be better understood through sociological perspective. Karl Marx, the famous sociologist has highlighted the plight of the workers. Even though Marx did not coin the concept of modern slavery, but however, he predicted that the capitalism will create its hegemony in driving the labour and thereby exploiting the labour to the maximum possible extent. Modern slavery refers to forced labour, debt bondage, human trafficking, and other severe forms of coercion. As per the estimates of International Labour Organization (ILO, 2022), over 27 million individuals are in situations of forced labour worldwide. These individuals are frequently relegated to peripheral positions in transnational production networks, where legal protections are minimal, oversight is fragmented, and the architecture of accountability is deliberately diffused across borders (Crane et al., 2019).

Within sociology, modern slavery is increasingly interpreted as a structural phenomenon and is weaved with issues of poverty, migration, racialized labour markets, and asymmetrical power relations, all of which are integral to the functioning of the global economy (Bales, 2012; LeBaron, 2015). The logistics sector, previously perceived as a neutral facilitator of economic activity has now emerged as a site of inquiry where the intensification of labour, spatial and temporal compression, and digital surveillance practices intersect with systemic labour abuses. Traditionally, the emergence of logistics and supply chain networks has mirrored the structural inequalities of global capitalism. The spatial dispersion of production and exploitation across borders has allowed corporations to reap the benefits of deregulated markets, while distancing themselves from the ethical consequences of their supply chain decisions (Gereffi et al., 2005). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic further accentuated the vulnerabilities within global supply chains, particularly highlighting the dispensability and disposability of frontline workers in logistics, warehousing, and transport (Miroudot, 2020; Magableh, 2021; Mchopa et al., 2020).

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