



Corporate Serfdom – A Consequence of Global Development

Mateusz Lewandowski
Institute of Public Affairs
Jagiellonian University, Poland
mateusz.lewandowski@uj.edu.pl

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to argue that serfdom, as a category of describing human relations, has not disappeared and to discover its features as well as to raise the following issue: where is the line between our free will and commitment to work and a corporate serfdom? A point of reference is the dependence of serfs from landlords in the feudal system which began in medieval Europe. To answers for those major questions are based on literature analysis as well as on the results of a small questionnaire research which was conducted among young Poles, working in private sector for small, medium sized and big enterprises. It seems the global economy is partly based on corporate serfdom; however it is much different than feudal one. Also corporate serfdom should not be perceived only as a negative phenomenon.

Key words:

global development, employee, employer, serfdom, capitalism

Introduction

The impact of the global development on the balance of power in world affairs may be understood in various ways. One of such interpretations allows to examine the power of companies in relation with its employees, gained as a result of global development, which many people are proud of and which is considered as a positive sign of contemporary civilization. On the other hand this power may and should be a subject of critical reflection. A point of reference in this paper is the dependence of serfs from landlords in the feudal system which began in medieval Europe.



The aim of this paper is to argue that serfdom, as a category of describing human relations, has not disappeared and to discover its features as well as to raise the following issue: where is the line between our free will and commitment to work and a corporate serfdom? Recalling the problem is important for shaping the best possible employer-employee relations, and should be matter of discussion among academics, politicians, managers and workers. In order to achieve stated aims, the research based on the small questionnaire was conducted among young Poles (about 30 years old).

Global development and the change of serfdom

Toffler (1980:10-11) suggests that up till now the civilization development may be divided into three main phases: agricultural, industrial and “the third wave”. It is being questioned how it should be called, but one of the mostly agreed names is “information society” (Papińska-Kacperek, 2009:17-19). In all those stages several sources of power influencing every-day life routine of working people who are the majority in every society appear.

In agricultural stage of this millennium the dominant system in Europe was feudalism and with this system serfdom is mostly associated. However, in central Europe, it lasted longer than medieval age, even till the middle of the XIX century (Poddanstwo..., Internet). It had various forms in different parts of Europe but it might be defined as a dependence of tenant farmer of his landlord in social, economic and regulatory/legal terms. Of course this relation is complex, but few main restrictions depict it:

- Drudgery – obligation to do the work for landlords sake and interest,
- Limited self disposal and disposal of own property,
- Association with that land - serfs could not leave the holding or village without lord's permission.

It means landlords controlled serf's time, property, effects of work and possibility to move. The key factor is that regular society at that time hardly had a choice to change this situation, as they had no power to disobey and disobedience caused penalties.

The situation has changed in the industrial phase, when new possibilities emerged, caused by the factories development on the one hand and by the impact of



theories of natural law in the age of enlightenment, reflected by adoption of documents such as the Bill of Rights of England or Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in France on the other hand. In this age the traditional feudal serfdom started to disappear and a new form of serfdom was being shaped, the one based on the abuse of corporate workforce. As employees were fighting for their rights the range of dependence was being diminished. However, international corporations still have bigger influence on individual's lives than state, church or family, and that corporations control and colonize our lives in a way no government dreamed since feudal age (Deetz 1995:33, 1992:349, 15 at Griffin, 2003:289-290).

Those three criteria depicting feudal serfdom empower to examine the contemporary situation of employees not only in big international corporations but also in smaller national or local companies reveals crucial similarities. Some simple questions may be asked in this context. Do the managers, as representatives of the employer, have the power to:

- Decide about the amount of employee's emolument, severance or other benefits?
- Limit employee's self disposal in time?
- Associate an employee with working place?

Those problems were discussed in the literature before, for instance huge disproportions in salaries (Griffin 2003:290, Ludzie dostaja ... , Internet) or other benefits (Czarniawska, 2010:89-102, 5,4 milona euro odprawy..., Internet), also the issue of overtime (Hollman, 1993:26-29, The Essential Guide...) and restrictions caused by work in the context of time and space (Fishwick, 1993:265-272, Morgan, 2004:344-357, Toffler, 1980). I haven't met any recent publication considering those issues all together and in the context of serfdom. However, taking into account a different perspective many authors were pointing out the negative aspects of capitalism.

Fournier believes that big organizations have too much power and are too influential. She emphasizes the idea of self-governance and moral economy as a possible solution (Fournier, 2001:203-206). Much more radical criticism was made by Reedy (2001:176-177), who claims for instance that learning organization theory leads to treating people in an instrumental way, moreover in this context he makes a parallel



to concentration (death/work) camps like in Auschwitz, which is an exaggeration and is inadequate, but shows the attitude of the author. Also increasing pressure for 24/7 working time connected with consumerism and a need of development understood in terms of bigger profit is a matter of criticism by Grey and Garsten (2001:21-22). A overwhelming picture of contemporary society and its condition, being a consequence of global development, was drawn by Bauman (2004). The idea of corporate serfdom may fit to this picture very well. This line of criticism in the context of employer-employee relations may be associated with some points of Marxist theory, although this text should not be perceived as any continuation or apology of Marxism.

Similarities between feudal serfdom and features of contemporary employer-employee relation provoke two major questions: isn't our global economy partly based on the hidden idea of serfdom? Where is the line between our free will, agreed commitment to work and corporate serfdom?

Contemporary employer-employee relations – research results

An attempt to answer those two major questions is based on a small research which was conducted among twenty six 26-32 year old Poles, working in private sector for small, medium sized and big enterprises. The method used to for this purpose was a questionnaire. The population was not representative, however this analysis was not supposed to meet the criteria of scientific research. The results were sorted to reflect three basic features of serfdom.

All respondents indicated, that according to their contract they have to work 40 hours per week, which is a typical full time position according to the labor law. Over the last year 33.3% of the population had to work more than that on average at least twice per week, eight people (33.3%) – once per week. It means that 66.0% of respondents had to work overtime (it was not questioned if it was paid or not), on average at least once a week during the last year. One third of researched population was supposed to work none extra hours or much less than on average once per week. At the same time 41.7% of the population declared that in the period of 6 months they would like to work regularly on average two to five hours per week if they were paid for this overtime. 20.8% of the researched group pointed that they would not like to work any paid



overtime in such a period of time and 37.5% indicated the amount of less than 2 hours per week as acceptable. The perspective may be extended by the results of other research, which showed that 27.3% of all fulltime US workers work overtime; about half of these are working one to eight extra hours per week, another third are working 9–19 extra hours (Hollman, 1993:26-29).

The second category of questions concerned two criterions. The first one was an ability to go on a short holiday whenever an employee wanted to during last year, the second one concerned earnings. 16.7% respondents declared they did not have an opportunity of taking one day holiday (excluding holiday on demand), and 20.8% indicated possible problems with going on one week holiday. On the other hand 8.3% of respondents declared they do not want to have such an opportunity.

Only 4.2% of population admitted to know how much the top management earns, 25.0% of the group had some suppositions and the rest (70.8%) had no idea. The second question concerned fairness of the relation between the employee and the top manager's level of emoluments. The most often indicated relation suggested that top manager's salaries may be 4 to 6 times bigger than employees (45.8%). Three people (12.5%) claimed that the fairest manager's salary is twice as big and four people thought it could be at maximum ten times higher. One person claimed it might be even twenty times higher. 20.8% of the group did not answer this question.

The third group of questions was supposed to examine employee's flexibility to move, which was understood in a few ways. In the researched population 12.5% were asked by their employer to sign a declaration forbidding them to work for the competitors after they quit. In general this kind of declaration had sense for 70.8% of questioned employees and it was pointless for 29.2% of respondents. Half of the population (54.2%) also did not like it, while it was neutral to the rest of them (55.8%). 79.2% of the group had no possibility to do their job in any place they like and 75.0% declared they would like to. 41.7% of the researched group had to go on a business trip longer than one day more than three times last year.

Is there a corporate serfdom?



This simple research revealed that the employer-employee relations may be described by very similar features as feudal serfdom. Several conclusions make this statement relevant, such as:

- more than a two thirds of the researched group had to work extra hours on average at least once a week over the last year,
- some people would not like to take advantages of paid overtime,
- proportion between salaries (1:150) recalled by Griffin is far from a fair one, the highest accepted limit of disproportion in conducted research was about 1:20.
- most of the people did not know how much top managers in their company earn, which seems to be a secret for a reason,
- not all of the questioned employees were able to go on holiday when they wanted to,
- some staff had to sign the declaration of loyalty, which disabled them to work for competitors after they quit,
- most of the group had no possibility to do their job in any place they like, which they would like to have.

Although corporate serfdom exists it is hardly possible to give its clear image. Also there is one crucial difference between feudal and corporate one. In a feudal system serfs could not choose nor change the way they worked and lived and their relation with landlord. There was no law and institution to protect them, as they had no rights. A corporate serfdom is serfdom from choice, within the terms agreed in the contract; however the labor market and individual living conditions sometimes may make this choice only theoretical.

There are also other features describing this type of serfdom, which were revealed by such conclusions as:

- in opinion of researched group the differences in salaries should exist,
- lack of possibility to do the job in any place may be explained by the type of work, also some people would not like to have such an opportunity,
- some people would like to work overtime, if they were paid for it



- some people do not care about possibility of going on holiday whenever they want,
- some staff likes traveling, so they like to be on business trips or delegations,
- although the loyalty declarations are not liked by employees, the reason for this kind of practices often is being understood.

Few reasons decide that corporate serfdom has an individual character. Firstly, the same working conditions may be perceived in two opposite ways, as appreciated by one person and as violation by other. Secondly, not always all of three main features defining it appear at the same time. Thirdly, the conditions change in time, so the same case may be interpreted differently according to a specific moment.

It turns out that two forms of corporate serfdom may be identified - neutral and violent. Neutral corporate serfdom concerns basically the typical employer-employee relations when the conditions agreed in a contract are being respected, therefore it is “intangible” and hidden. Sometimes an employee would agree for further limitation of self disposal in time and space if it brings them extra profits. Of course the contract may be broken at any time on agreed terms, however there are usually some consequences allowed by the law. It seems that typical full time job is actually an example of this type of corporate serfdom.

The second type of corporate serfdom, “tangible” one, is violating not only employees’ laws but also their will in a harmful way. This situation takes place when the terms of contract are not being respected or are being respected, but they are against the employees will for a serious reason, like for instance a mother has to work late and would like to spend time with her children. This kind of arguments are raised when implementing work-life balance programs is concerned (The Essential Guide to Work-Life Balance, 2001). It seems obvious that this kind of serfdom does not concern every employee. Also there are many institutions to protect employees’ laws. However not all the employees are aware of it or would dare to go to court and fight with the employer, especially if the person’s salary keeps alive the whole family.

Conclusions



The idea of corporate serfdom refers to three major elements describing feudal dependence of serfs from the landlord. Those are: drudgery, limited self disposal and disposal of own property, association with the place of work.

Two types of corporate serfdom may be identified, a “intangible” neutral and a “tangible” violent one. There is a huge difference between these types of serfdom and the feudal one, concerning the choice and formal ability to change serfs/employees situation and also its possible consequences. The economy is partly based on a corporate serfdom.

The line between a free will, required commitment to work and a corporate serfdom depends on individual perspective circumstances. It is always and individual case and depends on the personal approach, needs and will of both parties – employer and employee.

What is the future? The answer for this question might lead to a third stage of global development – an information society. It brings new possibilities related with the social economy, partnership production, Open Source idea etc. (Benkler:75-106,152-153). For example it has been used to solve some of big social problems, as a lack of funds for R&D to get new treatments for several diseases for people who were too poor to buy an expensive medicine (Bendyk, 2010) (this is other issue why they were poor). However other danger has been identified – “netocracy” as a new class of power holders in a global society (Bard, Soderqvist, 2006)

References

1. Bard, Alexander, Soderqvist, Jan, (2006) “Netokracja. Nowa elita władzy i życie po kapitalizmie”, Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, Warszawa
2. Bauman, Zygmunt, (2004) “Życie na przemieszanie”, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków
3. Bendyk, Edwin, (2010) “Apteka otwarta”, Polityka nr 21/2010
4. Benkler, Yochi, (2008) “Bogactwo sieci. Jak produkcja społeczna zmienia rynki i wolność”, Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, Warszawa
5. Czarniawska, Barbara, (2010) “Trochę inna teoria organizacji”, Poltext, Warszawa
6. “The Essential Guide to Work-Life Balance” (2001), Department of Trade and Industry/Scotland Office, HMSO, London
7. Fishwick, Francis, (1993) “Overtime Working—A Matter for Public Concern”, Management Decision, Vol. 17 Iss: 3.



8. Fournier, Valerie, "Utopianism and the cultivation of possibilities: grassroots movements of hope" [in] Parker, Martin (ed.), (2002) "Utopia and organization", Blackwell Publishing
9. Grey, Christopher, Garsten, Christina, "Organized and disorganized utopias – an essay on presumption"[in] Parker, Martin (ed.), (2002) "Utopia and organization", Blackwell Publishing
10. Griffin, Em, (2003) „Podstawy komunikacji społecznej”, Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, Gdańsk
11. Hollman, Robert W.,(1993) "Overtime Working: Employee Willingness", Employee Relations, Vol. 2 Iss: 5
12. Ludzie dostają zbyt wysokie wynagrodzenia, online document, <http://www.chip.pl/news/wydarzenia/trendy/2009/11/bill-gates-ludzie-dostaja-zbyt-wysokie-wynagrodzenia>
13. Morgan, Rober, E., (2004) "Teleworking: assessment of benefits and challenges", European Business Review Vol. 16 No. 4 2004
14. Papinska-Kacperek, Joanna (ed.), (2008) "Społeczeństwo informacyjne", PWN, Warszawa
15. Poddanstwo, online document, <http://encyklopedia.pwn.pl/haslo.php?id=4009552>
16. Reedy, Patric, "Keeping the Black Flag flying: anarchism, utopia and the politics of nostalgia" [in] Parker, Martin (ed.), (2002) "Utopia and organization", Blackwell Publishing
17. Toffler, Alvin, (1980) "The third wave", Bantam Books
18. 5,4 miliona euro odprawy za odejście Alessandra Profumo, online document, http://wyborcza.biz/biznes/1,100896,8409575,40 mln_euro_odprawy_za_odejście_Alessandra_Profumo.html