

*Freedom and work. Slaves and domestic servants in eighteenth-century  
Denmark-Norway*

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In late eighteenth-century Denmark-Norway, issues of freedom were sometimes paired with particular types of work and particular types of workers. The typical example of this is the lifting of adscription in Denmark in 1788 which had previously tied men between the ages of 4 and 40 to the estate where they were born. Free men worked harder, an argument ran. At the same time, slaves continued to be kept in the Danish colonies in the West Indies and the mobility of servants continued to be restricted in Denmark and Norway alike where the law obliged young, healthy individuals to work as servants or be punished with incarceration in a correction house. In fact, the lifting of adscription led some to argue that restrictions on servants' mobility should be tightened because servants abused their alleged freedom to dictate the terms of their employment. Servants' had a craving for freedom that was detrimental to the state, and it was even contended that a servant's freedom outstripped that of a merchant or a state official because the servant only had himself to care for while his employer's duties including caring for his household and contributing to society.

The paper particularly deals with two categories of workers connected with the household: domestic servants and slaves. The paper investigates if and how slaves and servants met in eighteenth-century Denmark-Norway in law, and on the pages of essays, treatises, periodicals, and newspapers. I explore how notions of order, restrictions on movement and work intersected with notions of freedom and examine how notions of free and unfree labour were utilised in late eighteenth-century Denmark-Norway.

Servants and slaves were different to the law; the first group was under contract and a subject under the law, the other was under ownership and not a legal subject. But the work many slaves performed was no different from what many servants did. Many worked as domestic servants and a few worked as domestic servants in Denmark-Norway proper. Here we find that they could be referred to as servants in censuses but judged to be property and unfree in court as was the case when two men who had been slaves in the colonies ran away from their masters to join the fleet in Copenhagen in 1801. The court case came to revolve around the question of whether they were free or unfree and, subsequently, if they should be dealt with as

absconding servants or runaway slaves. In such cases race and ethnicity clearly affected and intersected with notions of free and unfree labour, but it is unclear to what extent this was the norm.