

Oct 21 2015

Eradicating Institutional Slavery, Past and Present

Ethan Geringer-Sameth

Melanie Vasselin is an alumnus of the M.Sc. Human Rights programme at L.S.E., having focused on indigenous peoples' rights and postcolonial studies.

[Click here for all blog posts in this series](#)

To many people, slavery is a term which brings to mind ghastly depictions of wooden ships with rows of human cargo transported for forced labor in the Americas and Europe. This is the archetypal image of the transatlantic slave trade, which flourished roughly from the beginning of the 16th century to the 19th century. The horrific practice has had a lasting legacy in the form of [present-day racial inequality](#), prevalent in discourses on both sides of the Atlantic. Equally terrible, though less overt in the West, is its ideological relative: the phenomena collectively termed “modern slavery.”

Many N.G.O.s have campaigned for the use of [the term “modern slavery”](#) because of its morally abhorrent connotations, associating with the now-commended abolitionist movement of the 19th century in the hopes of spurring outrage and action. This has had some success. The passing of the [Modern Slavery Act](#) by the U.K. Parliament earlier this year, for instance, has been hailed as an important step towards a more holistic recognition of global slavery. Yet on the surface, it may be difficult to make the leap from transatlantic slavery to modern slavery. The transatlantic slave trade was marked by its large-scale human trafficking, mostly for the production of staple materials, in a systematic and routinized way characteristic of late mercantilism. Modern slavery, on the other hand, is prohibited by law in every country in the world and operates covertly, often opportunistically, and in a wide variety of production chains and services; it takes place transnationally through trafficking, and domestically through debt peonage and forced labor.

These two incarnations of slavery, however, are less dissimilar than we might like to think, and their common labeling points to the looming injustice that they share in. Today slavery is no longer accepted as conventional, nor as a necessary evil. It goes against many of the values that Western states claim to be built upon, especially the cornerstones of individual freedom and autonomy. Yet modern slavery resembles transatlantic slavery both in its globalizing reach and in its institutionalized condonation of exploitation.



A memorial to slavery in Stone Town, Zanzibar.



An abolitionist symbol (1787).

While legislation such as the recent Act passed in the UK is commendable – improving our understanding and identification of modern slavery – anti-slavery legislation can only go so far. Slavery, in any form, is currently illegal; enslavers are today forced to operate underground in most parts of the world, in the murky domain of the unregulated and overlooked. Like many social ills, however, it continues to thrive. In global markets characterized by liberalization and deregulation enslavers see incentives. The European Court of Human Rights has dealt with a number of cases relating to Article 4 of the Convention, which prohibits slavery and forced labor. While many judgments have found violations with respect to servitude and forced labor, the Court hesitates to use the term “slavery.” Such a usage would risk morally implicating conditions central to global economic operations and galvanizing support for radical reform. Coupled with the ease with which human traffickers avoid prosecution, the economic incentives and adaptability of slave labor make modern slavery a booming business.

[According to the ILO](#), almost 21 million people are enslaved today, a staggering figure considering the vehement condemnation of slavery worldwide. Modern slavery exists in a diverse range of sectors from agriculture, construction and manufacturing, to domestic work and prostitution. Many of these industries perform roles central to local and global economies, entangling exploitation with our

everyday lives. Beyond the label, this environment is reminiscent of transatlantic slavery, in which the labor of enslaved people was vital to sustaining and developing young economies in the New World. The functions of modern slavery, as well as some of the techniques of enslavement—including institutionalizing domination through deprivation and dependency—remain the same. While we claim to have changed our values and redirected our ethical compass, the institutional practices of slavery are not as dissimilar as we might like to think, and the profit-driven, capitalistically competitive environment it operates in is also largely unchanged.

It is interesting to note the modern anti-slavery campaign's relationship with the contemporary human rights movement, in addition to 19th century abolitionism. The abolitionist movement was long held as a success due to its eradication of the transatlantic slave trade. However, with the recurrence of slavery in modern times, this precursor to the human rights project has an important lesson to teach the latter: that a widely supported campaign, even backed by legislation, may not be enough to eradicate the roots of an injustice. We must confront the extremely uncomfortable fact that slavery is more than just an aberrance caused by a few evil-doers; it is deeply enmeshed in the neoliberal economic structures that operate alongside human rights discourses. From domestic service providers to the cultivators of common produce, forced labor continues to play a role in economies the world over.

To the extent that values of independence and agency, shared by both abolitionist and human rights causes, guide the ethics of Western politics, so too does the economics of exploitation condition what we consume, often without thinking. We must go beyond legislation or mere exclamations of injustice, and thoroughly consider what it would look like to live up to the values we claim to hold. The question is: Can we do this as a society without accepting, nor ignoring, these mammoth inconsistencies?



This piece was published as part of the Anti-slavery Series, October 2015.

This entry was posted in [The Anti-slavery Series](#) and tagged [modern slavery](#), [transatlantic slavery](#), [U.K. Modern Slavery Act](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).