



On History

Beyond Trafficking and Slavery Short Course | Volume 4



Edited by Joel Quirk and Genevieve LeBaron

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Beyond Trafficking and Slavery Short Course
Volume Four

Edited by Joel Quirk and Genevieve LeBaron

Beyond Trafficking and Slavery Supporters



About Beyond Trafficking and Slavery

A wide range of activists, academics, trade unions, governments and NGOs are currently trying to understand and address forced labour, trafficking and slavery. *Beyond Trafficking and Slavery* (BTS) occupies a unique position within this larger movement, one which combines the rigour of academic scholarship with the clarity of journalism and the immediacy of political activism. It is an independent, not-for-profit marketplace of ideas that uses evidence-based advocacy to tackle the political, economic, and social root causes of global exploitation, vulnerability and forced labour. It provides original analysis and specialised knowledge on these issues to take public understanding beyond the sensationalism of many mainstream media depictions. It further works to bring citizens, activists, scholars and policy-makers into conversation with each other to imagine pioneering policy responses.

BTS is housed within [openDemocracy](#), a UK-based digital commons with an annual readership of over nine million. OpenDemocracy is committed to filling gaps in global media coverage, helping alternative views and perspectives find their voices, and converting trailblazing thinking into lasting, meaningful change.



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The use and abuse of history: slavery and its contemporary legacies

Campaigners and governments ritually praise the anti-slavery efforts of 'great emancipators' in the United Kingdom and the United States, yet fail to engage with the larger history of enslavement, slave resistance, or the contemporary legacies of historical slave systems.

Joel Quirk & Genevieve LeBaron

Campaigners and governments leading the fight to end 'modern-day slavery' regularly appeal to the history of anti-slavery to help justify their current activities and agendas. These appeals to history typically involve one or more of the following: 1) a [selective focus](#) upon mostly white anti-slavery campaigners in Britain and the United States; 2) a largely [uncritical celebration](#) of the virtues of 'great emancipators', such as William Wilberforce and Abraham Lincoln, whose personal examples are invoked as models to emulate; and 3) a recurring emphasis on [innovative strategies used by ordinary citizens](#)—petitions, boycotts, pamphlets—whose impact is held to have been politically decisive in securing 'freedom' for enslaved Africans.

Anti-slavery campaigners are therefore chiefly regarded as "heroes [who] won great battles", to quote [Kevin Bales](#), and their inspirational historical example is put forward as a model that we should follow today. In a high profile speech in 2012, US President Obama [declared that](#) "our fight against human trafficking is one of the greatest human rights causes of our time, and the United States will continue to lead it—in partnership with you. The change we seek will not come easy, but we can draw strength from the movements of the past". If pioneers such as Wilberforce and Lincoln were able to end legal slavery, then what stops a new band of college students, churches, activists, and public officials from 'liberating slaves' today?

This superficial approach to history is profoundly flawed. It sings songs of praise for past anti-slavery efforts, yet does not seriously engage with the history of slavery or its legacies. Centuries of severe and systematic exploitation and abuse have too often been reduced to an abbreviated form of ‘pre-history’, whose main narrative function is to set the stage for the ‘moral triumph’ of abolition. As a number of our contributors to this volume demonstrate in more depth, millions of enslaved Africans played a fundamental role in both building the Americas and enriching Europe, while external demand for slaves drew parts of Africa into a political economy of violent enslavement.

Prior to the early nineteenth century, forced migration from Africa to the Americas greatly outpaced migration from Europe. Enslaved labour not only constituted a key source of wealth and power, it also proved to be a core economic motor for the development of [modern capitalism](#). To protect and maintain this system, slave owners and their allies developed elaborate institutions to both regulate and reinforce their property rights, including new forms of policing, banking, contract, and insurance. They also devised self-serving racist theories to justify their privileges. This toxic combination of racism and economic interest created a system of slavery chiefly defined by extraordinary levels of physical abuse, psychological torment, and sexual violence.

Enslaved Africans both resisted and endured these inhuman conditions. Resistance could take many different forms, with some of the most notable examples including shipboard uprisings crossing the Atlantic and numerous cases of flight and revolt upon arrival in the Americas. Slaves who escaped joined Maroon communities outside European control, such as [Palmares](#) in the seventeenth century, or travelled long distances to settle in ‘free’ communities such as [Boston](#) and [Buxton](#) in the nineteenth. Families and communities also emerged under the shadow of slavery. Slaves found ways to establish personal bonds—however fragile—and contributed to the evolution of distinctive forms of language, food, music, religion, and culture.

Historical patterns of resistance were fundamental to the anti-slavery cause, yet too many ‘[modern-day abolitionists](#)’ continue to imagine slaves as passive victims who benefitted from activism conducted by others on their behalf. This overlooks the crucial role of slaves and ex-slaves in challenging historical slave systems. This most famous example is the successful revolt of 1791 that paved the way for the foundation of the [Black Republic of Haiti](#) in 1804. Black generals such as Toussaint L’Ouverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines won a series of decisive victories against English, French, and Spanish armies, thereby creating an inescapable challenge to racist ideologies that held that blacks were inherently inferior to whites.

When states in Latin America broke away from Spain during the early nineteenth century, [slaves fought for their freedom](#) in wars of independence. Decades later, as many as 100,000 slaves and ex-slaves fought against the Confederacy during the Civil War in the United States. According to a new body of research by historians such as [Steven Hahn](#), the enlistment of slaves in the Union army can be best understood as part of a [much larger slave rebellion](#), which saw slaves in the southern United States massively undermine slavery through their own efforts.

Neither the legal abolition of slavery nor the official end of hostilities [brought resistance to an end](#). Whenever slavery was abolished, former slave owners and entrenched elites made every effort to defend their privileges, thereby forcing former slaves to [continue their struggle for rights and recognition](#). In the decades that followed legal abolition, former slave owners turned to other similar systems of labour exploitation, such as indentured, forced, and convict labour. They also concocted new systems of racial dominance, such as the ‘separate yet equal’ duplicity of the [Jim Crow era](#), which was in turn policed by the [horrors of lynching](#).

Extreme violence was often justified as ‘protecting’ white feminine virtue from the ‘uncontrollable’ sexual savagery of black men, while

female black domestic workers continued to labour in white households under conditions often reminiscent of slavery. When Britain and France abolished slavery in 1834 and 1848, respectively, both governments [financially compensated masters](#) for the loss of their property. In no case did slaves receive compensation for their years of toil and abuse. These and other related developments ultimately contributed to global patterns of wealth, poverty, inequality and discrimination that remain with us to this day.

Introducing our Contributors

This volume draws together a series of chapters that explore these and other related historical themes in greater depth. All of these chapters were specifically commissioned to explore issues and developments that have been overlooked or marginalised in the rush to celebrate the virtues of ‘great emancipators’. As we shall see, there is a great deal that the global history of slavery and anti-slavery can potentially teach us about how our world is organised today, while also suggesting possible futures and political projects that could—and should—emerge in relation to combating contemporary injustice, discrimination and exploitation.

It should become apparent, moreover, that the global history of slavery and anti-slavery is much more than a useful source of instruction and inspiration regarding how we should act today. This history also speaks directly to the too often neglected question of [how we should not act](#). Whenever the legal abolition of slavery is reduced to the ‘moral triumph’ of ‘heroic’ campaigners, little space remains for more challenging and politically consequential questions regarding the practical limitations of what was accomplished, what happened next, and what other factors and actors were also in play.

We begin with a series of chapters focusing upon government responsibility. Every government in the world today is officially committed to the anti-slavery cause, yet this rhetoric conflicts with official

support for legal regimes and policy responses that promote forms of systemic abuse, vulnerability, discrimination, and exploitation. This is not a new phenomenon, as histories of the Communist gulag, Nazi work camps, and colonial forced labour regimes make clear.

The first section features contributions from Alex Lichtenstein, Genevieve LeBaron, Laya Behbahani, Julia O'Connell Davidson, Sara Farris, and Eric Allina. Both LeBaron and Lichtenstein concentrate upon the historical roots and contemporary dimensions of the US 'prison-industrial complex'. Each author offers a different yet complementary analysis of the underlying interests of governments and their private sector allies in perpetuating and profiting from prison labour. Behbahani considers the historical origin and more recent evolution of the *kafala* system, which is the current foundation for the state-sponsored exploitation of millions of migrant labourers across most of the Arabian Peninsula. O'Connell Davidson calls on activists to challenge neoliberal governments' strategic mobilisation of the cause of 'modern slavery' whilst undermining human freedom. Farris reconstructs the frequently overlooked history of care and domestic work as an integral feature of state-sponsored capitalism during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Section one ends with Allina's historical analysis of European coloniser's exploitation of forced labour after the abolition of slavery, and the lessons of this period for our own times.

Section two explores histories of activism and mobilisation, with contributions from Joel Quirk, James Stewart, Andrea Major, Nelly Schmidt, Jessica Pliley, Gretchen Soderlund, and Samuel Martínez. Quirk challenges the selective focus of 'modern-day abolitionists' on British and US anti-slavery activism, and highlights the alternative lessons that histories of slavery, colonialism, and imperialism hold for contemporary activists. James Stewart explores how US government officials were not only directly responsible for upholding legal slavery and slave trading, they also occupied a similar role in the aftermath of legal abolition in 1865, with both federal and state level officials

playing a decisive role in defending ‘slavery by another name’. Stewart argues that this history has ramifications for the present, but that they have been largely overlooked because ‘modern-day abolitionists’ have failed to grapple with the historical nexus of slavery and race.

Major and Schmidt both focus on the practical limitations and political complications that marked the history of British and French anti-slavery activism. Major’s contribution demonstrates the limitations of a celebrated boycott of ‘slave sugar’ by British abolitionists during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, along with the practical problems associated with ‘ethical’ sugar produced in India. Schmidt’s chapter explores the problematic attitudes and political agendas that defined the historical worldview of nineteenth century French abolitionists, together with recent forms of memory and forgetting.

This is followed by Pliley and Soderlund, who consider different aspects of the history of anti-trafficking campaigns in the United States. As a now extensive body of research has demonstrated, the key historical precursor to modern anti-trafficking was not anti-slavery, but the political campaigns against ‘white slavery’ and the patriarchal policing of prostitution. Pliley connects ‘white slavery’ interventions to concerns about national security and immigration. She demonstrates that gendered assumptions about potential prostitutes were a central feature of a massive government effort to regulate female mobility and sexuality. ‘White slavery’ was therefore crucial to the growth of the FBI and other security agencies. Soderlund, in turn, focuses upon the ‘continual feedback loop’ that binds together sensational media reports and political activism in the 1880s to similar reports that have been key to anti-trafficking activism from the 1990s onwards. Section two closes with an article by Martínez, which argues that human trafficking in the United States is a ‘parasite’ of prohibitionism, and advocates for a world in which workers are spared the dangers of illicit border crossings and can migrate legally and safely.

The third and final section of the volume focuses upon the historical legacies of slavery and contemporary politics, with articles by Ali Moussa Iye, Joel Quirk, Benedetta Rossi, Alice Bellagamba, Karen Bravo, and recent a statement from civil society groups on reparations. Iye and Quirk's chapters both focus on contemporary initiatives to address histories of slavery. Iye's contribution documents the numerous ways in which the UNESCO Slave Route Project—established in Benin in 1994—has sought to address the global history and legacies of slavery. Quirk in turn compares the political and ideological appeal of 'modern-day slavery' to recent campaigns for reparations. These chapters are followed by a contribution by Rossi, who connects the failure of historical anti-slavery measures in Africa to confront entrenched models of marriage, gender, and kinship with more recent patterns of wartime captivity and sexual violence.

This section also features additional contributions from Bellagamba and Bravo. Bellagamba examines the contemporary legacies of historical slave systems in southern Senegal. She pays particular attention to the ways in which boundaries of community amongst slave descendants have been constructed. Bravo's contribution asks whether contemporary anti-slavery movements are learning from the past or exploiting it for emotional gain. She makes a powerful argument for the need to highlight the similarities surrounding the role of legitimate businesses and economic rationalities in contemporary and historic exploitation. Our final contribution takes the form of a public letter directed to David Cameron, the prime minister of Britain. This makes the ethical and political case for immediate reparations for the immense damages associated with the history and legacies of British involvement in trans-Atlantic slavery. Like his counterparts in Europe and some parts of the Americas, David Cameron is comfortable celebrating the work of 'great emancipators' such as Wilberforce, but it is becoming increasingly difficult for he and his peers to maintain this highly selective and strategically useful focus on abolition.



Section one

Histories of official responsibility
and culpability

Slaves of the state: American prison labour past and present

We know that corporations are drawn to prisoners because they constitute a source of cheap and reliable labour. But what makes prison labour so attractive to governments?

Genevieve LeBaron

Prisoners in the United States produce a vast array of products bought and sold in supermarkets. They roast [coffee beans](#), farm trout and catfish, milk cows and goats for artisanal cheeses sold at [Whole Foods](#), and pick and process [Idaho potatoes](#) and other [fruits and vegetables](#). Corporations both large and small have called upon prisoners to make clothes, shoes, and other department store goods, such as [American flags](#) or [Prison Blues jeans](#).

The US prison system is characterised by staggering [racial and class-based disparities](#). For instance, in 2008, the US Bureau of Justice reported that [one in three black men](#) would go to prison in his lifetime. Of the [one in 35 adults](#) in America currently under correctional control, most are from [poor and working class backgrounds](#). Reflecting on the fact that most prisoners are arrested for poverty-related crimes like theft or selling drugs, while prison time perpetuates their poverty, Harvard sociologist Bruce Western has called US prisons ‘[the new poverty trap](#)’.

Prisoners’ meagre wages do little to free them from this trap. They are paid [dramatically less](#) than market rates would dictate for their labour. The state of California, which has put [inmates to work as fire fighters](#), reportedly pays them [\\$2 a day](#) compared to a non-inmate fire fighter’s typical hourly wage of [\\$34.44](#). Wages vary across different ‘employment’ scenarios, but the majority of employed prisoners are paid between [\\$0.12 and \\$0.40 per hour](#). Prisoners are furthermore often sub-

jected to dangerous working conditions, such as [exposure to cadmium and lead](#) while recycling electronics.

Pointing to racial, class and income disparities, many critics have described prison labour as a form of ‘[modern day slavery](#)’. [Article after article](#) depicts the problem as one in which corporations are exploiting prisoners as part of their “[eternal quest to maximise profit](#)”. It’s no doubt true that some prison labour is pursued as a cost-cutting strategy for firms. But framing prison labour as an interchangeable form of corporate exploitation has obscured its wider and more complex role in US capitalism—both historically and today. In some ways, the more interesting question is: what makes prison labour so attractive to governments?

Prison labours past

Prison labour not a modern phenomenon. A vast body of research has demonstrated that there have been at least three major waves of for-profit prison labour in the history of US capitalism.

The earliest wave occurred across northern states in the early to mid nineteenth century, where the rise of factory work and urbanisation was resulting in labour scarcities and worker rebellions. Prisoners were put to work in large-scale industrial factories to fulfil capitalists’ need for a productive and disciplined labour force. Prison factories during this period were penal-social labouratories. “[The whip made men living machines](#)”, while managers experimented with different divisions of labour and violent methods of discipline. As historian [Rebecca McLennan](#) has [argued](#), these prison factories played an important role in quelling widespread resistance to the new industrial social order by habituating them into the disciplines of waged labour.

The second and overlapping wave of prison labour—the convict lease system—emerged in the southern states in the wake of the formal abolition of plantation slavery in 1865. American states leased large blocks

of prisoners to private companies, which forced prisoners to pick cotton, mine coal, and lay railroads. Far from being a mere substitute for slavery, historians like [David Oshinsky](#) have argued that this system of unfree labour was “[worse than slavery](#)”: it was a brutal strategy to re-appropriate the labour of former slaves and their children. With convict [death rates of over 40 percent](#) in some states, prison labour powerfully and publicly reinforced a racially polarised social order.

Both systems of prison labour were enormously profitable. According to [one study](#), in 1865-66, “American prisoners made goods or performed work worth almost \$29 million—a sum equivalent, as a relative share of gross domestic product, to over \$30 *billion* in 2005 dollars”.

The role of prison labour in US capitalism has never been just about corporate profits. The key architect and beneficiary of these prison labour systems have always been states. Prison labour has helped generate the power and revenue necessary to impose a social order ruled by money and markets. At the same time, the prison system upholds the market order imposed by governments, incarcerating those who resist or cannot find a livelihood within it. High numbers of prisoners have been incarcerated for property crime, theft, or other attempts to create a livelihood outside of low-paid, precarious labour markets. Viewed in this light, prison labour has historically played an essential disciplinary role, both for individual prisoners and for capitalist expansion more broadly. Prison labour also helped to uphold racialised and class-based social orders on which economic ‘growth’ was predicated in both the north and the south, until it was outlawed (until 1979) during the Great Depression.

Prison labour today

The third wave of US prison labour—our contemporary system—needs to be understood in this historical light. Today’s prison labour is not simply a ‘substitute for’ plantation slavery or an interchangeable form of slavery. To suggest otherwise obscures the central role

of governments in perpetuating and profiting from prison labour. While there are some obvious parallels between different systems of exploitation and domination, simplistic analogies blur complex entanglements between slavery, prison labour, and other systems of unfree labour.

In comparison to the two previous waves, a relatively small number of contemporary prisoners exclusively work for private businesses. A wave of legislation—beginning with the Prison Industry Enhancement Act in 1979—re-authorised profitable prison labour and mandated that prisoners work during their incarceration. Today, most of the [2,220,300 prisoners](#) in the US work directly for the state to maintain the prisons in which they are confined. Roughly [6 percent of state prisoners](#) and [16 percent of federal prisoners](#) are incarcerated by and work for private companies.



[Prisoners growing sagebrush at Coyote Ridge Corrections Center in Washington.](#)
[Jeff Clark, BLM/Flickr. Creative Commons.](#)

Some prisoners work for Federal Prison Industries, a government-owned corporation also known as [UNICOR](#), which [reported](#) in 2014 to employ 12,468 inmates across 78 prison factories. UNICOR recycles [toxic e-waste](#), manufactures goods from the [postal containers used by US Postal Service](#) to [ballistic military gear](#), and runs [call centres](#) for private firms. UNICOR's sales [surpassed \\$389 million in 2014](#).

Still more inmates work for booming, state-level prison industries. Prisoners in states like [California](#) and [Colorado](#) work at everything

from [farming and roasting almonds](#) to making the [diploma covers](#) that college graduates buy in their university gift shops. Some build [custom motorcycles](#) that retail at over \$30,000. In spite of bans on the sale of prison-made goods in international law, such as the International Labour Organisation's [1930 Forced Labour Convention](#), such goods are sold commercially across the United States, including in state-run [retail outlet stores](#).

Although these prison industries are owned and operated by state governments, private businesses sometimes partner with the state through 'joint venture programmes'. In many states, prisoners are leased or contracted directly to private firms. For example, Arizona Correctional Industries claims to have "[provided over two million hours of labour to private sector companies](#)" since the year 2000. Its partners have included Cargill, Hickman's Family Farms, and ESB Modular Manufacturing. Although these programmes appear to be expanding, it is important to emphasise that only about [6 percent of state inmates](#) are estimated to work for private firms. Even in these schemes, the state benefits through revenue exchanged for prisoners' labour.

The cost savings and direct revenues accruing to federal and state governments through prison labour are substantial, offsetting the massive cost of incarcerating so many Americans. In addition, prison labour has become a key source of revenue for states coping with fiscal crisis. One notable example is the state of California, which faced a prolonged and dramatic budget crisis between 2008 and 2012. In response the state has increasingly replaced unionised and well-paid government employees with low-paid prisoners. California's inmate fire fighter program reportedly saves the state [\\$1 billion a year](#).

Slaves of the state

Just as in the past, prison labour today is about far more than money. Prison continues to play a central role in anchoring the increasingly unequal and highly racialised social order that characterises contem-

porary US society. The majority of prisoners continue to be predominantly working class people of colour who have been incarcerated for minor offenses, such as theft, selling drugs, or property related crimes. If imprisonment is, as Loic Wacquant has described it, “[the punitive regulation of poverty](#)”, then prison labour is one of the most corporeal forms of neoliberal discipline in existence today. It draws in the unemployed, disenfranchised, and discriminated against, trapping them into disciplines of precarious waged labour.

In keeping with historical precedents, the key architects and beneficiaries of prison labour remain federal and state governments. It has long been clear who retains the ultimate ownership of prisoners’ labour, with the Virginia Supreme Court declaring in 1871 that prisoners were ‘[slaves of the state](#)’. This premise hasn’t fundamentally changed since. Attempts to attribute all blame to profit-driven corporations wrongly absolve governments of their primary responsibility in the exploitation of prison labour.

This article is a condensed version of a book chapter forthcoming in an issue of the *Proceedings of the British Academy* edited by Laura Brace and Julia O’Connell Davidson.

Using US prison labour to make crime pay

Under the guise of 'prisoner rehabilitation', US prison-made products are silently infiltrating consumer markets and propping up its carceral empire, much as they have throughout US history.

Alex Lichtenstein

Americans like myself tend to imagine that convict labour, hidden as it often is behind high walls, resides only the backwaters of the economy—or in the past on southern chain gangs. At most, Americans reckon that our license plates might be made for the state by underpaid inmates. But we certainly don't imagine [call centre](#) staffers taking [hotel reservations](#) to be prisoners, nor [American military uniforms](#), solar power panels, surge protectors, computer circuit boards, hamburgers, or American flags to be the products of prison labour. Often times they are. Even the [hormone-free tilapia](#) sold at Whole Foods comes from a prison-run fish farm in Colorado. Some of these 'prison industries' are organised entirely by state correctional departments or the Federal Bureau of Prisons. In 37 states there are joint-ventures with private businesses, many of them America's leading companies. The Department of Corrections in my home state, Indiana, proudly offers "[private sector partnerships](#)", noting that "businesses benefit from a dependable labour pool, ample production space, and capacity inside Indiana correctional facilities".

From the foundation of the American penitentiary system in the early nineteenth century, convict labour has more often than not been found at the cutting edge of the nation's economic system. Philadelphia's Eastern State Penitentiary, established in 1829, set prisoners to handicraft work in isolation in their cells. Designed to instil discipline, penitence, and reformation, this form of prison labour also produced shoes, textiles, and other artisan-made goods for the growing market in consumable goods beyond the walls.

However, this system soon came to be regarded as an inefficient means of exploiting captive labour in the era of expanding industrialisation. The ‘Pennsylvania system’ of isolated prison labour shortly gave way to the rival ‘congregate system’—that is to say, prisons that doubled as factories. The rehabilitative model of penal labour, while still preached, gave way to practical questions of the output of prison-made goods.

If prisons in the northern states came to resemble factories, those in the south followed their own distinctive path after the Civil War. Images of chained road gangs working under the whip and gun are well-known, but this new form of slave labour proved essential to the broader economic development of the region. Brutally treated as they were, southern prisoners (nearly all of them African American) worked in key industrial sectors. They were ‘leased out’ not only because this was profitable for the state and cheap for employers. Forcing prisoners to work in the harshest jobs in the fastest growing sectors of the south’s new economy was considered the only way of bringing cheap labour into these areas. In the second half of the nineteenth century, southern prisoners built railroads, dug coal, tapped turpentine forests, made bricks, farmed cotton and sugar on enormous plantations, and generally laboured in the most important sectors of the region’s extractive economy. When the leasing of prisoners to private businesses came to an end in the early twentieth century—often through the objections of organised labour—the states put convicts to work building roads across rural areas that badly needed them. The chain gang helped usher in economic progress and state control of penal labour. At the time, penal experts touted the chain gang as a *reform*, a means of providing the discipline of honest work and the healthiness of fresh air to previously privately-leased convicts.

And what about today? As in the past, the language of a “dependable labour pool” is almost always twinned with the rhetoric of rehabilitation. Indiana’s Department of Corrections touts its prison industries as an “effective way to curb idleness among an ever-increasing pris-

on population and a cost-effective means of providing offenders with marketable job skills". But at the end of the day, with pay scales unhindered by minimum wages, work ungoverned by local labour laws, and a labour force with little in the way of choice, prison production is really all about that tilapia for \$9.99 a pound. The 'beneficiaries' here are not the inmates, but the states that can continue to rely on incarceration without breaking the bank, the corporations profiting from their hyper-exploited labour, and, frankly, you and me, the unknowing consumers of these inexpensive prison-made products.

Prison-made products have silently infiltrated much more of the marketplace than Americans like to admit. While still only a minority of the over two million state and federal prisoners in the US work to produce goods for public consumption (as opposed to state use), that's only part of the picture. We should recall that prisoners themselves, as they were in the postbellum south, have become commodities for the growing private prison industry. They are sold to [contractors](#) who profit as much from the number of bodies they warehouse as they do from the inmates' productive labour. Moreover, the so-called 'prison-industrial complex' generates income through the enormous market that mass incarceration creates in [security goods](#): tasers and razor wire, food and health services, [overpriced phone calls](#), [not to mention jobs for correctional officers](#) in regions suffering from a lack of work.

This profoundly reflects our current economic era, one in which services, rent-taking, and the privatisation of public goods underlie the capitalist social order in the US, much the way coal mines, steel mills, and textile plants did a generation ago. In many impoverished communities, [the private prison has replaced the factory as a generator of local jobs](#). And while mass incarceration provides work to the keepers, the kept represent the detritus of post-industrial capitalism, the perpetually jobless from hollowed out urban cores like north Philadelphia. Not far, in fact, from the site of the original Eastern State Penitentiary, which now stands as a local [tourist attraction](#).

Bigger than the World Cup: state-sponsored human trafficking in the Gulf states

Recent attention to the plight of migrant workers in Qatar is welcome, but the problems of trafficking and forced labour in the Middle East are endemic.

Laya Behbahani

The 2022 World Cup has brought the abuses of migrant workers in the Gulf states into the global spotlight. Hiding behind the glittery skyline they have constructed over the past thirty years, migrant workers comprise nearly two-thirds of the GCC's labour force, totalling nearly [22 million migrant workers](#) across the [six GCC states](#) of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). [At least 600,000](#) of these are currently subjected to forced labour. This is a reality that, from my first hand research into these issues, I know most consumers in this hub of luxury never see.

The slave-like treatment of migrant workers in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is not limited to the World Cup, nor is it a new phenomenon. State-sponsored trafficking and forced labour has been part of GCC state development strategies ever since many of them ceased to be part of the British protectorate in 1971. The history of slavery and forced labour in the Gulf of course goes back much longer than this—as it does elsewhere—however [my research shows](#) the space for its modern incarnation is created through the interplay of modern immigration and labour laws. Central here is the *kafala system* (translated as the sponsorship system), introduced in the early 1930s. The term is intended to capture the Arabian notion of hospitality, however this system effectively allows GCC nationals and companies to traffic workers into the GCC for the purposes of labour exploitation.

Media accounts—such as recent stories about the World Cup—often



More than 20 skyscrapers are constructed simultaneously on the west end of Dubai off of Sheikh Zayed Road. Jake Brewer /Flickr. Creative Commons.

describe ‘labour violations’ taking place in the region, however such characterisations bely the scale of the problem and the state sanction of the exploitation. As I have argued in my research, migrant workers in the GCC should be considered victims of human trafficking because they meet three key elements of the definition of trafficking in the Palermo protocol, which all GCC states are either signatories to or have ratified. They are (1) recruited by (2) means of fraud and deception and abuse of power by someone in control for the (3) purposes of exploitation. The legal curtailing of migrant workers’ protections and rights means that exploitation frequently includes forced labour, slavery or practices similar to slavery. Because the dynamics surrounding migrant workers meet the threshold of trafficking in international law, their denial of basic labour rights can be understood as constituting a state-sanctioned manifestation of human trafficking. The GCC countries have thus legally enshrined a form of human trafficking that is unique to this region, but which also has important parallels to capitalism’s ‘[unfree global workforce](#)’ in other parts of the world.

The exploitation of migrant workers in the GCC is systemic. It occurs in broad daylight, is sanctioned through a range of state policies, and is

categorically *not* a result of individual, ‘bad apple’ employers. Once in the GCC, migrant workers (typically from East Asia, the global south and sub-Saharan Africa) are no longer covered under labour protection laws, and their fundamental rights and freedoms are denied.

To begin with, migrants are required to sign a labour contract agreeing to these conditions only in Arabic, a problem for those with no knowledge of the language. Other examples of problematic policies entail: the requirement of surrendering passports to employers for the duration of stay; the absence of a required minimum wage; the absence of maximum allowable percentages employers can charge for the migration process (resulting in debt bondage); the criminalisation of collective bargaining and the freedom to associate; the denial of rights to vacation time; and the absence of the right to transfer employment to a third party. In limiting workers’ freedom in these ways, GCC states introduce and legitimate widespread labour exploitation and forced labour within their borders.

These legislated restrictions often lead to [gross human rights violations](#). As my research and large-scale investigations by the [International Labour Organisation](#) and other organisations have documented, these violations include emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, debt bondage, the withholding of wages, the denial of vacation time, detainment for escaping abusive situations, and deportation.

The existing dynamics of the GCC economy drive the continued use of forced labour and exploitation in the region. GCC countries have significant interests in regional and international trade in oil and natural gas, resulting in a collective gross domestic product (GDP) of approximately \$1.60 trillion and a GDP per capita of \$33,300. Far from sitting on their money, the GCC states have used it to build and develop a [luxury paradise](#) for the wealthy and global elite. At the same time, very few GCC nationals participate in the labour force. The high GDP, lack of nationals in the workforce, and desire for development and expan-

sion have created a heavy reliance on a migrant labour force. Indeed, the estimates for some GCC states put the proportion of migrant workers as high as 90 percent of the private sector. Migrant workers labour across every sector of the economy, from bars and clubs to domestic care, agriculture, construction (with nearly \$418 billion worth of projects in the UAE alone), sex work, hospitality, and tourism.

As a result of mounting pressure by the international community, the GCC has made some recent incremental improvements. These include the acknowledgement of a rampant problem in labour practices vis-à-vis the *kafala* system, as well as gradual reforms. Although these reforms are a promising start, there is a need for much wider policy change as well as *enforcement* of policy changes before an improved future can be imagined.

What can be done to reform labour rights in one of the wealthiest economic blocs in the world? If the problem is bigger than the World Cup, so too must be the solutions. So long as the GCC states refuse to adhere to the international laws they have ratified, including the Palermo Protocol, meaningful reforms are unlikely. The abolishment of the *kafala* system would be a good start, as would a re-evaluation of the current hybrid legal system that perpetuates these problems. Such a re-evaluation would first call for the clarification of Islamic law, which prohibits the enslavement of free persons and emphasises the universality of the presumption of freedom, as a basic fundamental right given to all persons. Secondly, a re-evaluation would need to ask how rights could be afforded to migrant workers while preserving the economic integrity of the GCC from a trading vantage point. These reforms are not only in the best interest of migrant workers, but are in fact essential to the sustainability of trading interests and economic prosperity in the Gulf region.

Happy endings? Slavery, emancipation and freedom

Let's stop giving the architects and beneficiaries of an increasingly neoliberal world order a platform on which to parade their moral condemnation of 'slavery', and focus on efforts to transform the meaning of 'freedom'.

Julia O'Connell Davidson

New abolitionist organisations like 'Walk Free' and 'Free the Slaves' provide a definition of 'slavery' that, though inadequate in sociological terms, conjures up a vision of something so horrible that *everyone* immediately agrees it is absolutely wrong. Even the most fervent anti-immigration politicians and those most invested in the rise of neoliberalism condemn 'modern slavery'. What if the focus switches to 'freedom'?

New abolitionists don't define 'freedom', but implicitly equate it with emancipation from 'slavery'. The overarching narrative guiding the materials presented on their websites is one in which the suffering of the 'slave' is terminated by rescue. This is the ending that transports the victim-protagonist to a happy land, where things come right. Kids return to being kids, the sexually abused get therapy, workers get paid, and everyone can pursue their dreams. In their campaign materials, release from slavery is the optimistic and emotionally satisfying ending that provides readers with closure, much like in fairy tales when marriage resolves the heroine's suffering, conflict, loss, and longing.

History tells us that the experience of those freed from New World slavery did not follow this narrative structure. They and their descendants became *de jure* free in societies where social rights, liberties, and protections were unequally distributed along lines of race, class, and gender. In fact, the historical experience of many groups of formally



Roland Tanglao/Flickr. Creative Commons.

‘free’ people—including many wives and industrial workers, as well as indentured labourers and sharecroppers—often looked remarkably like the conditions that, when found in the contemporary world, are described by the new abolitionists as *de facto* slavery. And for those who were not still legally tied to a master in some way, ‘freedom’ often meant only the opportunity to starve or be criminalised for any strategy employed to escape that fate. Those caught were then locked in a workhouse or prison and subjected to forced labour.

Our perception of where the line between freedom and slavery falls varies according to our vantage point and over time. It shifted gradually in twentieth century western liberal societies, not as a consequence of anti-slavery campaigns, but as a result of political struggles around race, class, and gender. These were struggles for social and economic rights as well as civil equality and liberties. They often reflected a belief that human beings are not fully free unless they are protected from the market by a welfare system that respects their human worth, regard-

less of their market price. Through these struggles, a form of ‘worker citizenship’ was achieved in affluent, post-war welfare states that stood in sharp contrast to virtually every aspect of chattel slavery (at least for white adult male citizens).

Is this the happy ending awaiting those rescued from ‘modern slavery’? Hardly. The vast majority of those dubbed ‘modern slaves’ are citizens of developing, often very poor, countries (Walk Free’s modern slavery index is topped by Mauritania, where annual per capita GDP is \$1070, and Haiti, where it is \$819). They are also frequently either internal or international migrants. Leaving aside the fact that affluent states have been rolling back protections once afforded to citizens, states have always discriminated, and today discriminate even more fiercely, on the basis of nationality. The ending for international migrants rescued from ‘modern slavery’ is generally deportation. Meanwhile, in the developing world, governments’ already weak capacity to provide their citizens with welfare is further undermined by structural adjustment programmes foisted on them by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, World Trade agreements, and so on. In many places, access to the scant remaining social rights and protections continues to hinge on gender, caste, ethnicity and/or place of origin (internal migrants are often as rightless as international migrants).

In 1864, an American manual for newly emancipated slaves advised, “Put your trust in God, and bend your back joyfully and hopefully to the burden”. Isn’t this exactly what an apolitical movement offers the 29.8 million dubbed ‘modern slaves’, and the many more millions whose conditions resemble theirs? Let’s stop giving the architects and beneficiaries of an increasingly neoliberal world order a platform on which to parade their moral condemnation of ‘slavery’, and focus on efforts to transform the meaning of ‘freedom’.

Servants of capitalism

Capitalism has always depended on domestic servitude, which still persists today. So why have the women clothing, caring, and cooking for new generations of workers been omitted from its history?

Sara R. Farris

The history of capitalism could be written through the lenses of paid care and domestic workers in private households. Constituting one of the largest sections of the workforce in most western countries from the outset of capitalism, care and domestic workers—or domestic servants as they were called in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—have been nonetheless widely neglected from historical accounts of free and unfree labour.

John Locke used the image of a servant in *Two Treatises of Government* (1690) to demonstrate how labour was, at the dawn of English bourgeois society, beginning to emerge as a special type of private property. By the early 1800s, some ten percent of the English and Welsh populations were employed as domestic servants—90 percent of them were women—according to Carolyn Steedman in *Labours Lost: Domestic Service and the Making of Modern England*. Today, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that there are almost 55 million domestic workers worldwide, though some experts say the number could be as high as 100 million. Around 200,000 are employed in the UK, although the true number is likely higher.

Yet from Adam Smith to E. P. Thompson, the history of capitalism has been written as if servants—now called domestic workers—do not exist, or do not really belong to the working population. Why has this historical erasure occurred? To find answers to this question we need to look at the features of domestic work under capitalism.

The non-work status of domestic work

There are at least three reasons that domestic labour is not considered 'work' in the modern capitalist economy. To begin with, domestic workers *re-produce* people's daily lives and their capacity to work but do not produce commodities that capitalists may sell for profit. This is a fatal flaw, as commodity-making activities are the only ones valued by capitalist society. On the one hand, mainstream economists define care and domestic work as pertaining to the service economy and therefore as labour-intensive and low in productivity. Like all human services, care and domestic work is said to suffer from Baumol's 'costs disease', which means that wages are independent of productivity and that profit margins are low. On the other hand, most Marxist economists consider care and domestic work as *re-productive* labour—and thus as *unproductive* from a capitalist viewpoint—in as much as it pertains to the sphere of production of 'beings' and not of 'things', or of 'use values' rather than 'exchange values'.

Second, domestic servants work in private households, which are not considered proper workplaces and thus escape working regulations and controls. [As the ILO campaign 'Decent Work for Domestic Workers'](#) has claimed, this general lack of regulatory oversight allows many employers to hire these workers without proper contracts, pay them less than the minimum wage, and demand unpaid overtime.

Third, the work that domestic workers perform is considered 'unskilled'. Cooking, washing, ironing, caring for the children or the elderly are all tasks capitalist society considers as mainly women's vocational activities, rather than proper jobs.

Finally, when domestic workers care for children, the elderly and the disabled, they are required not only to *care for* but also to *care about* them: that is, they are expected to love the people they mind. Such expectation, however, soon becomes emotional and moral pressure. Employers deploy this strategically in order to 'ask' domestic and care

labourers to work longer days, or to refrain from asking for days off. Love is used to justify the robbery of domestic and care workers' time and right to decent pay.

Domestic workers from the global south

Today's domestic and care workers, like their servant predecessors in the nineteenth century, remain essential to western economies and societies yet they are forgotten. They are indispensable for the reproduction of our lives yet they are exploited, abused and at times treated like slaves. The fact that most are now migrants from the global south only serves to make them more vulnerable, as they lack access to citizenship rights and are subjected to border control regimes.

The Overseas Domestic Workers Visa (ODWV) in the UK is a prime example here. Overseas domestic workers are tied to their employers under the new regime, in effect since 2012, which means that they are denied the basic freedom to change employer if they no longer want to be in a contractual relationship with them. As Kate Roberts argues (see *BTS Short Course* Vol. 3), many domestic workers now have their employers' names in their UK Visa—as if they were their property!—and risk falling into the category of illegal migrants if they try to change the conditions of their work. The UK based migrant domestic workers advocacy organisation Kalayaan has registered [an increase in the reported abuse](#) of these workers since these changes to the ODWV came into effect.

As Kalayaan reports, migrant domestic workers who are tied to their employers are more likely to experience physical abuse: 71 percent of them have described situations of reclusion in the house where they live and work; 65 percent of them do not have their own rooms and some have reported sleeping in the kitchen or lounge; 53 percent claim that they effectively work sixteen hours a day and 60 percent of these workers are paid less than £50 a week. Today, perhaps even more than in the early days of capitalism, domestic and care workers continue to

exemplify the condition of wage workers under capitalism: work is increasingly casualised, feminised, and considered the private property of the employer who may use and dispose of it as they please.

The domestic work of servants, in other words, is paradigmatic of the capitalist wage relation and the political form of the labour contract in which the employer considers the employee as their property. Furthermore, insofar as such work in contemporary capitalist societies and under neoliberalism is performed mostly by migrant women from the global south, it powerfully shows one important way in which capitalism reproduces gendered and racial oppression, as well as class exploitation. Yet, the conditions of these workers have been erased from the history of capitalism, almost as if to make us forget what the wage relationship really is about: the robbery of our time, capacities, energy, and skills as if they were not really ours, as if they belonged to someone else.

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Transforming ‘beasts into men’: colonialism, forced labour and racism in Africa

European colonisers maintained their workforce with forced labour after slavery was abolished, claiming work would do Africans good. This opened up new dangers to an already vulnerable population.

Eric Allina

The idea of the ‘white man’s burden’ dates from our grandfather’s time or earlier. At the turn of the twentieth century, it was used to both justify and attack imperial endeavours. Today, the white man’s burden lives on in ideas of guilt or responsibility for inequalities made more visible in a globalising world. Activists exploit these feelings to mobilise support for their causes, one of the most visible being the drive to end ‘modern-day slavery’. In my effort to uncover the history of forced labour in colonial Africa, I searched out letters and reports written by observers and agents of empire to grasp how these practices affected African life and how these individuals viewed colonial labour. In tracing this history, it is the views of Africans themselves that reveal the depth of depravity and height of hypocrisy woven into the fabric of ‘modern slavery’.

And work shall set you free

Having taken much of the nineteenth century to abolish slavery and the slave trade, the rulers of Europe’s African ventures found themselves in need of a workforce at the dawn of the twentieth. Building empire—for gold, God and glory—was hard work, and few Europeans were willing to go to Africa and bend their backs under the tropical sun. At the same time, Europe had justified wars of conquest and colonisation under the guise of eliminating slavery. European colonies could thus hardly return to the slaver’s whip. How, then, could Africans be made to work in the service of empire?

Colonial rulers came to the conclusion that Africans would be forced to work anyway. The specific laws authorising this varied, but they were all undergirded by a general agreement that Africans lacked the intellectual and moral capacity to appreciate the value of labour. According to this self-serving, racist ‘paternalism’, European colonisers were obliged to force Africans to work for their own good. Yet even as colonisers claimed Africans would be ‘saved’ by European civilisation, colonisers made them vulnerable to new forms of servitude.

Portugal’s laws expressed this move most explicitly. Africans had a “legal and moral obligation” to work and, if they did not, colonial authorities could and would force them to do so. The chief architect of the law made clear the role race played in his thinking. For him, Africans were “big children”. Work, meanwhile, was a form of education that could “transform beasts into men”. As such, the state would impose “up to the state of extermination, as many other obligations as might benefit” what he called, “those backward negroes of Africa, those ignorant outcasts of Asia, those half-savages of Oceana”.

Under Portuguese colonial rule, Africans were compelled to grow rice and cotton, among other crops, and forced to sell to state buyers at fixed prices. Others were taken to work on road-building and other infrastructure projects, for which they were paid little or nothing. Still others were forced to work for white settler-farmers or large gold and sugar companies, where their work was dirty, dangerous, and disagreeable. What all these types of labour shared was a tedious toil, frequent exposure to violence and premature death, and a level of pay that barely met the needs of existence.

Believed by many, but not by all

No less a figure than Frederick Lugard, who was knighted for his service to the British empire—‘service’ which included institutionalising forced labour in colonial governance—recognised that Africans might regard forced labour as a “white man’s slavery”. Indeed, the words that

Africans used to condemn colonial labour made clear just how vile this labour was, and how little it differed from the slavery of the past. On encountering a group of seven Africans who had been taken for contract labour, an African man in central Mozambique warned that the man who had taken them would beat them, feed them less than their bodies required for sustenance, and “sold blacks as if they were chicken or goats”. To the great frustration of the agent who had contracted them, they then took to their heels, he reported.

While Africans had the clearest view of such practices, some settlers or visitors were skeptical of a ‘civilising mission’ that seemed more like a “veneered barbarism”. One such traveler, Henry Nevinson, visited Portugal’s colonies and saw the inhumane treatment African workers suffered while cultivating cocoa destined for Cadbury, the British chocolate maker. He reported in his book *Modern Slavery* that few of these workers received payment and even fewer managed to escape bondage, positing that forced labour in Portuguese-ruled Africa was no different from the “slavery of our grandfathers’ time”. He meant that colonial forced labour, regularly justified as part of the so-called civilising mission, was no different from the racially-justified chattel slavery of generations past.

Nevinson’s reference to slavery can be best understood as political rhetoric, since colonial forced labour was different from earlier forms of servitude in Africa. Slave masters at times treated slaves with great brutality but, having invested much capital in their purchase, regarded them as valuable property. In contrast, white settlers in Africa often treated forced labourers “much worse than any ass or ox they possess”, because if an African worker fell ill or even died, the settler suffered no loss. As one colonial governor in Mozambique put it in 1910, “with the death of an ox or an ass they are out the money it cost them”. Or, in the words of an elderly African in Angola, who in the early 1920s could recall a time when slavery was still legal, “the slaves were better fed than we forced labourers are for we are not property”.

Portugal's colonies: unexceptional in their brutality

The plight of Africans in Portugal's colonies received the most attention, both because the Portuguese did less to camouflage their coercion and also because poor Portuguese settlers depended more heavily on state-imposed labour. That said, by virtue of being born black all those living in colonial Africa were legally vulnerable for state-sanctioned bondage. Vulnerability was the rule to which tenuous exceptions existed: women, children, the elderly, soldiers, African chiefs, and the infirm were often exempt from forced labour. These categories offered some protection, but they were elastic. It was not always clear whether one qualified, and the exceptions were inconsistently applied according to the whim of European officials. Indeed, colonial officials and colonists routinely ignored these and other regulations, and Africans were quite normally left without the protection of the law. In the words of historian Gregory Mann, colonial practices could generate a 'black hole' that obscured their very nature. The colonial powers also took their time in abolishing forced labour in Africa, which saw no real demise until the years after world war two.

If Africans had long known that colonial forced labour was little more than a new form of servitude, it was ideas of sovereignty and rights new to the post-war world that made plain to all the contradictions inherent to the colonial system. African activists turned such ideas on the system itself, making it impossible to ignore its antiquated nature, and used them to advocate for a new and more just social order.

Latter-day abolitionism

Activists today again use the language of 'modern slavery' to inflame moral sensibilities, suggesting that we co-exist with the evil of slavery in both time and space. It permeates our electronics, clothing, and even our food. One challenge remains the same: how should those advocating change make their case without calling into question the capacities of those whose rights they champion?



Section two

Histories of political activism and
mobilisation

Uncomfortable silences: anti-slavery, colonialism, and imperialism

The history of anti-slavery is replete with lessons, but those commonly cited by the new abolitionists are not the right ones.

Joel Quirk

*Take up the White Man's burden,
Send forth the best ye breed
Go bind your sons to exile,
to serve your captives' need; To wait in heavy harness,
On fluttered folk and wild-
Your new-caught, sullen peoples, Half-devil and half-child.*

— Rudyard Kipling, 1899

In a major address to the United Nations General Assembly in September 2003, President George W. Bush described the fight against contemporary slavery and human trafficking in [the following terms](#):

We must show new energy in fighting back an old evil. Nearly two centuries after the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and more than a century after slavery was officially ended in its last strongholds, the trade in human beings for any purpose must not be allowed to thrive in our time.

Few people noticed it at the time, but this statement contained a basic historical error. It has not been “more than a century” since slavery officially ended. While legal slavery in the Americas ended in the nineteenth century, in many parts of the globe legal abolition took place during the first half of the twentieth century. In the case of sub-Saharan Africa, which is my main focus here, slavery remained legal

in Sudan until 1900, Kenya until 1907, Sierra Leone until 1928 and Ethiopia until 1942. This more recent history is important, because it leads to a series of uncomfortable and difficult questions about the motivations behind—and practical effects of—the anti-slavery cause, with the elephant in the room being the close relationship between anti-slavery, imperialism, and European colonialism.

This theme is familiar to most historians of slavery, but has been almost entirely overlooked by modern activists. Whenever ‘[modern-day abolitionists](#)’ look backwards into the past, they tend to selectively focus upon the history of anti-slavery activism in Britain and the United States. Within this context, the history of abolition has been chiefly approached as a source of instruction and inspiration. When it comes to instruction, the main focus has been the tactics and techniques used by mostly white Anglo-Saxon pioneers, such as petitions, novels, publications, networks, boycotts, lawsuits, meetings, and artistic icons. When it comes to inspiration, the early history of anti-slavery has been celebrated as a key illustration of the power of ethical leadership, collective action, and personal commitment. These themes are often found together, most notably in relation to the often uncritical celebration of the personal virtues of ‘great emancipators,’ such as William Wilberforce, whose name has recently been linked to [anti-trafficking legislation](#), [awards](#), [documentaries](#), and [television specials](#).

This selective approach to history suffers from any number of flaws. One notable problem has been a widespread tendency to focus upon the history of abolition, rather than the history of slavery. As numerous scholars of slavery have demonstrated, the forced migration and forced labour of enslaved Africans played an fundamental role in both building the Americas and enriching Europe. The severe hardships and systemic abuses that millions of slaves both endured and resisted over the centuries have too often been lightly passed over. In addition, the legacies of historical slave systems [remain with us to this day](#), yet this is once again an issue for which ‘modern-day abolitionists’ rarely

have time. There are now thousands of anti-slavery and anti-trafficking organizations in Europe and the United States. Very few of these have included the legacies of slavery amongst their activities or advocacy.

While much more could be said on this topic, my main focus in this piece is the uncomfortable relationship between anti-slavery, imperialism, and colonial conquest. As is well known, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were defined by an unprecedented period of colonial conquest. By 1914, Europeans are said to have occupied as much as 85 percent of the globe as colonies, protectorates, dependencies, dominions, and commonwealths. It was also during this period that racism was at its most 'scientific', with European and American intellectuals offering 'proofs' of their own innate 'superiority', ranging from social Darwinism to the measurement of head size. In addition to this self-serving pseudo-science, European pretensions to superiority were said to contain a 'moral dimension', which was most famously encapsulated by the idea of the 'white man's burden'.

It is within this context that the anti-slavery cause frequently played a key ideological and political role in justifying colonial conquest and other imperial interventions directed against 'lesser races'. This theme was especially important in much of Africa, where the continued existence of slavery within Africa—which had often expanded in part thanks to centuries of previous demand from European and American slave traders prior to the 1860s—played a key role in the development of a popular and political script that cast both Europeans governments and European peoples in the role of 'civilised saviors', and Africans in the role of 'uncivilised savages' in need of paternalistic protection.

The status of slavery was central to this binary between 'civilised' and 'uncivilised'. Rather than being motivated by a commitment to human or racial equality, the anti-slavery cause was instead primarily understood in terms of the moral obligation of 'superior' Europeans to protect 'inferior' Africans. This racist formula reduced Africans to a



Boat with British Ensign, Congo, ca. 1900-1915. Public Domain (Wikicommons).

‘child-like’ status (with adult men routinely being described as ‘boys’ into old age), who were said to be fundamentally incapable of looking after themselves. Colonial conquest and colonial rule were a logical outgrowth of this self-appointed ‘civilising mission’. Seeking justification and legitimation for their colonial ambitions, Europeans repeatedly turned to the cause of ending slavery and slave trading across Africa to marshal support for numerous colonial projects.

The most notorious example of this larger historical trend concerns the Congo Free State, where King Leopold of Belgium both sought and received European and American endorsement of his conquest of most of the Congo River Basin primarily on anti-slavery grounds. The king even hosted a high profile international anti-slavery conference in Brussels in 1889-1890, which saw a caucus of predominantly European signatories declare their intent “to put an end to the Negro Slave Trade by land as well as by sea, and to improve the moral and ma-

terial conditions of existence of the native races”. Leopold’s anti-slavery rhetoric [impressed many](#) of his contemporaries, but it sadly had no connection to actual practices. The Congo Free State proved to be tragedy of the first order, with a multinational contingent of European criminals destroying millions of African lives in the pursuit of tremendous rubber profits.

At the time, European critics of the Congo Free State mostly regarded this catastrophe as one of a small number of deviant exceptions, which were held to be in no way representative of colonial rule more generally. Instead of questioning whether the ‘white man’s burden’ was legitimate, they instead treated cases of abuse as isolated failures to uphold the ‘civilised’ standards expected of colonial rulers. It is now clear, however, that the Congo was more representative than deviant. Rubber profits also inspired the French to use similar policies and practices in some of their territories in Equatorial Africa. The Portuguese ostensibly abolished slavery in their colonial territories in the late nineteenth century. They then, however, disingenuously substituted forms of indentured servitude and forced labour that former slaves are reported to have regarded as little different—or perhaps worse—than the slavery that the Portuguese congratulated themselves on legally abolishing. The British periodically criticised the Portuguese, most notable via a short popular campaign focusing upon Cadbury chocolate. But the British government was reluctant to push too hard, thanks to their own widespread use of indentured, forced, and migrant labour schemes, which sometimes involved labourers from Portuguese territories.

There were many occasions when anti-slavery was little more than empty rhetoric, but even in cases where it involved more significant political commitments it still remained relatively limited in scope. Even the most committed European abolitionists were still products of their time, and therefore tended to accept certain assumptions about the inherent limitations of the ‘natives’ they ruled. They therefore usually accepted that forced labour was legitimate, at least in some cir-

cumstances, owing to the 'fact' that Africans were 'lazy' and 'unwilling to work'. In many cases, forced labour was even justified as a positive good, since it was said to have an 'educative' and 'civilising' effect.

In theory, colonial labour regimes were substantially different to slavery. In practice, the differences were not so obvious. Colonial settlers and administrators in need of porters, labourers, and even soldiers used violence and the threat of violence to compel Africans into their service on highly unfavorable terms, which frequently involved people being worked to death. Given the poor terms on offer, most Africans were understandably reluctant to volunteer, but rather than improving the terms and conditions on offer Europeans blamed 'laziness', and resorted to further measures in order to force Africans to work on their terms. These measures included the appropriation of land, the manipulation of 'vagrancy' laws, controls on mobility and property ownership, forcing farmers to grow specific crops, and the introduction of taxation and labour requirements designed to compel Africans to work for Europeans. Despite official commitments to the anti-slavery cause, forced labour and related forms of compulsion reached unprecedented dimensions in Africa in the first half of the twentieth century.

This history has far-reaching ramifications for thinking about both slavery and anti-slavery in our own times. As we have seen, modern activists and public officials have frequently reduced the history of anti-slavery to a hollowed out 'feel good story', whose chief role is to help legitimate their pre-existing personal beliefs, policies, and approaches. The types of historical 'lessons' generated from these highly selective historical excursions tend to be fairly generic, as they most commonly relate to either personal virtues (perseverance, faith, etc.) or familiar political strategies that have already been further improved and expanded by later generations of activists (petitions, boycotts etc.). These generic 'lessons' rarely teach people anything that they don't already know or believe (or at least can't find out by consulting existing works on social movements and political activism). If we are serious about

looking to history for insight and instruction, we need to engage in a process of critical reflection that results in pathways that end up being *different* to an already pre-existing set of plans.

It is here, I would argue, that this uncomfortable relationship between anti-slavery and imperialism needs to become part of the conversation. The history of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is replete with lessons about what *not* to do. Rather than taking the 'humanitarian' credentials of anti-slavery supporters at face value, we instead need to interrogate and reflect upon how, why, and where anti-slavery rhetoric aligns with other ideological, economic, and political agendas, and what consequences can follow from these alignments. Rather than taking anti-slavery legislation at face value, we instead need to reflect on how and why states that are ostensibly committed to the anti-slavery cause continue to favor legal regimes and policy responses that promote forms of systemic abuse, vulnerability, discrimination, and exploitation. Rather than treating slavery as a singular and exceptional category, we instead need to approach slavery as but one manifestation of much larger patterns of exploitation and exclusion. Rather than assuming that 'freedom' is always sharply differentiated from slavery, we instead take into account the ideological and political effects associated with declaring a person to be 'free', and the types of constraints that 'freedom' can gloss over.

I began this piece with a speech from George W. Bush in 2003, where he called for more action against human trafficking. This was not the only topic that the president covered in this speech. Before talking about trafficking, Bush spent most of his time seeking to justify his then recent invasion of Iraq. To help defend his actions, he rhetorically divided the peoples of the globe into opposing camps:

those who seek order, and those who spread chaos ... those who work for peaceful change, and those who adopt the methods of gangsters ... those who honour the rights of

man, and those who deliberately take the lives of men and women and children without mercy or shame.

These self-serving binaries echo the ideological division between ‘civilised’ and ‘savage’ that was so popular in the late nineteenth century. While colonial rule no longer enjoys public legitimacy, it should be evident that the underlying thinking behind the colonial and imperial project continues to have considerable ideological and political currency. As far as Bush was concerned, the military coalition that invaded Iraq stood on the side of “order”, “peaceful change”, and “hon-[ing] the rights of man”. Once again, this rhetoric sadly had little or no connection to actual practices. Once again, the people of Iraq were reduced to helpless supplicants in need of salvation and paternalistic protection from a benevolent United States. Once again, the numerous problems with US policy can be regarded as being representative of larger patterns, rather than as isolated or exceptional cases.

While opponents of the invasion of the Iraq may feel comfortable distancing themselves from this specific disaster, it is essential to recognise that these underlying binaries between ‘civilised’ and ‘backward’ have all kinds of applications. Ideological and political divisions between [western saviors and non-western supplicants](#) have [played a key role in shaping recent and ongoing anti-slavery and anti-trafficking efforts](#). This ‘white savior industrial complex’ is particularly [evident in terms of the politics of rescue](#), but also finds expression in the construction of slavery and trafficking as ‘exceptional’ [problems on the ‘irregular’ margins of the global economy and ‘civilised’ society](#).

The global history of slavery and abolition has much to teach us about the challenges and prospects of our own times, but these historical lessons should not necessarily be easy or straightforward ones.

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The ‘new abolitionists’ and the problem of race

‘New abolitionists’ have failed to engage with the history and legacies of slavery and racism. They must learn more about the past if they are to clearly understand the present.

James Brewer Stewart

Contemporary activists in the United States frequently describe themselves as part of a ‘new abolitionist movement’, which is said to represent a direct extension of the original struggle to end slavery. According to this popular formula, activists today are continuing the pioneering historical examples of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Sojourner Truth. Despite these historical allusions, this new abolitionist movement suffers from a profound ignorance when it comes to what the original abolitionists were actually up against, what they believed, what they accomplished, and where they fell short. As a result, these new abolitionists have failed to adequately recognise the overriding importance of plantation slavery in American history, its long-term consequences in the aftermath of its legal abolition, and its profound significance for African Americans living today. This is reflected in an obstinate form of racial blindness, which has in turn translated into a consistent disinterest in addressing the vicious racial and economic legacies of plantation slavery that African Americans and other non-white peoples continue to struggle against, both in the United States and more broadly.

When today’s activists refer to the ‘new global slavery’, they frequently fail to recognise that African Americans live with agonising memories of plantation slavery and its enduring contemporary legacies. These have far-reaching ramifications in relation to fundamental themes such as poverty and inequality, incarceration and policing, and education and opportunity. Historians have documented beyond all question the central contribution of slavery to the economic and political devel-

opment of the United States. Politically engaged African Americans have repeatedly made clear that their moral and historical claims to the problem of slavery are no less overriding than those of the Holocaust for Jews the world over. Given this history, what has been the 'new abolitionist' response? Check the websites of every major US-based NGO and in nearly every case all you will find is silence.

This silence extends to many different topics, including militarised policing, 'black lives matter', the prison industrial complex, the 'achievement gap', and structural racism. Though eager to remedy the long-term damage to survivors of all kinds of contemporary abuses, this concern does not extend to repairing the historical wrongs endured by African Americans. Could it be that a nation that once enslaved 4,000,000 African Americans is again practicing slavery when it contains the world's highest percentage of incarcerated people, overwhelmingly non-white, from whose all-but-unpaid labour privatised prisons wring enormous profits? Again, silence. In the face of this racial blindness, is it hardly surprising that African American participation in the new abolitionist movement has been all but non-existent?

Strip-mining history for banner ads

There are further problems in addition to this widespread silence. Consider visual images. Today's 'new abolitionists' have regularly sought to dramatise their cause by repurposing visual materials left in archives by the largely white, pre-Civil War antislavery movement. The results of these efforts have often been far from ideal. Historians have long cautioned against treating historical icons uncritically, because the historical outputs of white abolitionists' woodcuts, lithographs, and sketches frequently ended up voyeuristically stereotyping, patronising, commodifying, and disempowering the very African Americans for whom their creators purported to advocate.

Anti-slavery icons routinely featured fettered slaves, hands clasped and kneeling in supplication; helpless naked slaves being whipped by sa-

distic masters; scantily clad slaves fearfully trembling atop the auction block; half-naked female slaves being pursued by lust-driven planters, and so forth. Blithely ignoring what the past might teach them, today's 'new abolitionist movement' broadcast images that, once again, feature chains, manacles, barred windows, sexually provocative poses and supplicating victims repeatedly constitute the dominant motifs. This is nothing less than trading in the "the pornography of pain", as one prominent historian puts it. What might Frederick Douglass make of our 'new abolitionist movement?' The question answers itself.

Then there are those abolitionists who repeatedly tell us that they're all about 'ending slavery' and even abolishing it '[in our lifetime](#)'. These types of pronouncements are not only unrealistic, since slavery has always been and will always be with us. They can also do profound violence to the past and its meaning for black Americans today, since they suggest that slavery can be easily and definitively expunged. As is well known, many black southerners were re-enslaved in large numbers following emancipation in 1865 using racist vagrancy laws, debt peonage, and systems of convict leased labour. Further buttressed by the terrorism of lynching, this 'slavery by another name' resulted in the exploitation of tens of thousands across the south. It lasted until the end of world war two and anticipated the current US prison-industrial complex. Little wonder that African Americans scoff at those who promise to 'end slavery in our lifetime'. This history of slavery—which continues to colour the day-to-day lives of African Americans—and the slavery opposed by the 'new abolitionists' too often exist in separate universes.

Bridging the divide

We urgently need to close the current divide between 'new abolitionists' and the history of slavery and racism. To help work through what this might look like in practice, let's return to a topic mentioned above: the 'slavery by another name' system of convict labour and debt peonage supported by white racist terrorism that spread across the south

in the aftermath of the Civil War. If we were we to transport today's enslavers and their government enablers back to the 1880s, they would instantly recognise their southern counterparts as kindred spirits. The systemic abuses that African Americans endured in the decades that followed the legal abolition of slavery is precisely what vulnerable people the world over regularly endure today. As with southern debt peonage, enslavers the world over demand the repayment of impossible sums for supposed 'services rendered' from undocumented people, who they then subject to sexual exploitation and/or brutalising labour. The southern convict lease system likewise replicates itself wherever unscrupulous governments and private recruiters enslave 'guest workers' after luring them with promises of employment.

It is thus essential to remember that that historical debt peonage has paved the way for newer forms of enslavement throughout the world. The Central American nations, the British Caribbean Islands, Haiti, and the Philippines—all major exporters of vulnerable and exploited people today—also have a significant history grounded in 'old' slavery followed by decades of debt peonage. In China and India today, debt peonage holds millions of people in bondage, many of whom flee only to face similar exploitation elsewhere. Undocumented labour as a springboard to enslavement has hardly ended within the United States either. Exploitative fruit and vegetable growers, for example, have made southwest Florida the site of intense political organising by the Coalition of Imalokee Workers. Properly understood, African American history can help to illuminate the problem of slavery today. Properly understood, the problem of slavery today can help to further illuminate the legacies of enslavement against which African Americans struggle today

Many topics remain unaddressed regarding history's relationship to slavery within the United States today and today's abolitionists should insist that historians give them answers. How, for example, might the enslavement of violently displaced Native Americans before the twen-

tieth century help to explain why today's Indian reservations stand as epicentres of vulnerability and abuse? How might the history of slavery in the American far west, embedded in early twentieth century 'guest worker' and 'coolie labour' programmes, help account for the exploitation and enslavement of undocumented immigrants today? How might late nineteenth century 'white slavery', involving immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe, illuminate current patterns of sexual exploitation of undocumented Asian, Mexican, and Central American women and children?

Most obvious of all, how might the history of slavery's re-emergence in the post-emancipation south illuminate the massive application of incarcerated labour, prisoners who are of overwhelmingly of dark complexion? Convict leasing ended in 1945, but is that the end of the story? Could the current privatised and profit-driven prison-industrial complex be the latest iteration of 'slavery by another name'? Near the beginning of this article I charged today's 'new abolitionist movement' with racial blindness because of its silence in the face of questions such as these and for other related reasons. As this article concludes, my hope is it will prompt them to offer historically informed responses.

‘Not made by slaves’: the ambivalent origins of ethical consumption

Ethical consumption is seen as a way of combating the evils found in global supply chains, yet its ambivalent track record highlights a number of practical complications and political challenges.

Andrea Major

The question of what to buy and where to buy it raises many different considerations. Consumers routinely encounter a range of competing claims on their moral and financial resources, including whether or not to support local producers, boycott tax-dodging multinationals, or buy fair trade products. These choices are rarely straight forward. Is a canvas shopping bag made in a Bangladeshi sweatshop a better ethical choice than a plastic bag? How do we reconcile differences in standards of living and working conditions when it comes to deciding what is morally acceptable in international supply chains? How do campaigns for fair trade and ‘free’ labour influence our perceptions of the ‘distant others’ who produce much of the food and clothing consumed in the global north? These types of questions have a long and complex history. As we shall see, late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century boycotts in the United Kingdom of slave-grown sugar from the West Indies encountered many similar dilemmas. A closer look at this pioneering foray into ethical consumption only underlines how difficult it is for consumers to make clear-cut and effective moral choices today.

The anti-saccharite movement, as abstention from sugar for political and moral reasons came to be known, was closely tied to the British anti-slavery movement. Its historical peaks coincided with upsurges of British activism against the slave trade in the 1790s, and then against slavery more generally in the 1820s. The principle focus of the anti-saccharite movement was a boycott of West Indian sugar and rum

as a means of undermining the economic foundations of slavery. For British consumers who abstained, slave sugar was regarded as morally, metaphorically, and physically contaminated with the sin of slavery. “Are drops of blood the horrible manure”, one abolitionist poem asked, “That fills with luscious juice the teeming cane?”

The advent of ‘free grown’ sugar

Against this backdrop, some enterprising East India merchants saw an opportunity to market their own ‘free grown’ sugar as an ethical alternative. Advertisements began to appear which presented the consumption of ‘East India Sugar made by Free People’ as a way of demonstrating support for ‘the cause of Freedom...over that of Slavery’. By the 1820s, the use of supposedly ‘free-grown’ East India sugar was directly endorsed by the Britian-based Anti-Slavery Society, which set up a depot for its sale in August 1824. Sugar bowls bearing [the anti-slavery ‘logo’ of the kneeling slave](#) and the motto “East India Sugar, not made by slaves” became fashionable dinner table accessories, while placards were posted with the message “by six families using East India sugar, one less slave is required”.

The sugar boycott and the ‘ethical’ alternative of East India sugar has often been presented as an unequivocal moral good. Some contemporary activists have even presented the East India case as an archetypal example of moral consumption triumphing over the horrors of slavery. The website ethicalconsumer.org, for example, notes that:

In 1791, after Parliament refused to abolish slavery, thousands of pamphlets were printed encouraging the boycott. Sales of sugar dropped by between a third and a half. By contrast sales of Indian sugar, untainted by slavery, rose tenfold in two years. In an early example of fair trade, shops began selling sugar guaranteed to be have been produced by ‘free men’.

But was it really free?

The exploitative and often oppressive nature of colonial governance in India under the British East India Company (EIC) is rarely discussed in the context of the promotion of East Indian sugar. This is a notable omission, since agricultural production in India during this period (and also more recently) was directly linked to extreme poverty, caste-based inequalities, and recurrent subsistence crises among the In-

dian peasantry, as well as the local use of domestic and agricultural slavery, bonded labour, debt bondage, and caste-based labour obligations. Put more directly: East India sugar was routinely produced under labour conditions that were far from entirely ‘free’.



Glass sugar bowl c. 1820. Andreas Praefcke/Wikimedia Commons

Ironically, but perhaps not surprisingly, it was West Indian planters who were the first to highlight this. They pointed out that even when not actually enslaved, impoverished Indian labourers were obliged to work for next to nothing. This found expression in pointed questions in the pro-slavery press regarding “the superior humanity of employing labourers at thruppence per day in the East, rather than slaves in the West, to whom every comfort consistent with their humble position is undoubtedly afforded”, as one article in the *Liverpool Courier* put it. Disregarded then and now as pro-slavery apologia, some of these West Indian accounts provided reasonably accurate critiques of the working conditions in some territories under EIC control. While no one today would accept the planters’ depictions of a ‘benign’ West Indian slavery, their attack on East India sugar raises questions about the selective nature of anti-slavery campaigning in a context of colonial exploitation, along with the effects of uneven access to information (and exposure

to misinformation) on consumer decisions.

The British anti-slavery movement largely disregarded, denied, or excused conditions in India during the 1820s. This changed in the late 1830s. Until 1838 British abolitionists had remained focused on the West Indies, and the continuation of coercive labour practices there under the guise of the apprenticeship system. This forced the newly emancipated slaves to continue working for their former masters for a set number of years. With the successful termination of this campaign, however, some key British abolitionists began to turn their attention to conditions in other parts of the empire, and to call attention to the existence of slavery in India and the devastating impact of East India Company rule there. Prominent anti-slavery orator George Thompson, for example, argued that a humanitarian scandal had been taking place unnoticed in the East Indies, in the form of famines that regularly carried off hundreds of thousands of British subjects in India. These catastrophes, he argued, were not the result of 'the divine hand', but of EIC misrule. Natural disasters were exacerbated by excessive land tax, lack of investment, and mismanagement of India's natural resources.

Despite decades of abolitionist rhetoric to the contrary, the moral dichotomy between East and West Indian labour regimes was far from clear-cut. This rhetoric instead masked a range of other considerations that shaped the campaign for East India sugar. These included individual abolitionists' personal, commercial, and financial relationships with India and a range of subjective judgements about the relative nature of different forms of exploitation and oppression. While the boycott against West Indian, slave-grown sugar was remarkably successful on its own terms—with huge numbers of British consumers participating—it should be apparent that there was a significant gap between theory and practice.

This gap has important applications for our own times. The contradictions inherent in focusing on West Indian slavery over other forms

of labour exploitation, including wage-slavery in Britain's industrialising cities and extreme poverty in some of its other colonies, resonate with on-going debates about the selective nature of popular moral campaigns. The paternalistic racism inherent in British abolitionists' depictions of passive, victimised African slaves continues to be reproduced in problematic depictions of recipients of 'charity' from a 'benevolent' west.

Finally, we need to take note how traders with vested interests in East India appropriated ethical arguments to carve out a greater share of the sugar market for themselves. The evident hypocrisy and self-interest raises important questions about the relationship between humanitarianism, capitalism, and commercialism in contexts where 'ethical' consumption can also be big business, and where (unverified) moral arguments can also be powerful marketing tools. A more nuanced view of the issues surrounding the use of East India sugar during historical anti-slavery campaigns can thus help us better understand not only the origins of ethical consumerism, but also some of its on-going problems and dilemmas.

Different times, same weaknesses: abolitionism past and present

Activism against so-called 'modern slavery' often appears to descend from the abolitionism of previous centuries. The history of past movements can provide insight into the forms and weaknesses of current movements.

Nelly Schmidt

Slavery and related forms of servitude have been illegal for some time, but are nonetheless reported to be globally on the increase. It is not easy to make direct or straightforward comparisons between the problems of today and the transatlantic slave trade of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. Such an exercise too often ends up in anachronism and errors of interpretation. What we can do, however, is reflect upon differences and similarities between patterns of political activism. In order to better understand today's patterns we need to relate them to the long-term historical context of anti-slavery movements born in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, from which the international organisations and non-governmental organisations of the twentieth century originate. Instead of celebrating the past, we need to reflect on how and why slavery came to an end as a legal institution, the important yet too often neglected role of slaves and ex-slaves, and the practical limitations of what could ultimately be accomplished from European metropolises.

'Great emancipators' and historical silences

Many stories told about the history of anti-slavery lack both context and critical distance. In France, for example, the abolition of slavery in 1848 continues to be widely attributed to the actions of one man, Victor Schoëlcher. This singular focus collapses a complex historical moment into a simplistic story about the power of individual perseverance and commitment. In addition, there have been relatively few

comparative studies of past anti-slavery movements. European nations and the United States continue to view their own anti-slavery movements as primarily national projects. This has resulted in a failure to recognise the numerous ways in which developments in different parts of the Atlantic, notably in Europe and the Caribbean-American sphere, greatly influenced one another.

Even more importantly, there has been little to no recognition of the role played by the slaves themselves in ending legal slavery. Today's politicians and activists rarely have anything to say about the impact of slave rebellions and the permanent social tension that existed in the colonies due to the struggle over abolition. What is more, the key events that led to the suppression of slavery frequently took place in contexts of war and conflict. Such was the case in French Santo Domingo/Haïti between 1791-1793 and 1803, in the French colonies at the time of the 1848 Revolution, in the Danish West Indies in the same year, in the British colonies following the Great Jamaican Slave Revolt of 1831-1832, in several Spanish colonies in South America and then in Cuba during the Ten Years' War, as well as in the United States.

The slave experience has too often been silenced, especially in France. In contrast to the British and Spanish colonies or the United States, no slave testimony exists for the French colonies from the periods of slavery and abolition or afterwards. In addition to this silence, the monumental corpus of documents attesting to Western abolitionism contains gaps and inaccuracies. These gaps are particularly evident when it comes to the abolitionists' reactions to the actions of slaves themselves. Slaves' constant calls for change, as represented by acts of resistance, were no less intense in the nineteenth century than they were in previous centuries. What use was made by the abolitionists of real testimony of the realities of the system of slavery and the survival strategies of the slaves? What doubts did they have in terms of the information to which they had access in Europe?

Activism from a distance: European abolitionists and colonial territories

No abolitionist of the nineteenth century questioned the principle of colonial expansion itself, or the subjugation of the people of colonised territories. French social reformers, often called *utopians*, were relatively silent on the subject of slavery and colonisation. They believed that a reorganisation of society would put an end, there and elsewhere, to social injustice. Significantly, such reformers frequently assumed that the colonisation of new peoples would bring about social progress for those who were colonised.

The majority of abolitionists in Europe were positioned outside the colonies and had little understanding of—or direct experience with—the social structures established between master and slave in otherwise unfamiliar colonial territories. Their response to any issue of a financial nature was furthermore almost inevitably weak and defensive. In the French case, economic analyses were poorly developed, vague, and untested, despite abolitionists' stated interest in issues of commerce, maritime trade, and property rights. While Schoelcher produced comparative tables of colonial economies with and without slavery, his calculations remained theoretical and lacked solid empirical foundations.

French abolitionists believed that their proposed methods of abolition would maintain production rates, exports levels, and sugar prices. They would further safeguard private property rights and the interests of the merchant fleet while attracting new investment to the colonies. This position indirectly served the interests of the plantation owners and shippers by leading to protracted parliamentary deliberations. In addition, certain anti-slavery advocates were guilty of harbouring the same prejudices as plantation owners vis-à-vis slaves. Many of them believed that slaves were ill-adapted to life after slavery and to work after emancipation. What is more, they rarely ventured into the domain of diplomacy in which the majority were poorly versed. Their main lines of argumentation were moral, religious, and humanitarian

in nature: strong arguments to be sure, but insufficient in the face of the private and national economic interests at play.

Other important forces to consider are the *Société des Amis des Noirs* founded in Paris at the end of the eighteenth century, the *Comité abolitionniste de la Société de la Morale Chrétienne* (1822), and the *Société française pour l'abolition de l'esclavage* (1834). These were based on British models and are among the first organisations founded in France to fight a specific social or political cause. These organisations might have been a real force had they achieved the cohesion and popular support necessary to act collectively against successive governments. Guillaume de Felice commented on the ineffectiveness of these organisations in his 1846 *Appeal to the abolitionists*: “Either the abolitionists do not understand the importance of the words they pronounce, or they have very good reasons to see the crime of slavery prolonged, or they do not feel personally invested in the matter”. He restates the urgency of “establishing the absolute criminality of colonial slavery”, concluding “the thing I fear most is not opposition to my ideas: it is indifference and inaction”. (Cf. *Guillaume de Felice Émancipation immédiate et complète des esclaves, appel aux abolitionnistes*, Paris, Delay).

The theory and practice of ‘freedom’

The Declaration of the Abolition of Slavery, signed in Paris in April 1848 and based on the proposal of the Commission for the Abolition of Slavery (presided by Victor Schoelcher), was accompanied by a number of other decrees. These instituted a group of so-called *republican* rights and freedoms, such as universal male suffrage for electing representatives to the national assembly. The general commissars of the republic had instructions to “complete, in the name of the Republic, this great act of reparation” for “a crime of inhumanity”. However, some weeks after the proclamation of abolition, a new phase of colonisation and social control was implemented. This new regime was represented by words like order, work, family, forgetting the past, social reconciliation and *recognition* of the Emancipatory Republic. A number of

political trials presided by war councils sent dozens of people judged as ‘dangerous’ to the penal colonies, while a series of arrests by the so-called ‘work police’ regulated the smallest details of the lives, work, and movement of the ‘newly free’. A number of methods of social control were put in place which Schœlcher, by this stage removed from power, was able to describe as “attacks on individual liberty”.

From 1848 onwards the distance between the ideas expressed in the abolition decrees and the realities on the ground was immense. Continuing discrimination, bolstered by a sense that the past had been left behind, allowed the colonial system to survive. The policy of “forgetting the past” generated myths which profoundly affected the writing of the past and its commemoration. Several commemorations in the twentieth century consecrated the manipulation of the past, which responded to the economic needs of some and to the needs of others for colonial pageantry.

Today the struggle against modern slavery takes the form of a dazzling list of moral arguments as opposed to a treatment of the economic forces in play. Those struggling against modern slavery seem no less up to the challenge than the abolitionists of the past. The multiple facets of servitude clearly illustrate the inefficacy of principles against the constraints of international economic relations, a problem exacerbated by the palpable indifference of the worldwide public.

Sexual surveillance and moral quarantines: a history of anti-trafficking

The US government is using anti-human trafficking laws to intensify the surveillance and criminalisation of migrating women and harden the national security state—as it has since 1875.

Jessica R. Pliley

Last year the shining jewel of the US Defense Department, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), announced that it was joining the fight against human trafficking as part of its national security mandate. The agency that helped to create the internet has developed a programme named Memex to scour the deep web—the part of the internet ignored by commercial search engines like Google—for evidence of criminal activities. [According to DARPA](#): “The use of forums, chats, advertisements, job postings, hidden services, etc., continues to enable a growing industry of modern slavery”. DARPA invited proposals for computer science programmes interested in helping to shed light on the darker corners of the internet. Artur Dubrawski, of Carnegie Mellon University’s School of Computer Science, was awarded one of these prestigious contracts. He [noted](#), “originally, we looked for ways to help victims of human trafficking, but we quickly realised the best way to help victims would be to help law enforcement”.

In its 140-year history of fighting sex trafficking, the United States has always prioritised law enforcement, border control, and national security over aid to victims or concerns about privacy. The developers in charge of Memex [were themselves concerned](#) about the privacy implications of their work. “We didn’t want to cloud this work unnecessarily by dragging in the specter of snooping and surveillance”. DARPA is only one piece of the United States’ extraordinary national security infrastructure, a conglomeration of institutions that includes the National Security Agency. This agency, as the revelations released by Edward

Snowden attest, has routinely used its national security mandate to develop and use mass surveillance systems against American citizens (as well as citizens of other countries). As Katie Cruz argues (see *BTS Short Course* Vol. 3) trafficking is “bound up with border control and criminalisation”. I would argue that intertwined with border control and criminalisation is national security, and these three issues have been entangled for well over one hundred years in the enforcement of anti-trafficking laws in the United States.

Chinese immigrant women: the original targets of anti-trafficking law

Congress passed the first anti-trafficking law in the United States in 1875 within the context of an anti-Chinese nativist movement. This claimed that Chinese immigration formed a “modern slave trade system”, in the words of a congressman from Massachusetts, because of the high percentage of sex workers among its tiny female population. The Page Act outlawed the importation of women for the purposes of prostitution or “any other immoral purpose” and it made the trafficking of Chinese women from East Asia a felony. Chinese women were frequently assumed to be prostitutes by the racist imaginations of immigration inspectors, largely because many of the women were trafficked to the western United States by entrepreneurs seeking to take advantage of the large number of male Chinese labourers. So in the aftermath of this law, female immigration from China began to dwindle well before the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act put a stop to most migration from China to the United States. The Immigration Bureau, founded in 1891 to enforce the anti-Chinese laws, saw its responsibility as one of protecting the country from the “morally, mentally and physically deficient”, according to its 1907 annual report. From the Immigration Bureau’s perspective, depravity and disease were entangled concepts that centred on the body of the migrating sex worker.

Deciding whether a migrant woman was an immoral-prostitute-in-hiding or an innocent victim of sex trafficking relied on the gendered

imaginings of the men who staffed the Immigration Bureau. It was a moral reading of women's bodies that reflected assumptions about class: attire, demeanour, and hygiene were read as indicators of morality. The reliance on such flimsy readings produced comedies of error at the border. According to *The New York Times* reports from the time, in 1903 an immigrant inspector in New York grew suspicious of one woman who occupied a first-class cabin, yet travelled alone. This was enough to raise suspicions that she might be a well-paid prostitute. As the inspector asked increasingly personal questions, the woman became increasingly "hysterical". The ensuing investigation revealed that she was the wife of a ship captain based in Seattle and was travelling to reunite with her husband.

A game of cat and mouse

Sex workers who were aware of US immigration laws could easily avoid detection by presenting themselves in ways that satisfied inspectors' gendered assumptions. In 1909, as part of an investigation into white slavery in Europe, one inspector learned that prostitutes working in the United States frequently returned to Europe to visit their families. When he pointed out to his sex worker interlocutors that such behaviour was in violation of US immigration law, one woman laughed and called him a "chump". His final report, which recorded these interactions, caused the Immigration Bureau to conclude:

The most alarming feature of this traffic from the bureau's point of view consists . . . of the vastly increasing numbers of alien prostitutes flooding the country, finding in the existing immigration laws, with their present means of enforcement, only slight impediment to their passage back and forth, and in the great and callous indifference displayed to the existence of these leprous sores upon the body politic in the various cities which throw the cloak of protection over the districts wherein are gathered the brothels, dives, and houses of assignation.

Prostitutes, Procurers, and LPC's Excluded from Entry, 1892-1911

Year	Prostitute	Procurer	LPC	Total Debarred
1892	80		1002	2164
1893			431	1053
1894	2		802	1389
1895			1714	2419
1896			2012	2799
1897			1277	1617
1898			2261	3030
1899			2599	3798
1900	7		2974	4246
1901	3		2798	3516
1902	3		3944	4974
1903	13		5812	8769
1904	9	3	4798	7994
1905	24	4	7898	11480
1906	30	2	7069	12432
1907	18	1	6866	13064
1908	124	43	3741	10902
1909	323	181	4458	10411
1910	316	179	15927	22607
1911	253	141	12048	22349

Source: *Annual Report for the Commissioner General, 1904-1911.*

The Immigration Bureau sought to build a stronger moral wall at the border in order to better identify sex workers who were evading the law. It asked Congress to fortify the 1875 law with the Immigration Acts of 1903, 1907, 1910, and 1917. Combined, these outlawed the importation of sex workers, women coming for other ‘immoral’ purposes, and men demonstrating ‘moral turpitude’. They also made the acts of procuring, pimping, and sex work deportable offences. With each additional law, the Immigration Bureau found itself in need of more manpower to carry out its mandate, surveilling the borders and the interior of the country in order to ensure both remained secure.

More powers, more players

The Immigration Bureau was not the only federal agency that used sex trafficking to increase its institutional reach. To supplement the immigration acts, the US Congress passed the White Slave Traffic Act in 1910 (commonly known as the Mann Act) to halt sex trafficking within the US, and to protect what one congressman called the “blue-eyed girl” in America. Enforcement of this expansive law, which made it illegal to take a woman or girl over state borders for the purposes of prostitution, debauchery or “any other immoral purpose”, fell to the young Bureau of Investigation, now the FBI. When the law was passed in 1910, the FBI had only 61 agents, yet by 1914 the agency had over 300 representatives spread throughout the nation. I argue in my book *Policing Sexuality* that it was the active policing of sex trafficking that led to the national growth of the FBI.

The FBI encountered the same problems as the Bureau of Immigration when it came to identifying sex workers. After a 1917 Supreme Court case upheld the constitutionality of the Mann Act, the Bureau solved this vexing puzzle by policing heterosexuality more broadly, including cases of run-away daughters, adulterous wives, and migrating sex workers. Under this expanded purview, the FBI used the anti-sex trafficking law to justify its increasing oversight of the physical and moral health of the nation.

The Memex programme once again brings sex trafficking firmly under the umbrella of national security. The Obama administration established an expansive vision of national security in its 2010 *National Security Strategy*, which covers everything from immigration and education to health and scientific innovation. Under this vision the National Security Council's territory has expanded beyond the traditional focus on international military activities and foreign policy to include trade, organised crime, travel, and a wide array of other activities.

DARPA's celebration of the law enforcement potential of the Memex project should not be taken lightly. The project significantly increases the surveillance state and makes its findings available to law enforcement. This expanded surveillance is justified by drawing on the discursive and political power of the anti-trafficking movement in the United States, and it will be a powerful gift to law enforcement. But if the history of the surveillance national security state and the enforcement of anti-trafficking laws teaches us anything, it suggests that in the past these initiatives grew the power of the state while criminalising the behaviour of migrating women.

Anti-trafficking movements and journalism: who sets the agenda?

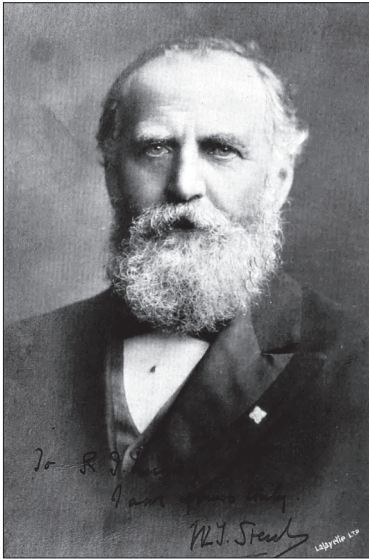
Many have criticised the media for their sensationalist reporting on sex trafficking. But few realise the extent to which social movements are shaping this agenda.

Gretchen Soderlund

Sex trafficking is a framework for understanding commercial sex exchanges that draws on socially potent narratives about immigration, race, gender, and sexuality. More than any other institution, the media have been central in establishing this framework as credible and legitimate, despite various concerns that have been raised by critics about the problematic nature of sex trafficking journalism and the activist organisations it spawns. Indeed, ending sex trafficking has become the most popular humanitarian cause of the new millennium. Today the cause is as likely to be championed by human rights activists as it is celebrities, evangelical Christians, Mormon activists, high school and college students, politicians, feminists, or women's magazine readers. This unlikely collection of activists promotes the belief that sex trafficking is not only rampant, but it is one of the worst abuses imaginable.

For western societies, sex trafficking first surfaced as a key political, social, and moral topic during the 1880s in England, when a social purity activist asked the crusading journalist William T. Stead to help push forward stalled age-of-consent legislation in parliament. The result was a scandalous piece titled the “[Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon](#)”, which described the auction of a vast number of virgins to London's wealthy aristocrats. Stead's methods and conclusions were problematic, but he succeeded in his quest to raise the age of consent in England and triggered an international movement to end the traffic in women.

The sex trafficking framework that Stead popularised eventually made



William Thomas Stead (1849-1912).
Public Domain (Wikicommons).

its way to the US. In the wake of Stead's piece, English social purity activist Josephine Butler toured the US declaring that the 15th Amendment had failed to liberate a new class of slaves: female prostitutes. Inspired by Stead and Butler, temperance and social purity groups like the Women's Christian Temperance Union began to demand that US editors use Stead as an example and print stories of sex trafficking in their papers. Newspapers at the time were hesitant to openly discuss sex or prostitution for fear that this content would be perceived as immoral. However,

social purity movements taught editors that they could report on the horrors of prostitution-as-sex-trafficking without incurring charges of prurience. At the behest of social purity activists, newspapers in the US slowly began to publish stories on sex trafficking. In return, activists praised these newspapers in their own publications and encouraged their rank-and-file to patronise them.

Sex trafficking disappeared from the public agenda for several decades in the twentieth century. However, in the 1990s, news organisations and journalists began promoting sex trafficking as a salient and relevant framework for understanding some forms of immigration. This coverage was in response to the collapse of the Soviet Union, which ushered in a period of widespread voluntary and involuntary mass migration. In the US, the news media began reporting on sex trafficking as an unseemly byproduct of the Cold War's end. Around this same period, feminist and human rights activists began to organise on be-

half of trafficked women; by the mid-1990s some of their organisations were even consulted by the media (the Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women and the Global Survival Network, for example). However, none of these groups gained as much traction within the mainstream western media as today's rescue organisations.

Over the last fifteen years abolitionist rescue groups have increasingly set the national news media agenda around sex trafficking. These organisations now frame, define, and quantify the practice for journalists. Today it is commonplace in the US to see segments on shows like NBC's *Dateline*, CBS's *60 Minutes*, and ABC's *Nightline* that chronicle the activities of neo-abolitionist groups like International Justice Mission, Shared Hope International and, most recently, [Operation Underground Railroad](#). These relationships have spawned a new genre of sex trafficking journalism. Journalists and camera crews embed themselves within anti-trafficking groups to offer firsthand reports of the [undercover, paramilitary-style raids](#) these groups conduct in



A poster warning of the dangers of 'white slavery' (1909).
Public Domain.

their global campaigns to end sex slavery. Well-funded rescue groups, with journalists and local law enforcement by their side, lay elaborate traps to arrest middlemen and send young sex workers to shelters in the name of ending slavery. Journalism has again developed a symbiotic relationship with anti-trafficking organisations, whereby the organisations set the agenda around trafficking by engaging in effective public relations. The news media, in turn, is rewarded with titillating and exciting footage for nighttime news audiences.

In recent coverage of sex trafficking there appears to be a continual feedback loop: the news media have inspired social movements to adopt sex trafficking as a cause at various points in history. Once the issue becomes entrenched, journalists become beholden to anti-trafficking movements as experts for continued coverage of the topic. The press proceeds to adopt a frame from these groups that it had earlier helped to establish as dominant. As I have shown [elsewhere](#), the history of anti-trafficking groups and the history of modern journalism are deeply intertwined. Not only did these social movements and journalism develop symbiotic relationships with one another, but early-twentieth century controversies over the excesses of sex trafficking reportage actually helped change journalistic practices.

The history of sex trafficking journalism and activism is marred by scandal, sensationalism, and unsubstantiated claims. From Stead to [Somaly Mam](#), sex trafficking is a topic that lends itself to excesses and abuses. Part of the problem is that the narratives have become so universally accepted that they have become ready-made stories that journalists can publish with little reflection or criticism. We need a renewed call for responsible reporting on this issue. Understanding the history of this reportage and its relationship to social movements can help us avoid some of the main pitfalls of the past.

Human trafficking: a parasite of prohibitionism?

Is human trafficking an unintended consequence every time a sector of commerce is zoned illicit by lawmakers as a way of policing morality? What are the links between human trafficking and the wars on drugs and on undocumented immigration?

Samuel Martínez

Among the elephants in the waiting room of today's political commentary, one of the most obvious but least discussed is the accumulating evidence that human trafficking is a parasite of legal prohibitionism. Human trafficking is no doubt a 'scourge', yet it is not a natural or timeless affliction but one that battens on slavery-genic structures of law. It is time for students of trafficking to call out states for creating the conditions that enable this crime.

Early in the current global upsurge of concern about unfree labour, [critical feminist voices](#) warned that legislative and police efforts to suppress the sex trade are counterproductive. They drive sex-for-money commerce further underground and displace it, in a push-down/pop-up effect, into less strictly policed areas. Particularly in the negotiations of the [2000 UN Trafficking Protocol](#), sex-worker rights feminists pointed attention toward the relationship between the law and human trafficking. They did not, however, go far enough to unveil trafficking not as law's absence but as law's misdirected excess.

America's Prohibition Habit

You would think that Americans would know better. Their first experiment in [prohibition](#)—the outlawing of the sale of alcohol between 1919 and 1933—should have brought home the message that prohibitionism cannot kill morally objectionable commerce. It only cordons it off inside a zone of non-regulated trade. It is in this sense alone that it makes sense to say, in the words of *12 Years a Slave* director, Steve Mc-

Queen, that “[slavery was never abolished; it was deregulated](#)”. Metaphorically, the walls around the spaces of unfree labour today are built by law even as the yard within those walls is unregulated. Yet instead of admitting to a mistake, Americans quickly followed their experiment in alcohol’s prohibition with other prohibitions, re-labeled eventually “wars on [fill in the blank]”.

The most expensive of these ‘wars’, in terms of tax dollars and blasted lives, is the still raging [war on drugs](#). It also acts as host to the parasite of human trafficking. Reading, admittedly, against the grain, tantalising evidence of this link is found in stories detailing the public spectacle of young teenage girls clad in five-inch heels and miniskirts, being led in and out of flashy cars and motel rooms on [the Berlin Turnpike](#), not far from where I live in eastern Connecticut. In seeking to understand why “more young American girls [are] entering the commercial sex industry—an estimated 300,000 at this moment—and their ages have been dropping drastically”, investigative reporter, Amy Fine Collins, looked into [the back story on one trafficking bust on the Turnpike](#).

If, as Assistant US Attorney Krishna Patel says, the “two business models” in this commerce are “manipulating girls through violence ... and controlling them with drugs”, one missing piece of the puzzle is the role of the police as surrogate enforcers of sex-worker discipline. In the story told by Collins, one bail bondsman—trickster figures of the law enforcement world—did double duty as a pimp. The bail bondsman not only enjoys predatory high ground on a law enforcement savanna dotted with young girls in trouble; he can also call in colleagues to arrest disobedient or rebellious girls for ‘crimes’ such as “failure to appear” before a parole officer. Relevant here, too, is the [school-to-prison pipeline](#)—another disastrous misuse of law enforcement—through which mostly poor and disproportionately African American youth get tagged with criminal records for school disciplinary infractions. On the Turnpike, the girls’ fear of encounters with law enforcers is a stick in pimps’ hands. The same police officer who enforces drug



International Day Against Violence Against Sex Workers 2010.
Steven Rhodes/Flickr. Creative Commons.

laws and arrests parole violators is also expected to be trusted by underage sex workers to respond with care. Looked at this way, human trafficking is not just one more form of illicit commerce; it also grows parasitically on the designation of other forms of commerce as illicit.

Borders and human smugglers: a recipe for trafficking?

The link between prohibitionism and trafficking has been most clearly documented in [America's war on undocumented immigration](#). We have known for more than a decade that higher and longer walls, increased border patrol surveillance, and heightened bureaucratic impediments to immigration have deflected immigrants into the grip of smugglers. Yet trafficking's parasitism on smuggler dependency has never been a topic of sustained discussion in either anti-trafficking or immigrant rights activism. In his 2001 study, *Border Games*, Peter Andreas pointed out that trafficking is not a product of porous borders: where borders are truly permeable, people will just walk across on their own and not bother with procuring a smuggler. Reliance on smugglers, who may stand revealed as traffickers if they seek to restrict

the entrants' freedom once they are on the other side, emerged only in response to the US government's border build-up in the 1990s. And this is a reality not just in North America but in other places worldwide. As [Phil Marshall and Susu Thatun](#) generalised in 2005, on the basis of their extensive anti-trafficking experience in the six-nation greater Mekong region, "tighter border controls exacerbate trafficking ... [and] bringing migration policies more closely into line with labour market realities, would be the single greatest step a country could take against trafficking".

Consider also that the current upsurge in concern about unfree labour began to build in the mid-1990s. This was just a few years after the start of the border build-up, with border-sealing actions like 1994's [Operation Gatekeeper](#) followed by the slavery scandal in the 1995 [El Monte forced labour case](#). Is that coincidence just a product of chance?

In rejecting the idea that trafficking is a law enforcement issue, pure and simple, I also reject the dismissal of trafficking as a "[sex slave panic](#)". Trafficking and the plight of the trafficked are real. Steering away from prohibitionism is all I advocate. That begins by moving, as deliberately and incrementally as seems prudent, toward a world where bona fide migrant workers can cross borders legally and safely, where addicts get therapy and not jail time, and all youth stand a fair chance of legally earning a living wage.



Section three

Historical legacies and
contemporary politics

A wall of silence around slavery

We must acknowledge slavery's role in creating the modern world if we are to address its legacy. The UNESCO Slave Route Project exists to help breach the wall of silence.

Ali Moussa Iye

This year marks the beginning of the [International Decade](#) for People of African Descent (2015-2024). The [main objectives](#) of this United Nations sponsored initiative include promoting “respect, protection and fulfilment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms”, as well as “greater knowledge of and respect for the diverse heritage, culture and contribution of people of African descent”. In light of these objectives, it is worth recalling the three kinds of historical denials that Africans and people of African descent have had to overcome:

1. The denial of their humanity and dignity through numerous attempts to reduce them to the status of beasts of burden, whose primary function is to serve external interests and agendas.
2. The denial of their history and culture through a series of selective ‘histories’ that present Europeans as actors and Africans as peoples whom are acted upon.
3. The denial of their rights and citizenship through all types of policies, laws and strategies of racism and discrimination.

Most prejudices against people of African descent are rooted in the belief that they have not made any valuable contribution to the progress of humanity. Their civilisations are also questioned, with every sign of sophistication ritually dismissed as importations from other regions. The ancient Egyptian civilisation is not the only case where Africa and Africans have been denied ownership of history and heritage.

These prejudices are not simply the result of ignorance. They are part of a long history of ideological constructions that have served to justify and legitimate the slave trade, slavery, colonisation, segregation and apartheid since at the fifteenth century. Elaborated upon by the most eminent thinkers that Europe and America have produced, these ideologies of race and difference have done nothing less than codify and corroborate European racial and cultural supremacy. These widespread prejudices have survived the abolition of slavery and the formal end of colonisation. They continue to be disseminated by the media, cinema, television, textbooks and politicians, influencing the ways Africans and peoples of African descent are perceived and provoking racist suspicions regarding their capacity to master their life.

Silence and responsibility

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that there continues to be a wall of silence around the slave trade and slavery across the world. This silence surrounding slavery has allowed Europeans to escape responsibility and to avoid reflecting upon the inhumane economic and socio-political system that shaped our modern world. It has also helped to avoid challenging questions regarding the continuing legacies of slavery, along with the larger relationship between slavery, colonialism, and apartheid.

Slavery currently holds the unique status of being the only crime against humanity for which the perpetrators were financially compensated for the lost of their human property at the point of legal abolition. The victims and survivors of slavery were not so lucky. This sharp dichotomy illustrates the ethical and moral disaster on which the modern world was built.

It is difficult to understand how a tragedy of this scale could be ignored and silenced. Historians estimate that a total of around 50 million Africans were deported from the different regions of Africa and enslaved in Europe, the Americas, Asia, various islands in the Indian Ocean and

throughout the Middle East. If we add the number of those who died during capture, the arduous journey on foot towards various ports, the 'holding' camps, and the middle passage, there were hundreds of millions of lives that were taken from Africa.

This massive outward forced migration had profound consequences for the African continent, resulting in population decline for at least four centuries. Demographers have calculated that the total number of Africans at the end of nineteenth century should have reached 200 million, rather than an estimated 100 million. The slave trade and slavery had another peculiar consequence: they left in their wake the tenacious poison of racism and discrimination that plagues Africans and people of African descent in our societies today. They paved the way for new forms of slavery that continue to affect millions of people, in particular women and children, in different parts of the world.

Learning from the past

What lessons can societies that have practiced such systematic and enduring crimes draw from this history? What could we expect from a 'civilisation' that passed through this kind of inhumanity? To what extent can we appreciate humanistic values that were introduced at the height of the slave trade and slavery? These are ethical and philosophical questions that are not, in my view, sufficiently asked amongst the academic and political discourses. UNESCO created the Slave Route Project in 1994 in order to contribute to this reflection, as ignoring this history constitutes *in itself* a denial of human rights and an obstacle to peace, mutual understanding, reconciliation and cooperation. The inaugural meeting took place in Benin.

The ethical, political, and cultural stakes of the UNESCO Slave Route Project were clearly articulated from the very beginning. Before being treated as an object of research, the slave trade and slavery should first be posed as an ethical question. The barbarity that societies are capable of unleashing, especially those societies claiming the privilege of



Detail of 'Door of No Return', a slavery memorial in Ouidah, Benin.
Adam Jones/Flickr. Creative Commons.

'civilisation', are the stakes. They are also the contradiction between the moral aspirations of peoples and their subjugation to an immoral economic system of their society. Employing a historical lens here is important: if the principles of universality and indivisibility in human rights seems to be largely accepted today, it is important to recall that has not always been the case.

The comprehension of this chapter in world history makes it possible to better grasp the ambivalence of humanistic movements, in particular the genealogy that binds the slave trade to other historic crimes such as the extermination of indigenous peoples in the Americas, the holocaust of Jews, apartheid, and more recent genocides. Far from being an event of the past, the tragedy of the slave trade and slavery raises some burning challenges for today's societies: the fight against racial prejudices and discrimination, the equitable distribution of power and resources, the respect and practice of cultural pluralism.

The Slave Route Project aims in particular to demonstrate that despite the barbarity of this system of oppression, the people enslaved by violence never ceased to resist from the moment their villages were attacked up to the places where they were exploited. Using the full potential of their culture, they not only survived the conditions of de-humanisation, but even 're-humanised' slave societies through social ingenuity and artistic creativity.

The Slave Route Project furthermore contributes to the recognition that the slave trade and slavery constitute key foundations of our modern world. They were not only crucial to the accumulation of capital that industrialised and enriched the Americas and Europe, but also cultural interaction between peoples of Africa, Americas, Europe, and Asia gave birth to new cultures and artistic production that now form part of the extraordinary diversity of our world. Moreover, the struggle against slavery profoundly influenced the global human rights movement. This history, no less than any other, has participated in the emergence of modernity.

This tragedy concerns the whole of humanity and calls out to all of us whatever our origin. The universal silence that surrounds it, the troubling discourse that justifies it, and psychological scars it inflicts affect us all. It encourages us to confront the most pressing issues of our multi-ethnic, post-slavery societies: reconciliation, cultural pluralism, new identities and citizenships, economic immorality, and new forms of servitude.

Reparations are too confronting. Let's talk about 'modern-day slavery' instead

Governments and activists in Europe and America invoke the immediacy of 'modern-day slavery' to sidestep challenging questions regarding the case for reparations. Instead of repairing harm, they promise rescue.

Joel Quirk

Tony Blair's tenure as the prime minister of Britain was a tremendous disappointment. While most people now remember Blair as a key champion of the catastrophic invasion of Iraq, this foreign policy disaster counts as only one of many times when he failed to do the right thing. One less high profile example came in late 2006, when Blair published a now [infamous article](#) in *New Nation*—a community newspaper geared towards Africans and peoples of African descent living in Britain—concerned with the role of slavery in British history.

In this article, Blair expressed “deep sorrow that [the slave trade] ever happened”, and also stated that it was “hard to believe that what would now be a crime against humanity was legal at the time”. While Blair's article was initially welcomed [in some circles](#), it is now primarily remembered for what he didn't say, since Blair [deliberately refrained](#) from offering an apology for centuries of slavery. The chief reason that was [given at the time](#) for this failure to offer a “full apology” was that it would leave “the state open to claims for reparations”.

The British government has still not formally apologised for slavery. Neither of Blair's successors—Gordon Brown and David Cameron—have been prepared to improve upon his carefully calibrated statement from 2006. When the British government [recently apologised](#) for serious human rights violations under colonial rule in Kenya, this apology was only compelled by successful legal action, creating an important precedent from which campaigners seeking reparations have drawn

inspiration. While the politics of apology are by no means straightforward—how much can an apology really mean without other measures—this ongoing resistance to an apology remains emblematic of a more general reluctance to directly confront the history and legacies of slavery.

The contemporary legacies of historical slave systems

Blair not only failed to apologise. He also failed to engage with the legacies of slavery. While Blair's article briefly referred to the "profound" impact of slavery "upon Africa, the Caribbean, the Americas and Europe", he refrained from taking the further step of [connecting this history](#) to what he described as "the problems of Africa and the challenges facing the African and Caribbean diaspora today". This was a notable omission. Recent reparations claims are not confined to [a history that is now closed](#). They are also [fundamentally concerned](#) with [continuing legacies found in patterns of injustice, inequality, and racism](#) today.

This approach to reparations is exemplified in the [Ten Point Action Plan](#) recently developed by [CARICOM](#) to address ongoing challenges such as public health, knowledge, education, illiteracy, and debt. For reparation campaigners, slavery cannot be approached as a self-contained episode. It must instead be regarded as one component of the [larger history](#) of colonialism, segregation, apartheid, and racial discrimination. This also extends to the other side of the ledger. Patterns of wealth, power, and [privilege](#) that were enjoyed by slave owners and the societies of which they were part [did not end with abolition](#). They also [persist to this day](#).

Like most politicians in Europe and America, Blair was not prepared to confront the historical sources of contemporary poverty, privilege, and discrimination. He instead fell back into the more comfortable language of humanitarianism, shifting the focus from harms inflicted to help provided. Having started his 2006 article with an expression of "regret" for abuses committed by the British state—centuries of en-

slavement—Blair concluded with a picture of this very same state as an instrument of virtue. In addition to listing measures to “help Africa tackle its problems”, he also went on to repeatedly highlight the need to “acknowledge the unspeakable cruelty that persists in the form of modern day slavery”.

No apology for slavery, but full speed ahead against “modern slavery”

It is this inclusion of modern slavery that I am interested in exploring further. Blair’s remarks are not unique, but are instead representative of a larger trend. Whenever politicians in Europe and North America talk about the history of slavery, they now almost ritually throw in references to trafficking and slavery today. When British parliamentarians [formally debated](#) the bicentenary of the legal abolition of the British transatlantic slave trade in 2007, much of debate focused not on slavery and racism, but upon modern-day human trafficking. One particularly revealing contribution to this debate came from Vincent Cable, then deputy leader of the Liberal Democrats, who [declared](#): “The best way that we can honour the past and pay reparations to it, if that is what is sought, is by ensuring that contemporary slavery is properly and decisively dealt with”. According to [William Hague](#), the current leader of the British House of Commons and noted biographer of William Wilberforce, “Slavery is out of sight to most people as it was two hundred years ago, but the world faces the same challenge nonetheless”.

Similar sentiments were also expressed by David Cameron, the current British prime minister, [during a speech](#) commemorating the 2007 bicentenary:

Today we are not only remembering the slavery of the past. We bring to mind the many thousands of people who are still trapped in slavery, trafficked as labourers, sex workers and soldiers ... The dedication of William Wilberforce and

his colleagues is still needed today, and I salute the efforts of modern campaigners to stamp out this vicious abuse of human rights.

This is the same David Cameron who [declared in 2013](#) that “I don’t think the right thing is to reach back into history and to seek out things you can apologise for”. Like most of his peers, Cameron is comfortable talking about the urgent need to combat trafficking and slavery, but this commitment effectively takes place within a separate moral and political universe to that inhabited by the slave systems and colonies established by the same government he now heads.

Why repair when you can rescue?

The insertion of “modern slavery” into these types of conversations has the effect of shifting the focus of the debate away from the history and legacies of slavery—a theme that most people in Europe and America do not want to talk about—by introducing a new topic that is framed as “[far more important](#)”: modern-day slavery and human trafficking. Campaigns for reparations present a challenge to the self-image of most white Europeans—and their global descendants—as both ‘civilised’ and morally superior, since the basic argument is about the need to repair the lasting effects of many centuries of exploitation, abuse, and unjust enrichment. This can be contrasted with campaigns against ‘modern-day slavery’, which instead involve the moral validation of this very same self-image. Instead of confronting the history and legacies of slavery, western citizens and governments are eagerly leading a “[rescue industry](#)” devoted to the [protection](#) and [salvation](#) of vulnerable people from “[the darkest corners of the world](#)”.

James Brewer Stewart argues in the next article that modern-day abolitionists have failed to engage with the history and legacies of slavery. This failure is not accidental, but can instead be primarily traced to a fundamental incompatibility between competing worldviews. The main reason that most modern-day abolitionists have little to say

about racism, reparations, and the legacies of slavery is that their worldview is rooted in the underlying precepts of the ‘[white-savoir industrial complex](#)’. They consequentially suffer from recurring blindness in relation to the lasting impact of slavery, since this history presents a direct challenge to how they view their place in the world. Similarly, the main reason that campaigners for reparations have so little to say about ‘modern-day slavery’ is that they have determined—correctly in my view—that recent talk about modern slavery has too often had the effect of deflecting or diluting further recognition of the history and legacies of slavery.

It has sometimes been argued that reparations are a lost cause, since there are [numerous procedural difficulties](#) associated with developing a successful legal case. While it is true that existing laws make things hard, it would be a mistake to allow these laws to determine what is morally desirable or politically possible. It remains an open question whether ongoing reparations campaigns will be successful. But, even if they don’t get as far as might be hoped, there is nonetheless tremendous value in initiating a major political and intellectual challenge to the widespread neglect of one of the key foundations of the world in which we live.

The everyday gender inequalities that underpin wartime atrocities

The contemporary enslavement of women, and sexual violence inflicted on them in times of war, are rooted in 'everyday' gender-based inequalities between men and women.

Benedetta Rossi

Readers are horrified by the reports of wartime atrocities committed against women and girls in recent African conflicts. Graphic descriptions of the most inhumane acts of sexual violence confirm their exceptional nature to audiences wondering how war could produce such unimaginable brutality. Yet the sexual abuse and enslavement of women is rooted in everyday gender relations. 'War' serves as an ideological scapegoat in debates that refuse to address uncomfortable realities about inequalities entrenched in the institutions of marriage, kinship, and the family.

The men and women who interact in wartime are full-fledged historical agents, socialised into norms and values that drive their behaviour in wartime and peacetime. To understand what happens in war, why, how, and to whom, we need to critically consider institutions that govern social relations in peacetime. These institutions, which are all the more powerful for passing unrecognised as instruments of daily abuse, have been shaped historically through the interaction of global, regional, and local forces. Changing them is often harder than ending conflict, and change—when it occurs—brings conflict right into the most intimate domains of life.

Pre-twentieth century conflict in Africa

Up until the end of the nineteenth century, conflict and violence led to the enslavement of women and children in African societies. European colonisation abolished the legal status of slavery and hampered

the ability of independent African groups to wage war and organise raids. But everywhere in Africa the European administration introduced new forms of un-freedom and allowed slavery to continue happening *de facto*, if not *de jure*. At the same time, conservative gender ideologies in both European and African societies limited the effects of formal emancipation for women more than men. Women's productive and reproductive autonomy was seen as a threat to the social and moral order of African societies by the colonial administration, independent African governments, and people socialised in patriarchal societies, including women. By the end of the 1940s international pressures to eradicate slavery had limited enslavement drastically. But the generic slaves whose freedom was being defended were implicitly male. Comparatively little was done to inquire into women's ability to control their lives.

European colonisers had little interest in interfering with the internal dynamics of marriage in African societies. When colonial officers identified a case as 'a question of marriage rather than slavery', the official response was to display unusual respect for native mores and values. Black-boxing 'native marriage' concealed inequalities across different categories of women all labelled 'wives'. Moreover, the 'native marriage' label sounded reassuringly familiar to male colonial administrators. Many of the institutions that regulated kinship and alliance in African societies were unfamiliar to Europeans. But male colonialists thought they understood marriage and knew how to deal with wives at home and abroad. They applied a Eurocentric understanding of marriage and gender to 'native marriage', and mostly did not bother to ask who the 'wives' were: which ones were enslaved concubines, and which ones were women of free descent; which ones had been purchased and forced into unwanted unions, and which ones had consented to a marriage sealed by the transfer of bridewealth to their relatives, not a payment to their future masters. Because of their patriarchal gender ideas, European colonisers cared little about subtle distinctions of status across free wives, concubines, and female slaves.

In their eyes, women ought to accept the authority of male guardians, husbands and masters alike.

Frederick Lugard, the highest ranking colonial officer in Uganda and Nigeria at the turn of the twentieth century, encountered many cases of fugitive concubines and enslaved women. As he explained in his 1906 *Instructions to Political and Other Officers*: “in many cases where the fugitive is a woman, it will be found to be a domestic quarrel, and the woman will be glad to return and be forgiven”. Would she, really? The fugitive woman in question had escaped to leave behind a relation that would have originated with her kidnap and sale at a young age, leading to forced sexual relations with a man much older than herself. Her slave status meant that she had no recourse to the support of her relatives. Her safety depended entirely on pleasing a man she had not chosen—and his free wives. But colonial administrators were overwhelmingly concerned that runaway female slaves might ‘drift into immorality’, and saw it as their duty to ‘protect’ these women by placing them under the tutelage of a male guardian. The message was clear: women needed protection and independence was bad for them.

Until the beginning of the twentieth century European and African gender ideologies were responsible for the slower pace of women’s emancipation and the invisibility of their continued enslavement, which passed unnoticed in contexts where women’s subordination was the norm and the mere idea of women’s autonomy evoked outrage.

When women are the spoils

Gender ideologies influence women’s status and their ability to negotiate their roles in society in peacetime and wartime. Colonial bureaucracies, influenced by European patriarchal ideals, focused on controlling African men and allowed the latter to control African women. Because in African societies women were conceptualised as legitimately subjected to male control in many spheres of life, they were added to the list of desirable war spoils. If the sexual, productive,

and reproductive potential of women are considered valuable assets for those who control them, wars will result in attempts to seize them. And indeed, this is what has been happening from pre-colonial to contemporary African wars.

When David Livingstone travelled in the north-eastern Congo in the 1870s, he found that *only women* were desired and sold as slaves in regions where labour was scarce and people represented the most valuable form of wealth. Roughly in the same period, the pre-colonial increase in the population of the Kingdom of Buganda, estimated as somewhat over a million in the 1870s, was largely the result of the assimilation of captive women from neighbouring societies. Women were valued as workers, mothers, sexual partners, and in some areas as potential bridewealth payments. Controlling women was a means to expand the power of African pre-colonial polities. In many nineteenth century African societies, chiefs could acquire large numbers of wives and slave women; commoners saw polygyny as an avenue of social mobility; and fathers could use their daughters' bridewealth to pay for the marriage of their sons. In places where (1) people were the main form of wealth and (2) deeply entrenched ideologies made women, their labour, and their fertility controllable by men, the control of women was a primary objective of wars and of strategies of social reproduction in peacetime.

Today, as in the past, 'rape as a weapon of war' is as much about skewed gender norms as it is about war and its temporary horrors. African rebel groups and other military organisations working for, or against, the state continue to abduct women and girls in large numbers. Captives can be sold as a means of financing the group's activities, while others can be used as mothers and domestic workers to ensure the reproduction of the movement. These are time-honoured functions of enslaved women broadly documented in pre-colonial and early colonial African wars. They are not new phenomena.

The enslavement of women and girls is often accompanied by legitimising ideologies developed by the perpetrators. Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau was [quoted by CNN](#) in May 2014 as saying “slavery is allowed in my religion, and I shall capture people and make them slaves”, one month after the group abducted 276 girls. This sort of justification is not limited to ‘Muslim’ groups, and we have seen similar Christian religious discourse deployed to the same ends by groups such as Uganda’s Lord Resistance Army (LRA). The kidnapping of the Chibok girls in northern Nigeria resembles the abduction of the Aboke girls by LRA combatants and the enslavement of many of the abductees. On 10 October 1996, 139 schoolgirls were abducted by LRA militiamen in northern Uganda. Many Aboke girls were able to return to their families, but unlike them, thousands of abducted women were integrated in the LRA camps in South Sudan as part of a strategy of LRA leader Joseph Kony to reproduce his movement.

There are many specific causes for these events. But what the Chibok and Aboke girls’ abductions and enslavement have in common—and share with their historical antecedents—is that they are rooted in institutions that make the control of women central to the reproduction of society and power struggles between men. The cessation of wartime atrocities should not be the only goal to which global and local civil activism aspires. Wartime brutalities against women, broadly publicised in media and reports, are the tip of an iceberg. Lingering gender inequalities are the base that should be probed.

Post-conflict reintegration restores women’s subordination, yet few are asking questions

The post-conflict reintegration of women in their societies of origin restores the functioning of gender norms that have the potential to objectify women. Yet women are not passive pawns in these games. They try to make the most of situations where the non-respect of tradition would penalise them severely. Many women staunchly defend norms that give them access to power as wives and mothers. Yet these very

norms—abused and applied with inhumane brutality—make women indispensable to militiamen and rebels. The end of a conflict does not end the structural preconditions for the use and abuse of women, their bodies, and persons.

A Sierra Leonean colleague and gender activist explained one case where a woman wished to denounce the ‘husband’ who had violated her and forced her to live with him after the end of the war. The (male) village chief warned her that causing the imprisonment of her husband and father to her children would deprive her of income. The husband was now looking after her and the war had ended: why, asked the chief, would she want to lose him? It is not only that without a husband women’s economic options are limited, but also that they operate in political settings controlled primarily by male elders. Their chances to survive and live a dignified life rest on accepting established norms that give them limited, but tangible, power. Most of these women are unlikely to try to subvert the gender ideologies in which they grew up. They mostly do not share feminist agendas that they see as ‘western’ and alien to their culture and history.

Different groups of women working together in international fora often hold opposing views about what women’s roles in society should be. Participating women often keep their views to themselves, as a condition for collaboration on what appear to be more urgent issues, and as a consequence of their mutual respect and friendship for each other. It is easy to blame war and the atrocities that it engenders. But thin agreement about wartime atrocities conceals profound dissent over deeply entrenched peacetime institutions.

Difficult questions should be asked: do women in post-war societies have the same capacity as men to choose if, when, how, and with whom to have sex, marry, and have children? How are women who subvert established norms penalised? What are the contexts in which women make decisions? What institutions can they mobilise to advance their

own agendas safely? Refusing to ask these questions replicates the colonial refusal to interfere in native marriages.

To not ask these questions is both hypocritical and foolish. It is hypocritical because it facilitates bureaucratic work at the high price of women's marginalisation. It is foolish because shallow culturalism is a misguided approach. Institutions that embody profound gender inequalities are not simply 'African', and the struggle for greater equality is not a 'western feminist' agenda. The entrenchment of gender inequalities took shape historically through the interaction of particular African and European interests. Women's experiences and struggles for greater control over their bodies and lives are specific and local, not generically 'African' or 'western'. Post-conflict reconstruction efforts should avoid the restoration of ideologies that enable the structural subordination of women and their objectification as sexual, productive, and reproductive actors. More importantly, the women directly involved, especially the most vulnerable, should be empowered. Any measure that gives the power to choose for these women to someone else—be they concerned outsiders, religious leaders, local elite women or male elders—is a step in the wrong direction.

The legacies of slavery in southern Senegal

The history of slavery and the slave trade shape contemporary patterns of vulnerability and exclusion in Southern Senegal, but continuity between past and present is not a straightforward process.

Alice Bellagamba

Anti-slavery activists should consider visiting the Upper Casamance region of Southern Senegal. There they will find significant concentrations of people who identify as slave descendants, and even some elderly people who recollect the enslavement of their ancestors in the late 1800s.

This not-so-distant history looms large in the imagination of the inhabitants of Upper Casamance, as it was during this period that slave raiders on horses ravaged their villages and seized women and children. These raiders incorporated captives into their communities or sold them into slave trading routes linking the Upper Casamance to contemporary Mauritania, Mali, the Gambia, Guinea Conakry, and Guinea Bissau. Those who survived these raids looked for new localities where their families and herds could prosper in peace, and sought the protection of powerful military leaders. They also tried to increase the size of their communities by acquiring slaves themselves and welcoming new settlers.

As men and women born in the first decades of the twentieth century explain, the age of subjection did not end with the arrival of French colonisers. Under French rule, forced labour, taxation, and military conscription replaced slavery and the slave trade. Rural people lived trapped between French colonial authority and the despotism of its local representatives, the '*chefs de canton*'. It was only in the 1950s that things really began to change, thanks to the activism of young Senegalese politicians that followed Léopold Sédar Senghor.

No longer slaves, but still vulnerable

Numerous villages in Upper Casamance are today populated only by slave descendants. Many of these communities suffer from a lack of health and education facilities, potable water, sanitation, transport and agricultural tools. If anti-slavery activists were to visit these villages, they would also find practices such as early marriage of girls and the inheritance of widows, and listen to people that speak proudly of their brothers and sisters that have reached southern Italy by facing the hazards of the Mediterranean Sea. The fact that these migrants have no future in Europe, or that they may end up as harshly exploited labourers is not a concern: a migrant detention camp is a luxurious facility in the eyes of a southern Senegalese peasant. Whatever happens to migrants is preferable to the daily challenges of the average farmer: the risks of droughts, the exorbitant cost of agricultural tools, fertilisers and seeds, illnesses, and debts.

Should the history and legacies of slavery in southern Senegal be invoked in an effort to secure support from anti-slavery activists and donors? Having carried out research in this part of Africa for more than twenty years, I am tempted to endorse any form of new support—even the barest humanitarian assistance—if it will help the local population. Why not appeal to the current enthusiasm for anti-slavery projects, if the spin-off can be some additional human, social, and economic development? As an historian and social scientist, however, I have to raise a few questions.

Complex relationships

There is no doubt that there are continuities between past and present that mean that slavery remains a foundational issue in shaping patterns of vulnerability and exclusion in southern Senegal. Irregular migration networks heading to Europe cross the same regions that fed the traffic of slaves in the late nineteenth century. The descendants of people who were highly marginal and vulnerable in the late nineteenth century remain marginal today, although some factors have changed over time.

That said, linking past and present is far from a straightforward process.

In order to make sense of the issues involved here, we need to look more closely at what goes into the category of 'slave descendant'. In theory, those classified as slave descendants are the great granddaughters or great grandsons of individuals enslaved in the warring days of the nineteenth century. The reality is more complex, however, since people sometimes voluntarily entered into relationships of dependence that ultimately placed them amongst the population of slave descendants.

The Upper Casamance is a Ffulde-speaking region. The local term that roughly translates into the concept of 'slave descendant' is *jiyaado* (plur. *jiyaabe*), while *dimo* (plur. *rimbe*) identifies a person with a noble ancestry. People describe the traditional relationship between these two social categories in terms of subordination, patronage, and even friendship. In exchange for manual labour and social devotion, the *rimbe* supported the *jiyaabe* economically, socially, and morally. Whereas a noble man could marry a woman of humble origins, the contrary was unthinkable. *Jiyaabe* and *rimbe* either cohabited in the same community or settled in separate villages linked by ties of mutuality and collaboration. "He did everything for me" is the kind of expression some of the elderly *jiyaabe* I met used to describe the person under whose 'shadow' they spent their lives.

Other interesting hints come from popular etymologies. One version states that *jiyaado* means 'my property'. This interpretation casts light on the old days in which *rimbe* pastoralists bought slaves in exchange for cattle to increase the size of their entourages, and to acquire agricultural and domestic work force. A second telling suggests "the *jiyaado* is somebody who was seen". Here, the picture gets complicated, as historical evidence support two different readings of this sentence. The first is that the category of *jiyaado* served to integrate a lonely person, a stranger that wished to build a new life but lacked resources, or even a runaway slave. This kind of person joined a community of *jiyaabe*—

always ready to increase their ranks—or sought the protection of a socially and economically powerful *dimo*. We have many examples of *jiyaado-dimo* relationships along these lines in the twentieth century.

The second reading of the sentence refers instead to *rimbe* mobility. Coudora is a big *jiyaabe* community near the border with Guinea Bissau. Last January, while explaining to me their relationships with the *rimbe*, the elders of the village remarked, “we had not a *dimo* in this area for a long time”. *Rimbe* families arrived with their cattle at the time of Guinea Bissau liberation war in the mid-1960s. The *jiyaabe* helped the *rimbe* to settle, and some of the *jiyaabe* and the *rimbe* established relations of collabouration: the *jiyaabe* offered labour, especially at the time of ceremonies, while the *rimbe* repaid with heads of cattle or milk. This raises a question often overlooked by anti-slavery activists: is it so true that the *rimbe*, or nobility, are always in a dominant position?

Reductive labels, diverse histories

Social categories like those of ‘slave descendant’ tend to simplify and group together multiple, and often divergent, individual trajectories and histories. Much the same can be said in relation to the category of ‘nobility’. In southern Senegal, the last battle that produced captives took place in 1901. In 1905, the French colonial administration banned the slave trade throughout French West Africa, prompting other forms of social stratification to emerge.

Some *rimbe* families found ways to collabourate with the colonisers as *chefs de canton*. Together, they put in place an exploitative system in which forced labour met both their labour needs as well as those of the colonial state. They also sought to control the few available opportunities of economic and social emancipation: access to credit for commercial agriculture and education. Not all the *rimbe*, however, committed themselves to colonial chieftaincy. Those who did not suffered the ex-tortions of the *chefs de canton* as much as the *jiyaabe*. Like the *jiyaabe*, they accessed education only in recent times. Their contemporary re-

lations with the Senegalese government, NGOs, and activists are now much the same as the *jiyaabe*: they too are now subordinate peasants.

This is the last and most important lesson from history. The end of an old type of domination—in this case chattel-style slavery—has ultimately paved the way to a new one. The educated *rimbe* and *jiyaabe*—who live in the urban areas and work in administration, business, and politics—look at their rural fellowmen as victims of a closed, out-dated, and stubborn mentality. Unknowingly, they reproduce the same contempt typical of the *rimbe* of the past, when they looked down upon the economic, social, and moral dependency of the *jiyaabe*. They forget that for the rural *rimbe* and *jiyaabe*, the collabouration that stems from hierarchical complementarity has offered comfort in the age of the slaver, of the colonist, of the government official, of the development expert, and today of the activist and the neo-liberal consultant. Is it advisable to throw it away?

This article builds on fieldwork in the Upper Casamance supported by the European Research Council under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013)/ERC Grant agreement n° 313737: *Shadows of Slavery in West Africa and Beyond: A Historical Anthropology*

Trans-Atlantic slavery and contemporary human trafficking: learning from or exploiting the past?

Are we learning from the past or exploiting it? It is easy to obscure the similar economic rationales and incentive structures, as well as the participation of 'legitimate' enterprises and institutions, in both trans-Atlantic slavery and contemporary trafficking in humans.

Karen Bravo

We should learn from the past, not merely exploit it for emotional gain.

References to 'modern-day slavery' and comparisons to 'old slavery' are embedded within the anti-human trafficking discourse. However, the discursive methodologies that we use to relate current human trafficking with the trans-Atlantic slavery of Africans are exploitative and superficial, and do not lend insights for combating human trafficking.

The trans-Atlantic slave trade formally ended in the nineteenth century, and since then states and international institutions have committed to legally enforcing a global prohibition against slavery. Nevertheless, slavery is said to have re-emerged worldwide in the form of "human trafficking". This current industry is said to be worth billions. Growing numbers of victims are said to be enslaved by modern day human traffickers. Tricked by employment schemes, kidnapped, or sold by parents or other authority figures, men, women, and children around the world are deprived of freedom while being physically and psychologically violated. The scope of contemporary human trafficking is not known, however estimates ranging from four to 27 million worldwide (See Ronald Weitzer, *BTS Short Course* Vol. 1) and victims are assumed to be located in every country in the world.

Have the world and human-to-human exploitation not changed as much as we would like to believe since the era of trade in African

slaves? Are we, like consumers of Caribbean sugar in the eighteenth century (See Andrea Major, this volume), dependent on the abhorrent exploitation of others?

References to and comparisons with trans-Atlantic slavery tend to fall within the following categories:

1. The emotional exhortation to action

In the most common use of the comparison, trans-Atlantic slavery is used as an emotional and historic touchstone. Contemporary human trafficking is compared with earlier slavery in order to stimulate the audience to action. The visceral image makes the call more powerful, and the audience is more likely to support the analyses of the speaker.

2. Diminution of the horror of trans-Atlantic slavery

This category builds upon the emotional exhortation to action. Here, the speaker once again evokes the touchstone of trans-Atlantic slavery. She assumes the audience's revulsion to the slave trade, but implicitly or explicitly diminishes its horror. The message, in effect, is 'as horrible as you know the trans-Atlantic slave trade and slavery were, an even greater horror exists in our time, in our country, in our lives.'

3. Assumption of the mantle of righteousness

When assuming the mantle of righteousness, the speaker invokes her country's past actions against and continued condemnation of trans-Atlantic slavery. The mantle of righteousness confers authority upon the individual spokesperson or country. It works to delay or prevent questions regarding the methodologies proposed or used to combat modern trafficking. After all, who would (and why would they?) question the activities of a country or person with such an impeccable anti-slavery lineage, and proven methods of combating the analogous scourge? This serves to turn the tables, and the historically victimised African countries—whose territories were sources of trans-Atlantic slaves—become the contemporary victimisers.

4. Distancing our enlightened times or 'how far we've come'

In distancing our modern times from the centuries of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the speaker assures us of our own virtue and progress. She distracts us, so that we lose track of the structural and systemic similarities between contemporary human trafficking and trans-Atlantic slavery. As a result, today's polity believes that it is not complicit in or a beneficiary of the modern traffic in humans. In addition, because the modern traffic in humans is presented as an aberration in our enlightened times, we do not understand that we should question the systemic structures and assumptions that undergird our society, economy, and political systems.

5. The mythic slaying of the dragon

In the myth of the slaying of the dragon, the speaker, using triumphalist rhetoric, acclaims the historic abolition of trans-Atlantic slavery. The speaker then declares the wisdom of abolitionist techniques as the path to eradication of modern trafficking. However this invocation of the past denies the reality that trans-Atlantic slavery did not end with abolition. For example, as a result of the continued necessity to secure cheap labour and of the racial hierarchy that had sustained trans-Atlantic slavery, the much-celebrated abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire was followed by the introduction of indentured servitude to Britain's Caribbean colonies.

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Together, these methodologies serve to hide the fact that the structural apparatus facilitating exploitation remained in place after its legal abolition. In doing so, it obscures the similar economic rationales and incentive structures, as well as the participation of 'legitimate' enterprises and institutions, in both trans-Atlantic slavery and contemporary trafficking in humans. The integral connection of contemporary human trafficking with the global economic system

thus remains unexamined by the listener. Yet, analysis of the economic roots and structure of the two forms of exploitation reveals that modern trafficking in human beings is as much an interconnected and central component of contemporary economies as the trans-Atlantic trade and slavery were in former times.

The discursive methodologies discussed above demonstrate how deeply ingrained images and interpretations of trans-Atlantic slavery are used in the fight against human trafficking. It was a revolting, tragic, and never-to-be-repeated error in human history. However, such depictions ignore the fact that, at the time, the exploitation of trans-Atlantic slave trade victims was widely considered normal and mundane. They thus obscure the Atlantic slave trade's essential similarity to the mundaneness and visibility of the victimisation found in contemporary human trafficking.

Britain must atone for its role in *Maangamizi*

European and American civil society organisations representing people of African descent call on Britain to take full responsibility for its historical involvement in the transatlantic slave trade.

This letter was originally published under the title “Public Statement by Civil Society Organizations in Europe and the United States Representing People of African Descent on Britain’s Historical Involvement in the Transatlantic Traffic of Enslaved Africans and Its Far Reaching Impacts”

Articles appearing this past weekend in both the *Guardian* and *Independent* newspapers in Britain reveal the shocking scale of British “slave ownership” found in scores of official records, which show that thousands of contemporary Britons, including Prime Minister David Cameron, are related to “slave owners” who received huge sums of compensation when the “trade” was abolished in 1833.

The occasion for the articles are the recent findings of a [six-year project](#) by University College London and the premier of the documentary, *Britain’s Forgotten Slave Owners: Profit and Loss*, which is presented by historian and filmmaker David Olusoga and will be broadcast on BBC2 on Wednesday 15 July.

In the *Guardian*, piece Olusoga writes that, “the disadvantage and discrimination that disfigures the lives and limits the life chances of so many African Americans is the bitter legacy of the slave system and the racism that underwrote and outlasted it. Britain, by contrast, has been far more successful at covering up its slave-owning and slave-trading past”.

Olusoga adds that enslavement has largely been “airbrushed out of British history”; that many today have a more vivid image of American enslavement than of life as it was for British-“owned” enslaved persons

on the plantations of the Caribbean. “The history of British slavery has been buried”, he writes.

Historians generally acknowledge that British ships transported 40 percent of the conservatively estimated 12 million enslaved persons across the Atlantic and that Britain made more profits from its investments in “slave-trading” of African persons than any other European “slave-trading” nation. Britain extracted more wealth from the Caribbean “slave plantation” than any other European “slave-owning” nation. The Royal family, led by King James II, established Britain’s first “slave-trading” corporation—the Royal African Company, chartered in 1672. Like the Royals, the current British prime minister, Mr. Cameron, is also an inheritor from and beneficiary of enslaved African peoples.

The full abolition of British enslavement on 1 August 1838 was followed by the racial apartheid of colonial law and a racialised social hierarchy that is still with the descendants of the original victims—in the United Kingdom as in the United States and the Anglophone Caribbean.

The 2001 [UN World Conference Against Racism](#) (WCAR) held in Durban, South Africa, acknowledged that the transatlantic enslavement and trafficking of human beings is a crime against humanity, that its institutionalisation of race and racial stratification made it among the major sources of racism in the world today, and that African peoples and people of African descent were its victims and they continue to be victims of its consequences.

As a signatory to the *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination*, Britain needs to act urgently to settle its outstanding obligation to those who continue to be adversely affected by centuries of its racial apartheid. It can, and should, begin this year, which inaugurates the UN International Decade for People of African Descent 2015-2024.

The “Programme of activities for the implementation of the International Decade for People of African Descent” (UN resolution A/RES/69/16)—which was adopted by the General Assembly in November 2014—acknowledges and profoundly regrets “the untold suffering and evils inflicted on millions of men, women and children” as a result of the transatlantic enslavement and trafficking of human beings and Eurocentric colonisation and empire.

It calls upon those states “that have not yet expressed remorse or presented apologies to find some way to contribute to the restoration of the dignity of its victims” and invites “the international community and its members to honour the memory of the victims of these tragedies with a view to closing those dark chapters in history and as a means of reconciliation and healing”. Moreover, it calls upon “all states concerned to take appropriate and effective measures to halt and reverse the lasting consequences of those practices, bearing in mind their moral obligations”.

Considering this, the following signatories of this statement call upon:

1. The British government and its prime minister David Cameron to take full responsibility for the United Kingdom’s involvement in Maangamizi (the African holocaust) and its far reaching consequences and to fulfil its obligations to African peoples and people of African descent as well as to other victims of historical injustices, as mandated by the United Nations;
2. The British government and its prime minister David Cameron to finally heed the calls that have been made throughout the years—beginning with Quobna Ottobah Cugoana in *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (1787)—to establish a National Commission of Enquiry on the historical and contemporary national and international impact of Britain’s transatlantic traffic

in enslaved Africans; including contemporary issues that have followed in its wake such as debt bondage and other injustices in international relations and the continuing impact of structural racism and discrimination¹;

3. That the British government and its prime minister David Cameron establish the month of August each year as the National Maangamazi Awareness Month—beginning with 1 August as a National Memorial Day for the abolition of Britain’s enslavement and trafficking of African peoples and people of African descent, and furthermore, to give recognition to the annual 1 August African heritage communities march for reparatory justice, and greater recognition to 23 August as the UN International Day for Remembrance of the Resistance to the Transatlantic Traffic in Enslaved Africans and its Abolition;

Furthermore, we, the signatories of this statement, call upon:

4. The Caribbean Community (CARICOM) to assertively and firmly move forward with its claims for reparatory justice from the United Kingdom and other European states for the adverse and unjust consequences of enslavement and Eurocentric colonisation and empire in the Caribbean, and the British government and its prime minister David Cameron to show utmost care, concern, and respect for these claims. Therefore we call upon (a) CARICOM to *urgently* submit to the government of Britain the

1. We want to remind the British Government and public that there already is a national commission dedicated to the memory of the German holocaust during WWII, the [Prime Minister’s Holocaust Commission](#), which issued a report this year and was tasked with establishing what more Britain must do to ensure that the memory of the Holocaust is preserved and that the lessons it teaches are never forgotten. There is no reason for the United Kingdom to be less diligent in recognising, researching, remembering, teaching, keeping alive the memory of and otherwise respecting its direct involvement in the transatlantic traffic in enslaved Africans and its far reaching impacts.

“LETTER OF COMPLAINTS” that has been approved by the CARICOM Reparations Commission (CRC) and is now before the Prime Ministerial Sub-Committee of CARICOM, and (b) the British government to agree, on receipt of this letter, to the proposed summit outlined therein on reparatory justice for the transatlantic enslavement and trafficking of human beings and its legacies. We welcome chairman of the CARICOM Reparations Commission Professor Sir Hilary Beckles prediction, in [the British House of Commons on 16 July 2014](#), that “this 21st Century will be the century of global reparatory justice”.

Signed by,

1. European Reparations Commission (ERC)
2. National African American Reparations Commission (NAARC)
3. Pan-African Reparations Coalition in Europe (PARCOE)
4. Global Afrikan Congress in the UK (GACuk)
5. National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (NCOBRA)
6. Proceso de Comunidades Negras en Colombia (PCN), Colombia
7. Autoridad Nacional Afrocolombiana (ANAFRO), Colombia
8. Colombia Centro de Desarrollo Etnico (CEDET), Peru
9. Professor Sir Hilary Beckles, Historian, Barbados
10. Professor Verene A. Shepherd, Historian, Jamaica
11. Professor Mireille Fanon-Mendes France, Legal adviser, France
12. Dr. Doudou Diène, Former United Nations Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, Senegal and France
13. Professor Hakim Adi, Historian, UK
14. James Counts Early, Member of the Board of Trustees of the Institute for Policy Studies, USA
15. Danny Glover, actor and activist, USA
16. Dr. Cynthia McKinney, Former Congresswoman and 2008 Green Party Presidential Nominee, USA
17. Marcelo Dias, Communications Coordinator for Movimento Negro Unificado (MNU), Brazil
18. European Network of People of African Descent (ENPAD)
19. ADEFRA Grassroots e.v., Germany
20. Africa Council Berlin/Brandenburg, Germany

21. African Diaspora Youth Network in Europe (ADYNE)
22. Belgian Platform of the European Network of Migrant Women
23. Conseil Représentatif des Associations Noires (Le CRAN), France
24. D'HERO, Netherlands
25. Ebony African Cultural, Arts and Human Right Organization, Hungary
26. Fight Racism Now (FRN), Sweden
27. The Initiative of Black People in Germany (ISD), Germany
28. Initiative of Panafrican Women Alliance, Germany
29. Narrative Eye, UK
30. New Urban Collective, Netherlands
31. Operation Black Vote (OBV), UK
32. Pan-African Women's Liberation Organisation, Germany
33. Panafricanism Working Group, Germany
34. Platform of African Communities, Belgium
35. Raad van Afrikaanse gemeenschappen in Europa afdeling Vlaanderen, Belgium
36. Soul Rebel Movement, Netherlands
37. Trajets pour la Reconstruction du Kasai, Belgium
38. Zwarte Piet Niet, Netherlands

For more information about this statement please contact Dr. Michael McEachrane (mceachrane@gmail.com), member of the European Reparations Commission (ERC) and the European Network of People of African Descent (ENPAD). For interviews and other inquiries in the United Kingdom about this Statement and its demands please contact spokesperson for the ERC in the UK, Dr. Nathaniel Adam Tobias Coleman (natcphd@me.com) or Co-Vice Chair of the Pan-African Reparations Coalition in Europe (PARCOE), Esther Stanford-Xosei (estherstanford19@yahoo.co.uk). For information on the work of the ERC, please contact its General Coordinator, Dr. Louis-Georges Tin (tinluigi@aol.com), and for ENPAD, please contact its General Coordinator, Jamie Schearer (jamieschearer@isd-bund.org). For information on the work of the National African American Reparations Commission (NAARC), please contact Dr. Ron Daniels (ronmae@aol.com) and Don Rojas (donjbrojas@gmail.com). For more information on the ongoing efforts of CARICOM for reparatory justice, please contact Dr. Hilary Brown, Executive Coordinator for CARICOM (hilary.brown@caricom.org).

Contributors

Eric Allina is Associate Professor in the Department of History, University of Ottawa. His research examines histories of labour and the state in southern Africa, especially colonial and independence-era Mozambique. He is author of *Slavery by Any Other Name: African Life under Company Rule in Colonial Mozambique*.

Laya Behbahani is a research assistant at Schulich School of Business. She is an expert on labour standards and human trafficking in the Gulf states of the Middle East and has worked at the Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Section of the Organized Crime and Illicit Trafficking Branch at the United Nations in Vienna.

Alice Bellagamba teaches Political Anthropology and African Studies at the University of Milan-Bicocca. She is the principal investigator of a comparative project, funded by the European Research Council, on the legacies of slavery and contemporary human bondage in four regions of the world: West Africa (Southern Senegal, Ghana) North Africa (Morocco, Tunisia/Libya border), Indian Ocean (Madagascar, Mauritius) and Central Asia (Northern Pakistan, Afghanistan).

Karen E. Bravo is Professor of Law at the Indiana University Robert H. McKinney School of Law, specialising in illicit international markets, including human trafficking and slavery. You can access a list of her research papers on the [Social Science Research Network](#).

Sara R. Farris is Assistant Professor in Sociology at Goldsmiths College, University of London. She works on gender and migration, race and racism, sociological and political theory. She is the author of *Max Weber's Theory of Personality: Individuation, Politics and Orientalism in the Sociology of Religion* and of *In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism* (Forthcoming).

Ali Moussa Iye is a scholar from Djibouti. He is Chief of the History and Memory for Dialogue Section of UNESCO, where he runs the [Slave Route Project](#) and the General and Regional Histories Project, including the [UNESCO General History of Africa](#). Ali holds a Ph.D. from the Institute of Political Sciences in Grenoble, France.

[Genevieve LeBaron](#) is Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Sheffield and Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery Fellow at Yale University. She is a co-founder of *Beyond Trafficking and Slavery*.

[Alex Lichtenstein](#) teaches US history at Indiana University, Bloomington.

[Samuel Martínez](#) teaches cultural anthropology and Latin American studies at the University of Connecticut and is a student of the rights mobilisations of people of Haitian ancestry in the Dominican Republic.

[Andrea Major](#) is Associate Professor of British Colonial History, University of Leeds. Her work focuses on Britain's relationship with India in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with a particular focus on social and gender issues. She is the author of [*Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India, 1772–1843*](#).

[Julia O'Connell Davidson](#) is a professor in social research at the School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies, University of Bristol. She is a member of the *Beyond Trafficking and Slavery* editorial board.

[Jessica R. Pliley](#) is an assistant professor of women's, gender, and sexuality history at Texas State University. Her book, [*Policing Sexuality: The Mann Act and the Making of the FBI*](#), examines the enforcement of the United States' first anti-trafficking law.

Joel Quirk is Associate Professor in Political Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa. He is a member of the *Beyond Trafficking and Slavery* editorial board.

[Benedetta Rossi](#) is Lecturer in African Studies at the School of History and Cultures of the University of Birmingham (UK). She is the author of *From Slavery to Aid: Labour, Politics, and Ecology in the Nigerien Sahel, 1800-2000* (forthcoming in the African Studies series of Cambridge University Press in August 2015) and editor of *Reconfiguring Slavery: West African Trajectories* (Liverpool University Press, 2009). She has written many articles focusing on African slavery and emancipation and is involved in international collaborations on conjugal and sexual slavery in Africa.

Nelly Schmidt is Director of Research at CNRS, the French National Centre for Scientific Research, at Paris-Sorbonne University IV and a current member of International Scientific Committee of the UNESCO Slave Route Project. Recent publications include *Les abolitions de l'esclavage* (Paris, Fayard 2005), *La France a-t-elle aboli l'esclavage?* (Paris, Perrin, 2009) and the virtual exhibition *Les abolitions de l'esclavage*, French National Archives, 2014.

Gretchen Soderlund is Associate Professor of Media History at the University of Oregon's School of Journalism and Communication. She is the author of [*Sex Trafficking, Scandal, and the Transformation of Journalism, 1885-1917*](#).

[James Brewer Stewart](#) is the James Wallace Professor of History Emeritus at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota. He is the founder of [Historians Against Slavery](#).

Beyond Trafficking and Slavery Editorial Board

Neil Howard

Neil Howard is an academic and activist based at the European University Institute in Florence. He is a Marie Curie Research Fellow at the Institute's Centre for Advanced Studies, where his research focuses on forced labour, trafficking and slavery, and on the work of the modern 'abolitionist' field.

Prabha Kotiswaran

Prabha Kotiswaran lectures in Criminal Law at King's College London. She is the author of *Dangerous Sex, Invisible Labour: Sex Work and the Law in India*. She also blogs for the Interdisciplinary Project on Human Trafficking.

Genevieve LeBaron

Genevieve LeBaron is Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Sheffield and Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery Fellow at Yale University. Her research focuses on the global growth and governance of forced labour in retail supply chains and the politics of corporate social responsibility.

Julia O'Connell Davidson

Julia O'Connell Davidson is a professor in social research at the School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies, University of Bristol.

Sam Okyere

Sam Okyere is a lecturer in Sociology at the University of Nottingham. He is interested in the sociological, anthropological and policy analysis of childhood, child rights, human rights, social justice, (in)equality, globalisation, migration, racism and identity.

Joel Quirk

Joel Quirk is Associate Professor in Political Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa. His research focuses upon slavery and abolition, human mobility and human rights, repairing historical wrongs, and the history and politics of sub-Saharan Africa. Joel is currently a member of the International Scientific Committee of the UNESCO Slave Route Project, where he serves as Rapporteur.

Cameron Thibos

Cameron Thibos is the managing editor of *Beyond Trafficking and Slavery*. He is a specialist in migration and possesses regional expertise in Turkey and the Arab World. Cameron received his D.Phil from the Department of International Development at the University of Oxford.

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Campaigners and governments leading the fight to end ‘modern-day slavery’ selectively appeal to history to help justify their current activities. They uncritically praise Anglo-Saxon anti-slavery efforts, but have remarkably little to say about the larger history of enslavement, slave resistance, or the contemporary legacies of historical slave systems. Centuries of severe exploitation, racial subjugation, and violent abuse have too often been lost in the rush to celebrate the ‘moral triumph’ of abolition. The legal abolition of slavery was not a gift from great emancipators. Nor did it mark an end to the need for resistance. Former slaves were never compensated for their decades of toil and abuse, and their former masters made every effort to defend their privileges, contributing to global patterns of wealth, poverty, inequality, and discrimination that remain with us to this day.

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