

Contemporary Slavery as More Than Rhetorical Strategy? The Politics and Ideology of a New Political Cause

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Over the last two decades, contemporary slavery and human trafficking have emerged as major sources of popular fascination and political preoccupation.¹ This rapid and unexpected promotion to the front ranks of global conversations regarding exploitation and vulnerability has had far-reaching consequences. As many people working in this field will tell you, this new political cause of combatting “modern” or “contemporary” slavery – which has come to be chiefly understood in terms of fighting human trafficking – has experienced a remarkable degree of success in terms of popular awareness, institutional integration, and rhetorical support. What many people will not tell you, however, is that too many of the interventions that have followed in the wake of this remarkable success have not only struggled to make an impact, but they have also been complicit in a larger series of questionable political and ideological agendas.

All political causes invariably come with complications and limitations, so it should not be especially surprising that there have been problems aligning aspirations with outcomes. On this occasion, however, one of the main challenges has been reaching a minimum degree of clarity and consensus regarding exactly what “the cause” of combatting slavery – or human trafficking – actually entails. Two overlapping problems have been especially significant in this respect: (1) a widespread tendency to

privilege activism over analysis and (2) a similar and related tendency to privilege rhetoric over substance. In the case of the former, the imperatives of activism frequently have found expression in a series of sensationalist, self-serving, and superficial interventions. Much of this activity has revolved around numerous efforts to harness the iconography of slavery in order to draw popular attention and institutional investment to a range of practices and problems. These diverse and sometimes competing agendas have in turn been loosely knit together in order to support the construction of a larger global cause: combatting “modern slavery,” “contemporary forms of slavery,” or “human trafficking.” It is here, we would argue, that this global cause can be best understood as an unstable amalgamation of a wide range of diverse practices that go well beyond both legal definitions and historical experiences of slavery. Our chief goal in this collection is to interrogate the rhetorical dimensions and practical effects of this new political cause.

In keeping with long-standing trends within human rights activism more broadly, the construction of this global cause has been consolidated through the deployment of a series of frequently dubious “facts and figures” regarding the overall dimensions of contemporary slavery and human trafficking in the world today. Some prominent examples from this popular “facts and figures” genre include the following claims: (1) there are more “slaves now than at any point in human history”;² (2) human trafficking is “the world’s fastest growing criminal industry”;³ and (3) trafficking has become the third largest global criminal industry, following behind guns and drugs and generating “US \$32 billion annually.”⁴ Despite usually having little or no credible methodological foundation, these “facts” have featured in countless speeches, books, and media reports over the last decade, thereby helping to both prioritize and publicize the cause. The main attraction of these types of sweeping assertions is their value as advocacy tools, so there has been a notable reluctance in many circles to interrogate how these “facts” have been calculated or to question whether or not they can be justified.⁵ This theme is taken up in more depth by Darshan Vigneswaran in a later chapter focusing upon the politics of numbers in South African debates regarding human trafficking. For the moment, we would emphasize that this brand of activism has resulted in a situation where the

cause of fighting contemporary slavery and trafficking now enjoys a high level of popularity and political support, yet the underlying issues continue to be very poorly understood.

Another related issue also needs to be factored into the equation here. While there is no doubt that the cause of fighting slavery and trafficking enjoys widespread global support, much of this support tends to be shallow to the point of sometimes being all but non-existent. In this particular context, “shallow” refers to both the limited range of issues that have been taken up (that is, most actors have narrowly focused upon a small number of locations and/or industries, rather than taking more holistic action on multiple fronts) and to a shallow level of commitment and investment (that is, most states have done little more than pass new legislation and have frequently been reluctant to make more substantial interventions that pose a more significant challenge to powerfully vested interests or the structural causes of exploitation). In theory, trafficking and contemporary slavery touch upon all kinds of problems and practices. In practice, only a small subset of specific cases within a much larger portfolio has been taken up in any sustained fashion.

This pattern of universal yet largely shallow support is by no means a new phenomenon. Governments and other actors have been rhetorically proclaiming their official commitment to the anti-slavery cause since the nineteenth century, yet their substantive policies and practices have routinely pulled in quite different directions.⁶ This divide between rhetoric and substance is once again common to human rights activism more generally. Protecting human rights can frequently be costly and challenging, and relevant actors routinely lack the capacity or political will to follow through on their rhetorical and institutional commitments.⁷ On this occasion, however, we also find a further political calculus at work. As we shall see later in this chapter, much of the appeal of the cause of “ending slavery” stems from the fact that it is perceived as being relatively “safe” from a political and ideological standpoint. This is because the cause has been selectively interpreted as being chiefly focused upon a small number of “aberrant” and “exceptional” cases, which are said to be concentrated within the “irregular” margins of the global economy and within so-called “backward” corners of the Global South.⁸ This focus upon “exceptional” cases frequently ends up consolidating

– rather than challenging – dominant political and economic interests, especially in the Global North.

This political calculus is most apparent when it comes to campaigns that concentrate heavily upon various aspects of prostitution, since political and economic elites rarely have significant institutional investments in this specific area. However, there are also times when a narrow concentration upon the “worst of the worst” forms of labour exploitation can be politically attractive when it comes to tacitly minimizing, or otherwise legitimating, the much larger excesses of global capitalism. Over the last two decades, all kinds of leaders – ranging from George Bush to Robert Mugabe – have rhetorically declared their support for the cause of ending slavery and trafficking. While both the volume and ideological diversity of these voices is impressive at first glance, this type of “universal” global consensus is only possible because most of the actors and institutions involved have calculated that the political and economic stakes are relatively low and that there are likely to be reputational benefits and other advantages to offering rhetorical support to the cause.

Over the last two decades, a growing number of critics have taken issue with numerous aspects of the cause. The main focus of this now extensive critical literature has been discourses and policies associated with efforts to combat human trafficking, which have been heavily criticized from many different angles.⁹ While competing approaches to human trafficking form a necessary part of our canvass in this book, they are not our main focus. In fact, we believe that there are at least some areas where it is increasingly difficult to break substantially new theoretical and conceptual ground, owing to the now extensive literature concerned with the strengths and weaknesses of competing positions. This increasing saturation is most notably – but by no means exclusively – evident when it comes to larger debates over human trafficking and its relationship to the legal status of prostitution, migration, and border protection, along with foundational questions of patriarchy, sexuality, and agency. We have no doubt that these are major global issues, but they are not issues that we seek to specifically prioritize in this volume.

Our goal instead is to pave the way for different perspectives and lines of inquiry. Much of the analysis that follows is designed to make the case for our preferred approach. To this end, we have divided this

introduction into two sections, which also serve to both introduce and contextualize the subsequent chapters in the collection in light of our overarching arguments. In the first section, we provide a snapshot of the main actors, features, and fault lines that have emerged over the last two decades. Our primary argument is that the widespread presumption of a cohesive and singular global cause – fighting human trafficking and/or contemporary slavery – has ended up promoting a misleading and unhelpful picture of the divergent and frequently competing agendas, perspectives, and priorities in operation beneath the popular rhetoric of a shared global struggle. As we shall see, this state of affairs can often be further exacerbated by an emphasis upon sensational and exceptional cases. We argue that the widespread presumption of a cohesive and singular global cause frequently does more harm than good from an analytical standpoint, because it loosely aggregates very different problems under the rubric of a fictive global struggle. In many parts of the globe, the real action takes place primarily at a more localized and issue-specific level.

The second section builds upon this overall line of argument. We identify and analyze a number of ways in which the diverse themes now located under the rubric of “contemporary slavery” can be usefully disaggregated and connected to theories, experiences, and critiques found within established studies on various aspects of human rights and other allied fields. This analysis is not meant to be exhaustive, but instead draws upon a pluralistic framework in order to develop an introductory snapshot of where and how intersections and convergences might be developed further. Too many recent treatments of contemporary slavery and human trafficking have been predicated – either explicitly or implicitly – upon a politics of exceptionality, wherein “slavery” is promoted as a unique and exceptional evil that stands apart from other “lesser” challenges.

This hierarchical model promotes an unhelpful separation between “slavery” and many other experiences and literatures, contributing to insular conversations that too often involve attempts to reinvent the wheel, rather than drawing on more established precedents and ideas from other fields of academic inquiry and applied experience. At its worst, this hierarchical model can end up tacitly legitimating and/or de-prioritizing

abusive practices and structures that are said to fall short of “true” slavery. Accordingly, we argue, contemporary slavery and trafficking should not be treated as singular, exceptional, and stratified categories, but instead need to be disaggregated into a series of smaller thematic and case-specific categories, which can in turn be best understood in combination with established literatures and applied experiences.

Contemporary Slavery and Human Trafficking: Rhetoric and Practice

Recent references to slavery and abolition(ists) invariably come with a great deal of historical and ideological baggage.¹⁰ Many references to “slavery” have often been characterized by superficial efforts to appropriate both the infamy and iconography of slavery and its legal abolition, as Fuyuki Kurasawa later explores in his chapter in this volume. As we shall see, this dynamic has most commonly involved the history and language of slavery being strategically invoked as part of the effort to both prioritize and dramatize all kinds of current problems. The rhetorical strategy commonly involves a form of comparative analogy, wherein it is posited that there are sufficient similarities between historical slave systems (chiefly framed in terms of stylized images of transatlantic slavery) and more recent examples of exploitation, coercion, and violence. Numerous actors and institutions have used this rhetorical strategy in order to support larger arguments that specific sets of problems and practices should be regarded as a species of slavery and should therefore be prioritized ahead of “lesser” concerns.

The recent popularity of this rhetorical strategy has contributed to an environment where slavery means different things to different audiences. There are two further issues at stake here. On the one hand, there is widespread uncertainty regarding where slavery begins and ends as a category and on what grounds the determination of the status of a slave can and should be made.¹¹ On the other hand, there are competing visions of the nexus between slavery, human trafficking, forced labour, and other categories. This issue has been complicated by an unhelpful conflation of trafficking and slavery.¹² Both of these issues will be considered in more depth in subsequent chapters in this collection, where Jean Allain focuses on the question of defining slavery and Joel Quirk takes up the tensions between different conceptual schemes, such as slavery

and trafficking. Since much of the heavy lifting takes place elsewhere, our main focus is on introducing and defending the main features of our approach to contemporary slavery as a political cause.

Numerous activists, academics, and policy-makers have sought to (re) define both the parameters of the anti-slavery cause and the link between slavery, trafficking, and “slave-like” practices. Some of the main actors here have been non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the Global North, which are heavily concentrated in the United States in particular. Most NGOs in the Global North, such as the Polaris Project, chiefly define themselves as anti-trafficking organizations. While slavery still features prominently within this framework, it is mostly employed as a descriptor that underscores the problem of trafficking. The most common formula involves the depiction of “[h]uman trafficking [as] a form of modern-day slavery.”¹³ Within this formula, slavery frequently ends up as a rhetorical addendum that serves to underscore the severity of human trafficking, rather than as an independent or coherent category.

This framework can be contrasted with organizations that place slavery at the heart of a larger political agenda, of which human trafficking constitutes a subcategory. From their base in the United Kingdom, Anti-Slavery International (ASI) favours an expansive approach that places slavery at the heart of a broader portfolio of practices linked to slavery. According to ASI, slavery can be best understood as including bonded labour, forced labour, “early and forced marriage, trafficking, slavery by descent, and the worst forms of child labour.”¹⁴ From their base in the United States, Free the Slaves favours a similarly expansive approach, defining slavery as “the holding of people at a workplace through force, fraud or coercion for purposes of sexual exploitation or forced labor so that the slaveholder can extract profit.”¹⁵

This expansive conception of slavery is broadly aligned with the recent work of the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery on its causes and consequences. The first rapporteur, Gulnara Shahinian, was appointed in 2008. Working with a limited budget and staff, she conducted a series of missions to Peru, Romania, Brazil, Ecuador, Mauritania, Haiti, Madagascar, and Kazakhstan. In keeping with the terms of their mandate, both Shahinian and her more recent successor, Urmila Bhoola (who was appointed in 2014), have broadly defined

contemporary forms of slavery to include “debt bondage, serfdom, forced labour, child slavery, sexual slavery, forced or early marriages and the sale of wives.”¹⁶ In addition to country reports, Shahinian has also produced thematic reports on the topics of domestic servitude (2010), child slavery in artisanal mining (2011), servile marriage (2012), and ways of combatting contemporary slavery (2013).

The position of this rapporteur supersedes the UN Working Group on Contemporary Slavery, which operated from 1975 to 2006, and complements the work of the UN Voluntary Trust Fund on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, which was founded in 1991. In 2004, the UN also established a new Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons, focusing especially on women and children. The human trafficking rapporteur works in a similar fashion to the contemporary slavery rapporteur, with the main focus being country visits and thematic reports, which have recently included topics such as regional cooperation (2010), effective remedies for victims (2011), human rights and criminal justice (2012), trafficking and supply chains (2013), and organ trafficking (2013).¹⁷

Although the design of both rapporteur positions is similar, the human trafficking framework ultimately has a much higher profile than the contemporary slavery framework within the UN system. A good example of their relative prominence is the foundation of the UN Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking (UN GIFT), which builds upon the notion that “human trafficking is a crime of such magnitude and atrocity that it cannot be dealt with successfully by any government alone.”¹⁸ Established in 2007, UN GIFT is an ongoing high profile partnership between the International Labour Organization, the International Organization for Migration, the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe, the UN Children’s Fund, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Building upon the terms of the 2000 Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, UN GIFT has divided human trafficking into four sub-categories, which are recognized as regularly overlapping in practice.¹⁹ These subcategories are sexual exploitation, forced labour, children, and the organ trade. While slavery is by no means absent from this equation,

it most commonly serves once again as a rhetorical device for highlighting the “magnitude and atrocity” of human trafficking.

Another crucial player in this global story is the US government, which has been both celebrated and criticized in its self-appointed role as a global anti-trafficking “sheriff.” The main focal point for debate has been the publication of annual trafficking in persons (TIPS) reports by the US State Department, which began in 2001. Both the origins and operations of these reports – along with the associated policy interventions and rankings of state performance – have already been closely documented and analyzed elsewhere.²⁰ For our purposes, it is sufficient to make several brief observations regarding the global contribution of US policies and priorities. First, it is important to keep in mind that the initial globalization of anti-trafficking under the auspices of the TIPS initiative chiefly took place under the administration of George W. Bush, which favoured a model that heavily prioritized human trafficking for the purposes of commercial sexual exploitation. While US policy shifted to a more expansive approach under Barack Obama, the cause of combatting commercial sexual exploitation – or even commercial sex of any form – has nonetheless been globalized as a dominant political priority thanks in part to the formative influence of early TIPS reports and activities.

Second, we need to keep in mind that there have been pronounced limits to US global power and influence under both administrations. While US hegemony has compelled numerous states to commit to the anti-trafficking cause both at a rhetorical and legislative level, these commitments have only been occasionally and episodically translated into substantive practices and pro-active policies and interventions. Numerous laws may well have been passed, but enforcement can often be another matter entirely.

This recurring divide between legal commitments and substantive practices is important on several levels. While all states and stakeholders are now ostensibly committed to a common cause, this rhetoric tends to be little more than a shallow veneer that masks both the differing political agendas and tremendous variations in the overall levels of interest and investment. During the late nineteenth century, the

Portuguese government passed numerous anti-slavery laws in their African colonies that were chiefly understood by insiders to be “*só para o inglês ver*” or “just for the English to see.” Since these laws were geared towards alleviating outside British pressure for reform, they accomplished little in the way of substantive reform long after they were promulgated.²¹ A comparable pattern can be found in many states that have recently passed – yet have rarely sought to pro-actively enforce – new laws against human trafficking in response to US pressure. There are many structural reasons for this widespread lack of enforcement, as we shall see in more detail later in this volume, but at least part of the issue is that external catalysts and categories can only go so far in the larger socio-economic and institutional reform. While the cause of combatting trafficking now commands broad support among governments globally, most of this support is shallow and selective.

There are some important exceptions to this overall pattern. As a growing number of scholars have documented, there have recently been a number of specific settings where more narrowly tailored projects and policy interventions have been taking place, such as the introduction of specialized teams in Brazil that focus upon the severe labour abuses²² or rescue and rehabilitation schemes in India.²³ While political stakeholders across the globe are rhetorically committed to combatting many different variants of human trafficking or slavery, substantive action tends to be confined to specific priorities within specific locations. Once we look beyond the popular rhetoric of a cohesive and singular global cause – fighting trafficking and slavery – it quickly becomes apparent that there are only a relatively small number of locations and issue areas where sustained interventions are actually taking place. In many cases, these specific interventions also involve actors and organizations that do not self-identify as anti-slavery or anti-trafficking activists, but instead organize their activities around alternative referents, such as migrant rights, labour rights, or children’s rights. Many of these activities become only part of the global anti-slavery cause via a process of creative aggregation.

Funding is also an important factor since it is hard to get anything done without resources. On this front, the US government has once again played a major role in determining where and how specific

interventions have occurred by making available hundreds of millions of dollars in funding to support anti-trafficking projects, both domestically and internationally.²⁴ As any number of human rights scholars have demonstrated, decisions about which types of projects get funded – and on what terms – can have a profound impact upon the types of languages that various organizations use and the types of issues and practices that they prioritize. The most infamous example of funding conditionality involves a requirement introduced by the Bush administration that organizations that receive US funding must first sign a pledge “explicitly opposing prostitution and sex trafficking.”²⁵ This requirement is widely held to have complicated efforts to prevent HIV infection and to have greatly curtailed efforts to relax legal prohibitions against prostitution. It is worth noting, however, that funding conditionality extends well beyond the activities of the US government to encompass broader patterns associated with financial and institutional linkages between the Global North and the Global South. When funders in the Global North allocate resources to a specific project or issue, actors in the Global South are routinely obliged to align their activities with the interests and agendas of their external funders.²⁶

This political economy of activism has not only contributed to the creation of new anti-trafficking organizations (mostly in relation to sex work but also sometimes on other fronts), but it has also encouraged established organizations to include anti-trafficking efforts (or rhetoric) within their existing portfolio of projects. Since anti-trafficking funding is often limited to a single funding cycle and anti-trafficking efforts often have shallow roots and few alternative means of support, the end of the funding can sometimes result in the end of the entire project or organization. There have also been additional cases, however, where established civil society groups and other actors have successfully extracted resources from the Global North in order to support pre-existing projects. In various parts of West Africa, to take one notable example, NGOs such as Timidria (Niger), Temedt (Mali), and the Initiative pour la Résurgence du Mouvement Abolitionniste (Mauritania) have successfully leveraged renewed interest in human trafficking and contemporary slavery in the Global North in order to garner support and resources for their efforts to challenge the ongoing legacies of historical slave systems.²⁷

It is often difficult to directly connect interventions in one part of the globe to parallel interventions taking place in other parts of the world. Brazilian activists seeking to end extreme exploitation in the agricultural sector have little to do with their counterparts seeking to combat the ongoing legacies of historical slave systems in Mali or Niger. Much the same can be said in relation to the activists concerned with state-sponsored forced labour in North Korea²⁸ compared with those concerned with bonded labour in India.²⁹ Activists in the United States who are concerned with “domestic minor trafficking” rarely look beyond their own borders (or even beyond sex work) when it comes to making substantive political and policy interventions. There can sometimes be broad similarities in the types of abuses that occur in these otherwise quite different contexts, but a fair amount of creative aggregation and extrapolation is required in order to translate broad similarities into the language of a common and cohesive global cause. Despite political rhetoric to the contrary, there is not one global anti-trafficking or anti-slavery movement. There are instead many different movements and organizations with numerous agendas and interests, most of which chiefly focus upon specific issues, priorities, and/or localized concerns.

This state of affairs has often been overshadowed by a widespread tendency to both reproduce and further entrench the fictive coherence of global struggle. Since the late 1990s, many researchers have framed their work in terms of – or at least rhetorically alluded to – the overarching notion of a global cause, which has in turn been promoted further via a number of influential and popular books.³⁰ Since states, NGOs, and international organizations have come to favour particular approaches and conceptual vocabularies, the scholars who study them have also tended to give pride of place to similar types of approaches and languages. There are some authors – the most influential being Kevin Bales³¹ – who have devoted considerable energy seeking to define and demarcate global anti-slavery. However, there are also other authors who instead tend to make brief and fleeting references to some kind of global cause, often by way of ritual recitation of global “facts and figures,” and then move to a more narrow focus on individual issues or locations.

It is at this juncture that a variety of more specific themes begin to take centre stage, since most scholars and activists are concerned primarily

with specific (sub)themes, rather than seeking to give sustained attention to every aspect of the larger whole. These specific themes include commercial sex and prostitution,³² hereditary bondage and descent-based discrimination,³³ forced and early marriage,³⁴ human trafficking, criminality, and crime control,³⁵ migration, asylum, and exploitation,³⁶ children in the global sex industry,³⁷ and domestic labour.³⁸ While different authors favour different approaches to these topics, the main point we want to emphasize here is that the addition of slavery and/or trafficking as overarching frames of reference does not always add very much in terms of analytical value. Instead of treating these numerous themes as subcategories of singular and cohesive global cause, we instead need to consider looking outward to more established literatures and applied experiences.

Broadening the Conversation(s)

Rhetorical appeals to the history of slavery and abolition can serve a number of different purposes and agendas. In the case of self-proclaimed “modern-day abolitionists,” we can point to three main themes that have proven to be particularly significant.³⁹ First, rhetorical appeals to the history of anti-slavery have helped to position contemporary activists as the equivalents and/or descendants of earlier anti-slavery activists and campaigns. Second, rhetorical appeals to anti-slavery have helped to invest the anti-slavery or anti-trafficking cause with the same type of elevated moral status and urgency as previous historical campaigns to end legal slavery in the Americas. Finally, rhetorical appeals have been featured as part of the larger efforts to portray historical anti-slavery campaigns as key sources of inspiration and instruction, which can then be invoked in turn to demonstrate that seemingly impossible goals are obtainable with the right techniques and resolve.⁴⁰ Taken together, these themes have helped to establish – either implicitly or explicitly – a hierarchical conception of where the cause of ending slavery and trafficking should be situated in relation to other problems and practices. Within this hierarchy, slavery and trafficking are constructed as exceptional problems that should be accorded the highest possible priority. In turn, this perception has had the effect of establishing an informal separation between slavery and “lesser” problems.

This politics of exception can be unpacked in several different ways. One useful point of departure comes from Clifford Bob, who has sought to explain why and how some political causes have been able to secure global recognition and support, while other causes continue to languish in relative obscurity. His analysis chiefly focuses upon the mechanics of competition associated with what he describes as a “global morality market,” wherein activists in the Global South compete for resources and endorsements from their more privileged counterparts in the North.⁴¹ This overall approach has important ramifications when it comes to the cause of contemporary slavery. According to Bob, there is no such thing as a “meritocracy of suffering, with the worse-off groups gaining the most help.”⁴² Instead, activists engage in fierce competition for resources, alliances, and popular and political attention. Within the context of this “global morality market,” rhetorical appeals to (anti-)slavery appear to have played a key role in attracting interest and investment to the cause of ending slavery, since slavery is widely held to occupy a space alongside genocide in a “worst of the worst” category. In a world suffering from many serious problems, the cause of ending slavery enjoys several market advantages.

Others factors also need to be taken into account in order to fully develop this overall argument. As is well known, appeals to slavery and anti-slavery are not a new phenomenon. Activists of many different stripes have been seeking to harness slavery to support specific causes since the nineteenth century, including high profile yet highly problematic campaigns against “white” slavery.⁴³ Over the last two decades, references to “slavery” within the context of human trafficking and prostitution have frequently had much greater popular and political salience than references to “slavery” involving other types of practices, such as the abuse of domestic workers or forced labour for the state. Since some appeals to slavery have been more successful than others, we need to be cautious about assigning too much independent weight to “slavery” when it comes to the marketplace of activism and ideas.⁴⁴ While a full analysis of this theme is beyond the scope of this chapter, it should be evident from this overview that the recent success of the cause of ending slavery and trafficking cannot be explained as a “natural” or “organic” response to recent events but, instead, needs to be

understood as emerging out of fierce competition between numerous causes, constituencies, and normative claims. To help explain this success, we need to reflect upon why this specific cause is now so popular.

This means interrogating how, why, and where anti-slavery rhetoric potentially aligns with other ideological, economic, and political agendas and what consequences follow from these alignments. Over the last two decades, the cause of ending trafficking and slavery has received significant rhetorical support from every corner of the political spectrum. This broad base of support has helped to foster a misleading, yet nonetheless widespread, impression that both anti-slavery and anti-trafficking are non-ideological and removed from “normal” politics since strong rhetorical support comes from conservatives, liberals, traditionalists, and progressives. One good demonstration of this dynamic is the frequency with which recent anti-trafficking and anti-slavery legislation has enjoyed broad bipartisan support. Take, by way of example, the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act, which in 2000 sailed through both the US House of Representatives and Senate, which are otherwise notoriously polarized and deadlocked, and has since been renewed with similar bipartisan support in 2003, 2006, and 2008.⁴⁵ This was then admittedly followed by a period during which renewal was hijacked by larger political and ideological disputes between the Democrats and the Republicans, but these differences were later resolved without substantial change to the underlying legislation. Outside the United States, anti-trafficking legislation has been passed on a bipartisan basis in the vast majority of other countries and cases.

This self-presentation of the cause of ending slavery as one of those rare issues that should “transcend” everyday politics undoubtedly sounds good in theory, but to what extent is it actually borne out in practice? To help address this question, we need to ask why political and ideological adversaries have been able to reach – or appear to reach – common ground when it comes to ending slavery and trafficking. As is well known, political parties on both the left and the right generate at least part of their support via their potential capacity to both protect and promote the interests of various economic and social groups. In its most basic form, this often boils down to an expectation that politicians on the left will support the interests of workers and the public

sector, while their counterparts on the right will support corporations and the private sector. While political realities are obviously far more complex in practice, there is nonetheless considerable merit to the basic notion that key groups within society have strategic interests and that these groups participate in politics in order to protect these interests.

So why have politicians and other actors been able to come together when it comes to this specific cause? One key consideration here is the degree to which contemporary slavery and human trafficking have been closely associated with commercial sex work. While commercial sex work is a topic that generates strong emotions, it is not an issue that frequently or directly threatens dominant economic and political interests (although larger gender relations within society are definitely a major part of the equation here). This political profile is important because it helps to explain why anti-trafficking has often been able to command an unusual level of bipartisan support. In stark contrast to historical campaigns to end legal slavery, which were firmly aimed at the profits and privileges of the rich and powerful, more recent global “anti-slavery” campaigns targeting human trafficking only rarely pose a direct threat to major political and economic interests. When “modern-day abolitionists” target abuses associated with commercial sex, their efforts do not directly challenge major economic and political interests or the foundations of our profoundly unjust global economy.

This calculation helps to explain why so much time and energy has been invested in various aspects of the relationship between slavery, trafficking, and prostitution. It is also important to keep in mind, however, that the status of prostitution also comes with its own internal dynamics and political fault lines, which can be best understood on their own terms rather than as a subcategory of a larger global struggle against slavery.⁴⁶ This starts with a now firmly polarized debate regarding the relationship between trafficking in persons and the status of prostitution, with one side of the argument invoking the cause of fighting trafficking in order to delegitimize prostitution and the other side maintaining that the cause of fighting trafficking has too often translated into policies that challenge the legitimacy and autonomy of all women engaged in sex work.⁴⁷

In addition to this fundamental argument over prostitution, there have also been numerous other related critiques, starting with depictions of trafficking as a form of “moral panic,” which is bound up in underlying social anxieties and legacies.⁴⁸ As part of this argument, critics have challenged popular narratives involving the construction of vulnerable “exotic” victims, whose “innocence” requires “rescue.”⁴⁹ These narratives have in turn been linked to “celebritization” and popular tropes regarding “saviors” and “saved,” wherein “human trafficking is not only susceptible to alluring, fetishistic and voyeuristic narratives, but plays into the celebrity-as-rescuer-of-the-victim ideal.”⁵⁰ According to numerous critics, this “rescue” too often takes the form of paternalistic intervention, state “securitization,” and/or border protection.⁵¹ It should therefore come as no surprise that anti-trafficking remedies have ended up hurting, rather than helping, vulnerable groups.⁵²

Two key observations can be extracted from the preceding analysis. First, we argue that it is essential to analyze individual components of the cause of ending slavery on their own terms, rather than taking the popular rhetoric of a larger common cause at face value. Second, we argue that political and economic interests play a central role in determining the degree to which “bipartisan” support is viable. There are numerous stakeholders who are deeply invested in the question of the legal status of prostitution who are not similarly invested in other topics. It costs relatively little for corporations and governments to take an official stand against abuses in the commercial sex industry, but once the topic shifts to global supply chains and exploitative labour practices, they quickly get apprehensive owing to their major economic interests relating to the legitimation and continuation of highly exploitative labour regimes. Much the same applies to labour abuses that are perpetrated by governments, such as the widespread abuse of migrant labourers in much of the Middle East. As Rhoda Howard-Hassmann demonstrates in her case study of forced labour in North Korea in this volume, governments have long been one of the most effective abusers of their citizens. A serious political challenge to global patterns of labour exploitation and vulnerability would rapidly and decisively fracture the current “bipartisan” appeal of the anti-slavery cause.

In light of these arguments, we further maintain that there is considerable analytical and political value in disaggregating the anti-slavery cause into key thematic areas, rather than treating so many different issues as aspects of a singular and cohesive global struggle. While different actors and institutions will invariably have different priorities and approaches, we think that the following list offers a provisional account of the substantive issues that currently easily coexist under the rhetoric of “ending slavery”:

- prostitution and sexual exploitation
- migration and exploitation
- debt and exploitation
- child labour and exploitation
- domestic labour and exploitation
- global supply chains and exploitation
- hereditary bondage and descent-based discrimination
- wartime captivity and wartime abuses
- forced, servile and early marriage
- forced labour by the state.

This is obviously a huge and diverse list. It makes very little analytical sense to throw together such a diverse array of practices and issues under a singular banner, but this is nonetheless the current state of affairs that has emerged thanks to constant aggregation. Things get even messier when the list is further expanded to include themes such as prison labour and the carceral state or reparations for enslavement, which are both themes that are directly connected to the legacies of historical slave systems but that have to date been largely overlooked within discussions of contemporary slavery and trafficking.⁵³

We believe that disaggregating the political rhetoric of anti-slavery and anti-trafficking will help to partially uncouple political agendas and political stakeholders from the empty rhetoric of “bipartisanship,” where everyone is at least superficially assumed to be on the same side. Each of the themes listed above can and should be primarily understood as a distinct sphere of inquiry rather than as a subcategory whose primary function is to help illuminate different facets of a singular and cohesive

field of global activism and inquiry. They should not be regarded primarily as “subcategories” within global anti-slavery or anti-trafficking movements. There may well be points of overlap and intersection between these different themes, but we would argue that these intersections should emerge at points where there are substantive areas of intersection rather than being artificially created through rhetorical aggregation and extrapolation.

It is here, we further argue, that existing scholarship and activism focusing upon “anti-slavery” and “anti-trafficking” also needs to engage more systematically with established literatures and practical experiences in related fields. As we have seen, the widespread popularity of the politics of exception has created an unhelpful and artificial separation between contemporary slavery and a range of “lesser” problems and practices. Disaggregating the rhetoric of anti-slavery into specific thematic areas should not only make it easier to prioritize practice over rhetoric. It should also make it easier to integrate arguments and insights from related areas of activism and inquiry. There is no need to reinvent the wheel to deal with a unique and exceptional case. The wheel has already been invented many times over in related fields. It just needs to be imported and adapted.

There are therefore two further steps to our overall argument in this volume. The first step involves a move from the singular and cohesive to the plural and distinct in order to disaggregate contemporary slavery into more specific themes. The second step involves placing these more specific themes alongside more established bodies of research. No list can ever be exhaustive, but for the purposes of illustration, we would point to the potential value of existing and ongoing research into the limits of law reform and rights advocacy,⁵⁴ human rights as discourse,⁵⁵ vernacularized mobilization of human rights norms,⁵⁶ the perils of human rights indicators,⁵⁷ feminist critiques of human rights protections,⁵⁸ and the larger relationship between human rights and social vulnerabilities.⁵⁹ We believe that reaching out to these and other literatures will help to highlight issues and dynamics that may have otherwise been overlooked or marginalized.

Many of the practices that violate contemporary human rights norms – think of age and consent to marriage, corporal and criminal

punishments, and the lack of primary education – are featured prominently within earlier civilizing missions by European colonial powers, and the complications and limitations of current approaches and policies can be usefully approached within this larger context. Liberal conceptions of rights, which remain the dominant idiom of contemporary “anti-slavery” activism, have often ended up excluding rather than including.⁶⁰ Furthermore, human rights initiatives now regularly accompany neo-liberal global expansions of capital that have a very poor record of protecting against the excesses and logics of market competition.⁶¹ It is within this larger context that Andrew Crane, a business ethicist who has written extensively on corporate citizenship, argues in this volume that slavery and exploitation should be approached as a regularized management practice rather than as deviant exceptions.

These sorts of connections should not come as a surprise, but they have nonetheless too often been neglected or overlooked within recent scholarship and activism relating to contemporary slavery and trafficking. As Wendy Brown has incisively argued in the American context, the history of the civil rights movement shows that rights may reinforce the very structures of inequality that they aim to change.⁶² This argument, in turn, helps to explain why and how the cause of ending slavery has ended up tacitly legitimating larger political arrangements involving exploitative labour systems and supply chains. To take a further example, it is also now well documented that law reform and liberal rights advocacy frequently fail to meet the needs of the most marginalized, yet, nonetheless, these solutions are what are frequently recommended when it comes to ending contemporary slavery and human trafficking. Similarly, in the area of housing rights and anti-poverty work, the rhetoric and politics of individual rights have proven to be a weak strategy for meaningful social change. If arguments based upon individual rights have not been particularly successful, then perhaps we should be thinking instead in terms of advancing collective organization and solidarity.

When viewed as discourse, human rights norms (like law more generally) need to be seen as contested and open to interpretation. A discursive approach “radically decenters international human rights law” and studies the way social practice produces human rights knowledge.⁶³

Anti-slavery activists have recognized the power of rights as rhetoric, invoking the language of slavery to describe any number of different practices. However, it is also now well established within human rights scholarship that these types of rhetorical strategies are not limited to progressive social movements. The language of rights has frequently been mobilized by conservatives and reactionaries, such as vigilante justice groups and pro-gun lobbies. Daniel Goldstein's work in barrios in Bolivia has demonstrated how the language of the "right to security" can fuel vigilante justice when coupled with a suspicion of the state, police violence, and personal insecurity.⁶⁴

In another fascinating example, the National Rifle Association from the United States assisted a local pro-gun lobby in Brazil in 2006 in order to turn the tide of popular opinion in a referendum on gun ownership. Exploiting fears of state intervention in the civil liberties of citizens, it used the approach that "if the government can restrict your right to self defense, what other rights will it restrict."⁶⁵ Much like the language of rights, the language of anti-slavery has proven to be highly malleable, and at least some of the political contexts where anti-slavery has been invoked have been similarly problematic.

These types of examples also underscore the importance of understanding the ways in which local contexts and political calculations interact with larger global discourses. As a now extensive literature has demonstrated, the "sites where human rights unfold in practice do matter, and that these sites are not simply nodes in a virtual network, but actual places in social space, places which can be law-like and coercive."⁶⁶ Not every location will be conducive to the politics of an international human rights campaign or anti-slavery strategy. There are often other competing and long-standing normative discourses for social justice and social change, including liberation theology, other religious discourse, party politics, unionization, and socialism. As Sally Merry and colleagues have demonstrated in their study of gender violence and women's rights in five countries, social change is most challenging in cases where social norms are most intransigent.⁶⁷ These types of findings in turn invite further reflection and analysis regarding the extent to which lasting social change can be realized using the popular language of anti-slavery, or anti-trafficking, as a key platform for advocacy and change.

This literature also invites us to think further about how and why specific political interventions generate specific forms of political resistance and response. In his chapter for this volume, Austin Choi-Fitzpatrick focuses upon “the degree to which human rights interventions, including those encouraging former slaves to challenge authority openly, have resulted in resistance from local elites as well as the development of new forms of social and economic oppression patterned on the basis of previous hierarchical relationships in operation under slavery.”⁶⁸ In his 150 semi-structured interviews with former slaveholders, Choi-Fitzpatrick shows them as experiencing nostalgia, jealousy, confusion, and/or malice when confronted by a social movement of the former enslaved.

Existing literature on policy processes and alliances between private and public actors can also be tremendously valuable. As Darshan Vigneswaran argues in this volume, “social scientists in general and human rights scholars in particular, regularly fail to recognize how epistemological differences with their ‘fellow travellers’ in government, NGOs, and community organizations can undermine their collective ability to advance the cause of human emancipation.”⁶⁹ Focusing upon the politics of numbers and human trafficking, Vigneswaran demonstrates that anti-trafficking policy processes and political conversations have remained largely impervious to criticism due to financial incentives, legitimation games, and sunken costs. His argument serves to highlight that not everyone will be – or can be – on the same political or ideological side and that appeals to “the evidence” are unlikely to be sufficient to adjudicate between competing positions.

This emphasis on policy processes also extends to legal processes. In his chapter for this volume, Benjamin Lawrance also explores how government officials and legal processes grapple with questions of classification. He specifically explores how the language of “forced marriage” ends up reproducing the troubling notion that conjugal relationships are akin to legal marriage for former “husbands” and “in-laws.” Lawrance argues that this “forced marriage paradox” consists of two intertwined dynamics, namely the absence of a consistent set of definitions (based on evidence from UK and US courts), and the conundrum encountered by victims who cannot describe their experiences without employing language validating violent and illegitimate actions.

In a similar vein, Jonathan Blagborough explores the language used by survivors and activists. In his work, Blagborough argues that child domestic workers are narrowly construed as victims of exploitation in ways that neglect their full agency as decision makers, migrants, and children. Existing work on childhood is shown to have as much, if not more, to offer than the existing literature on slavery and human trafficking. This emphasis on the idiosyncrasies of lived experience is also taken up by Roy Brooks. Building upon his previous work on reparations for the history and legacies of slavery in the United States, Brooks seeks to extend his reparatory model to thinking about potential forms of redress for the harms associated with contemporary slavery. Here, as elsewhere, we encounter a now well-established critique of the limitations of criminal justice mechanisms, which remain the first port of call for many interventions.

As we have reiterated throughout this introduction, the term “contemporary slavery” is a provocative and powerful label applied by activists and others to signal the “worst forms of abuse.” As Fuyuki Kurasawa deftly analyzes in his chapter for this volume, it draws on the histories and iconography of the transatlantic slave trade and American plantation slavery. As Joseph Slaughter argues in *Human Rights, Inc: The World Novel, Narrative Form and International Law*, the coming-of-age novel, *Bildungsroman*, “is the novelistic genre that most fully corresponds to – and, indeed, is implicitly invoked by – the norms and narrative assumptions that underwrite the vision of the free and full human personality development projected in international human rights law.”⁷⁰ Slaughter is careful to qualify this claim by stating that he is talking about “dominant international legal construction of human rights” – in other words, not the discursive and dynamic understanding of human rights that we describe earlier in this introduction. Annie Bunting further develops these themes in her critical assessment of modern slavery narratives and legal testimonials in her chapter for this volume. She argues that should we limit our understanding of human rights violations and wartime violence to genres such as slave narratives or testimonies, we will miss the complexity and nuance of the experiences of survivors. This is particularly the case for survivors of gender violence in war, where the risks of voyeurism and narrative tropes are very prevalent.

Concluding Remarks

It has recently been argued that recent scholarship has been contributing to the emergence of a new field of “contemporary slavery studies.” According to Austin Choi-Fitzpatrick,

scholars contributing to our understanding of trafficking and slavery are engaged in a nascent and emerging interdisciplinary field of contemporary slavery studies ... [that] ... bridges research and movement fields as it increasingly involves the voices and contributions of grassroots activists and survivors of slavery as well as scholars and policy makers.⁷¹

While this formula represents an advance upon orthodox approaches that prioritize human trafficking, it nonetheless continues to treat the cause of ending slavery and trafficking as a singular and cohesive object of analysis and activism. As we have sought to demonstrate in this introduction, there are major limitations to this popular notion that contemporary slavery constitutes a separate and distinct field of study. It is instead preferable, we argue, to think in terms of multiple and overlapping spheres of activism and inquiry, which are nested within – and do not stand apart from – a wide range of related scholarly literatures and practical experiences. Slavery and trafficking should not only be treated as separate and exceptional issues but also need to be disaggregated and merged into a model that focuses chiefly upon specific themes and substantive practices.

As we have seen, too much of what takes place under the banner of combatting human trafficking and contemporary slavery is sensationalist, self-serving, and superficial. Once we look beyond the popular rhetoric of a cohesive and singular global cause – fighting trafficking and slavery – we quickly encounter a wide range of divergent and often competing agendas, perspectives, and priorities. Despite political rhetoric to the contrary, many of these agendas and calculations are location and issue specific, rather than subcategories within a much larger global cause. They are also not the sorts of issues or problems that tend to be amenable to “bipartisan” or technocratic solutions. The idea that anti-slavery is one of those rare issues that “transcends” politics or ideology

is only sustainable because the underlying issues at stake have been constructed and demarcated in a way that minimizes direct challenges to dominant political and economic interests. In order to move forward both politically and analytically, we have to be prepared to discard both the politics of exception and the fiction of a shared and universal global struggle.

Notes

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