

The global markets in modern day slavery

Gary Craig argues that slavery still flourishes in contemporary, globalised consumer markets

In 1807, after years of extra-parliamentary action and slave rebellions threatening the profits of the Caribbean islands plantation owners, William Wilberforce finally managed to achieve a parliamentary majority for ending the slave trade. In 1833, the issue re-emerged in parliament with the passage of a second Act ending slavery. British Navy ships, hitherto protecting British slaving interests, were now employed to apprehend foreign slaving ships. Britain should not, incidentally, assume the mantle of universal guilt in relation to the slave trade. It was not even the first major European power engaged in slave trading – that was Portugal from the mid-fifteenth century – followed by most other European powers. However, what Britain effectively did was to turn slave trading into a state-sponsored and organised economic activity. Through the construction and fitting out of ships, the establishment of routine processes for capturing, buying and selling, and transporting slaves, and the control of their labour, Britain industrialised and marketised the trade. This responded to its growing maritime, economic and industrial power and to the demand for new products – tobacco, chocolate, cotton, minerals – but most of all sugar. Mention of these commodities provides one link to the present-day; many of them continue to be produced in a context where slave – and often child slave – labour is present (Craig, 2009).

Slavery in fact never ended (Quirk, 2009), although the British public and government believed it had and felt it was now little to do with them. In reality, within Central and

West Africa, enslavement continued throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. At the end of French colonial rule in the 1960s, there were still 200,000 adults in slavery; their descendants still remain slaves today in the countries of the Sahel. Slaves remained in hundreds of thousands in the Arabian peninsula until the 1960s. Forced labour was a familiar part of the colonial landscape throughout much of the early twentieth century. In India, despite ‘abolition’ in 1843, there remains today the largest single concentration of slaves with tens of millions of adults and children in debt bondage, a further link between the so-called historical and contemporary worlds of slavery. These slaves – including children – can be found in modern industries, including brickmaking, fish processing, mining, carpet production, gem-making, clothing and fireworks. So, whilst many of the commemorative events in 2007 linked to the abolition of the British Slave Trade implied that slavery had ended 200 years ago, in reality, after the global arms and drugs trades, modern slavery is now the third largest trade in the world, ‘valued’ at approximately \$35 billion per year.

Slavery re-emerging

It is quite misleading to see modern slavery as in some way isolated from its previous manifestations. And, although pressure to end

slavery has grown, a plethora of legal instruments and growing international political pressures have not brought it to an end. Slavery has simply re-emerged or morphed into other forms of enslavement which, in contemporary contexts, reflect an industrialised and increasingly globalised world, one in which the migration of labour to unfamiliar contexts makes it more vulnerable to enslavement. Ironically, the relatively easy availability of data which, during the period when slavery was not only legal but diligently recorded, is now – in a context of illegality – much more difficult to obtain. Any estimates of the numbers and types of slavery worldwide, or indeed in the UK, come with a codicil that they are substantial underestimates.

Although the continuing practice of slavery across the world created international responses in the form of United Nations and International Labour Organization conventions, these debates had little impact on the UK. Slavery has generally been regarded as something awful but which happened elsewhere in the world. However, recent revelations about the severe exploitation of children picking cotton in Uzbekistan, cotton which was processed into the clothing found in British retail outlets, the clothing factory disasters in Bangladesh and the forced labour camps of Nepalese workers, hundreds of whom have died building Qatar’s World Cup facilities, have begun to shift public attitudes as people realise that many of these slavery-contaminated goods and services end up being sold on UK high streets. Campaigning organisations such as the Fairtrade Foundation and Anti-Slavery International must take much of the credit for raising public awareness. Essentially, what is now happening is that the globalisation of trade brings

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with it the globalisation of slavery, involving many millions more people than were ever involved in the transatlantic slave trade.

Light touch regime

The public is now beginning to understand that slavery is also present within the UK. One critical moment was the death ten years ago of 23 Chinese cockle pickers in Morecambe Bay, living and working in slavery conditions (Pai, 2008). The *Gangmasters Licensing Act 2004* was introduced to regulate labour providers, through the Gangmasters' Licensing Agency (GLA), in a few industrial sectors, including agriculture. A new stand-alone criminal offence of forced labour in the UK was legislated in 2009. In the last year, however, the coalition government, pursuing its light touch regulatory regime, has both cut the GLA's resources and limited the scope of its work. Detailed research has shown that forced labour is much more widespread than was thought, with at least 4,000 to 5,000 cases likely to be current in the UK, although very few reach the courts because of the complexities of proving the offence. There are probably also 5,000 or more women and children who have been trafficked into or within the UK either for sexual purposes or labour exploitation. What most UK consumers have yet to understand, however, is that they consume products on an everyday basis which are tainted by slavery conditions within the UK – such as meat, fish, fruit, vegetables, clothing, hospitality, the products of construction and much domestic or domiciliary care provision. Increasing numbers of cases show how easy it is for slavery to exist in the midst of us all.

Trafficking in human beings, one of the most significant aspects of modern slavery, is also a growing global trade, responding to the demands of the market: the phenomenon was so little understood in the UK in recent years that the then Minister for Women told parliament that she thought

there were between 147 and 1,470 trafficked women within the UK. However, one police sweep of a few years ago found 58 brothels in a small, largely rural county, each with between three and four trafficked women. Factored up across the UK on a *pro rata* basis, this would suggest a figure of around 18,000 to 20,000. The government finally responded to growing awareness of this issue by establishing an organisation, the UK Human Trafficking Centre (UKHTC), and partially signing up to European Conventions on trafficking. Recent data shows however that the UKHTC, now within the protected regime of the National Crime Agency, is barely scraping the surface of the issue.

Overall, the UK government response to the 'discovery' of modern slavery in the UK is widely criticised as inadequate and in some cases (for example the question of restricted visas for domestic workers) as making things worse. Effectively, allowing employers (businessmen and diplomats) to abuse domestic workers without the workers having recourse to leave their employ without facing deportation, might be interpreted as one means of making the UK business-friendly!

A paradox

To some it is therefore quite paradoxical that Theresa May, the Home Secretary, is now sponsoring the *Modern Slavery Bill* through parliament, aiming to have it enacted before the General Election. One plausible explanation is that May, who has been described by one parliamentary fan as the twenty-first century's Wilberforce, wishes to distance herself from the 'nasty party' should the post of leadership of the Conservative Party be up for grabs after the General Election. There is now a brief opportunity for citizens

to get involved by lobbying MPs. Some Conservative MPs who have discovered forced labour in their rural constituencies are sympathetic to some of the Bill's aims. One key political battleground will be ensuring that victims of trafficking

are not labelled as criminals or illegal immigrants: May has already moved the trafficking brief from Immigration Minister to Police Minister. The second battle involves greater regulation by

government and business of supply chains, both abroad and in the UK. But that of course goes completely against the grain of coalition 'light touch' and voluntaristic free market economic policy. It will be interesting to see how government deals with that particular contradiction. Wilberforce's original Act stopped the free market in slaves: will May's? ■

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References

- Craig, G. (2009), *Child slavery now*, Bristol: Policy Press.
 Pai, Hsiao-Hung, (2008), *Chinese Whispers*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
 Quirk, J. (2009), *Unfinished Business: A Comparative Survey of Historical and Contemporary Slavery*, Paris: UNESCO.

Useful links

- Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Group: www.antislavery.org/anti-trafficking_monitoring_group/
 Fairtrade Foundation: www.fairtrade.org.uk
 Anti-Slavery International: www.antislavery.org
 Ethical Trading Initiative: www.ethicaltrade.org
www.jrf.org.uk/research/forced-labour
www.forcedlabour.org