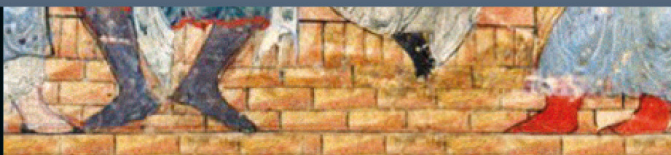


SLAVERIES OF THE FIRST MILLENNIUM



Youval Rotman

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Introduction

Whence Slavery?

If we try to imagine what slavery looks like, we will probably visualize black cotton pickers, chained Africans coerced into slave ships, Roman gladiators, slave markets in modern Libya, girls and women forced into a life of prostitution, children undertaking hard manual labour. For many of us the term slavery resonates a horrific experience of harsh exploitation in a way that restricts personal freedom and dignity. If we look for images on the internet, we will probably get the same results. Such images reflect the modern concept of slavery, which is composed of stories, histories, education, political awareness, and is also fed by the news. All of these conditions are based on acts of enslavement that reduce a human being to a tool, a device, a piece of merchandise, a means of profit and exploitation, in ways that contradict human rights, freedom, and dignity, a severe crime against a human being.

The perception of slavery as a crime against humanity is a product of the nineteenth-century abolitionist movement that fought with great success to eradicate slavery from the world. Its objective was to end phenomena that existed throughout history in myriad societies, phenomena that although very different one from another, had in common the legalization of the enslavement of human beings. The fight for the eradication of slavery went hand in hand with the development of the human rights movement. Yet, what appeared in the twentieth century as a great international political success seems in the twenty-first century now just wishful thinking. The current

human rights discourse refers to “modern slavery” or “contemporary slavery” and publicizes modern forms of enslavement that have become frequent over the last thirty years. This raises a disturbing question: is slavery back? And if so, are we dealing with the same kind of phenomenon, the same slavery?

To take a recent case, in January 2019 a federal jury convicted the couple Mohamed Toure and Denise Cros-Toure of Southlake, Texas, for the forced labour of a Guinean girl for sixteen years. Three months later they were sentenced to seven years in prison each and \$288,620.24 in restitution. The couple brought the girl from her Guinean village in 2000 and forced her to work without pay in their home as a housekeeper, cook, and nanny. The case was tried as a case of *forced labour*, meaning work which a person is coerced to provide against their will.

Another famous case is “The Queen v Wei Tang” in 2006, in which the Australian Court of Justice convicted the owner of a licensed brothel in Melbourne of five counts of intentionally possessing a slave and five counts of intentionally exercising a power of ownership over a slave. Tang was the first person convicted under anti-slavery laws that had been introduced in 1999.¹ She was accused of having purchased five women from Thailand to work in *debt bondage* in her brothel, and was sentenced to ten years in prison. The women had agreements with a broker in Thailand. He passed them on to Tang by selling her these “contracts” for twenty thousand Australian dollars. The women arrived in Australia separately in 2002 to 2003 on tourist visas, each owing forty to forty-five thousand Australian dollars to the owner of these “contracts.” Their debt was reduced by fifty dollars per customer. They worked six days a week for long hours. They were not locked up, but their passports were retained. Since their visas had been obtained illegally, they feared detection by immigration authorities. The debt bondage that Tang applied to the women formed the basis of the charges of slavery.

I Details of both cases are provided at the end of the Further Reading section at the end.

Both cases were individual, private acts of enslavement that were tried as illegal. Other cases show that bondage and enslavement can become normalized. A particularly extreme form of bondage is practised today in the global fishing industry. Southeast Asian fisheries can trap migrant workers illegally and hold them as *enslaved labourers* for years, sometimes for life. Cut off from their home and having lost their status as citizens, on a foreign fishing vessel on the open seas where there is no way of escape, no legal authority, and *de facto* no legal status, these workers experience years of severe living conditions, sexual assault, harsh violence, even murder. Working under dubious agreements or wilfully ignored by the relevant state for reasons of profit, this form of enslavement differs from the two previous cases. It represents a significant part of the economies of Southeast Asian countries and the global economy.²

Another form of enslavement that is also inherent to socioeconomic structures and falls within legal norms is the bonded labour of children trapped in the brick industry in Pakistan and India.³ Kiln managers and owners provide loans to workers who are unable to repay them, and so they become *bonded labourers* of their debt owners. They can

2 V. A. Prum, *The Dead Eye and the Deep Blue Sea: A Graphic Memoir of Modern Slavery* (New York: Seven Stories, 2018). Also *Blood and Water: Human Rights Abuse in the Global Seafood Industry* (London: Environmental Justice Foundation, 2019): <https://ejfoundation.org/resources/downloads/Blood-water-06-2019-final.pdf> (accessed June 5, 2020).

3 Bales, *Disposable People*, 149–94. A. Ercelawn and M. Nauman, “Unfree Labour in South Asia: Debt Bondage at Brick Kilns in Pakistan,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 39, no. 22 (2004): 2235–42. S. Kumari, “Neo-Bondage in the Brick Kiln Industry: A Case Study of Bihar,” *Social Change* 48, no. 3 (2018): 384–97. A. Bhukuth, “Child Labour and Debt Bondage: A Case Study of Brick Kiln Workers in Southeast India,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 40, no. 4 (2005): 287–302. Also see <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/spiraling-debt-trapping-pakistan-brick-kiln-workers-190903135224452.html> (accessed February 1, 2020).

be transferred from one creditor to another and become trapped in perpetual debt bondage that they unwillingly pass onto their children.

We may ask in what way these contemporary examples are different from the images we have of chattel slavery through which enslaved humans become merchandise, and are bought, sold, and dominated exclusively by their enslavers. Indeed, slavery is often defined as any type of exertion of ownership, possession, or trading of human beings, their body, life, and labour. Enslaved persons are considered victims whose life has been changed forever by their subjugation to an enslaver.⁴

Slavery has been declared illegal in most countries (as we shall see in the next chapter). The International Convention on Slavery of 1926 refers to slavery as “the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised.”⁵ Although slavery is illegal today, different forms of enslavement, such as bondage, forced labour, and human trafficking (trade in humans for the purpose of their enslavement) are very much part of today’s world, and are normalized or legalized (such as the bondage mentioned above in fisheries and the kilns). Can we define them all as slavery? This question troubles scholars, historians, sociologists, anthropologists, advocates, human-rights activists, and politicians. Are we speaking of new forms of slavery in today’s world? And if so, how do they relate to historical forms of slavery?

In view of such questions it is not surprising that the study of slavery has undergone a paradigm shift over the last two decades. This has arisen as recent scholarship in history, the social sciences, law, and human rights has responded to the questions that modern phenomena of enslavement, bondage, and human trafficking evoke, such as: What is the difference between ownership and possession, between slavery

4 O. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

5 League of Nations Slavery Convention, §1.1.

de jure and *de facto*, between slavery and enslavement? How do we define human trafficking, and what is voluntary and involuntary enslavement? From historical and anthropological perspectives too scholars emphasize the different definitions that slavery can have and the different conditions it creates. In consequence, since the end of the twentieth century we have obtained a far more diverse and richer picture about slavery and the different forms of enslavement that it supports.⁶

In this respect we may distinguish between enslavement and slavery in the following manner: enslavement is the act and the state of reducing persons, their labour, and the product of their labour, to a thing which the enslaver can possess, own, use, exploit, exchange, emancipate, or transfer to another. Slavery, on the other hand, is the system that creates, enables, normalizes, and maintains such situations and relationships. In other words, enslavement is the actual state of the enslaved person, while slavery is the framework, the system, that supports it.

Social history has focused on the understanding of such systems throughout the long history of humanity, has revealed the conditions and rationales that create phenomena of enslavement, and has explained how and why their normalization and institutionalization occur in particular societies. Scholarship paints a complex picture of the different purposes, changing conditions, and the versatile role of slavery in different historical circumstances, and challenges us to consider this diversity, its dynamics, and versatility to be in themselves the essence of slavery, its particular character.

How can we analyze the versatile, adaptive character of slavery as a system? The societies of the first millennium around the Mediterranean, Europe, and the Middle East, offer an ideal case-study. The first millennium was a period of tremendous transformation in every respect: geopolitical, social, economic, legal, cultural, religious, intellectual. In so

6 Miller, *The Problem of Slavery as History*. Shelley, *Human Trafficking*. Condominas, ed. *Formes extrêmes de dépendance*.

many ways these transformations determined how the map would look like for centuries to come, and their outcomes are still with us today. Slavery played a central role in these processes of transformation. But, according to the common historical periodization ancient forms of slavery, Greek and Roman in particular, get studied together, while slaveries after the sixth century are cut off from their Antique and Late Antique antecedents.

The present study adopts a new perspective in choosing an uncommon historical framework in which the slavery of the Roman Empire is analyzed together with slaveries in the developing medieval societies that followed it. A broad historical perspective that bridges two periods is essential in order to examine in what ways slavery became instrumental to historical development. Slavery had been used as a way to construct the new Empire. It was later used to structure and form new medieval societies, economies, and cultures. Adopting a long historical perspective will enable us to study these different forms of slavery together and to examine the way in which the adaptable character of slavery was used in the broad process of transformation of Antiquity into the Middle Ages.

It is not easy to accept the idea that slavery played such a pivotal and active role in our past, mainly because we consider it today as a crime against humanity. However, understanding the role that slavery played in historical transformations will help us to perceive slavery not only as a social phenomenon, but as a historical process. This can shed new light also on questions relating to our modern world and the place that slavery occupies in it. Because contemporary forms of enslavement are rarely institutionalized but are often the result of clandestine or individual private activities, we might get the impression that enslavement is back but not slavery. Yet, the cases of bondage in fisheries or of brick workers, cited above, show us that enslavement today is normalized and plays an integral part in the socioeconomic dynamics of certain societies. In order to eradicate them, we need to understand the specific functions they fulfill and that make them profitable. What conditions and circumstances

make slavery more profitable and productive than other types of labour or exploitation? Although modern slavery does not constitute a large part in the global economy today, it is certainly on the rise. Our historical perspective will reveal slavery to be a historical process.

The five chapters of this book follow chronologically the history of the Mediterranean during the first millennium, focusing on different forms of slavery that developed in the civilizations that composed it and were connected to it. The Mediterranean of the first millennium presents a unique historical case for such a study. It was the venue for significant historical transformations thanks to its dense populations, rich economies, and its political complexities. Slavery played a major role in all this.

Chapter 1, "From Present to Past and Back," is a theoretical introduction adopting a retrospective analysis. It examines different perspectives in the study of slavery and presents a new approach that challenges the monolithic definition of slavery. It presents diverse types of slavery and indicates those conditions that make it important to historical evolution.

Chapter 2, "Slavery between Two Phenomena: Empire and Christianity," examines the way slavery influenced the development of the two major historical phenomena of the first centuries of the first millennium: the consolidation of the Roman Empire and the crystallization of Christianity until the two merged in the form of a new Christian Romano-Byzantine Empire. It deals with the changes that slavery brought to the perception of the individual and it challenges the concept of a "slave owning society," a rhetorical concept that historians have artificially used to link ancient slavery to modern American slavery.

Chapter 3, "Enslavement, Captivity, and the Monotheistic Turn," examines the role of enslavement in the transformation of the Roman Empire into a world of distinct medieval monotheistic civilizations: Byzantium, the Caliphates, the Germanic kingdoms of Latin Western Europe. It challenges the idea of a decline of slavery and examines how slavery changed between Antiquity and the Middle Ages.

Chapter 4, “New Polities, New Societies, New Economies,” looks at the social and economic foundations of the new medieval societies. It traces the central roles that slaveries played in each of them in the period of their formation and reveals the adaptable character of slavery as a means of economic development.

Chapter 5, “Migration, Integration, Connectivity,” traces a global, international framework during the Central Middle Ages as a way of explaining how the different forms of slavery related to each other. It reveals slavery not only as a means to establish new social structures in new societies and new economies, but also for their connectivity. Studying how slavery relates to voluntary migration, forced migration, and connectivity between people and economies reveals its global aspect.

* * *

If we want to fight for the eradication of modern slavery we first need to understand its significance as a form of exploitation, adaptable to changing circumstances. The purpose of this book is to challenge perspectives that look at slavery as a discrete phenomenon and instead to examine the historical development of the first millennium through the eyes of slavery. Perceiving slavery not just as a social phenomenon but as a system that enabled the development of historical societies and emerging economies will reveal the role it plays as a historical process.