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Forget Me Not: Bodies as Last Colonies of Capitalism?

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Forget Me Not: Bodies as Last Colonies of Capitalism?

Abstract

Slavery is one technology of imperialism that serves to generate more profits worldwide. Skinner brings this issue to our attention, arguing that many people think that slavery ended in the 19th century, but the current turning of peoples into slaves proves otherwise. Skinner points out that since 1817, there have been more than a dozen international conventions signed banning the slave trade and yet, the number of people sold as slaves is in the millions. He calls modern day slavery a “monstrous crime” and proceeds to provide us with insights from his research. He begins making his point through what is supposed to be a “fictional” story about the negotiation to sell a child in Haiti into slavery for fifty dollars. He later reveals that the story is not fictional but was recorded during his four-year research into slavery on five continents.

Keywords

Human rights, Slavery, Human trafficking

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Forget Me Not: Bodies as Last Colonies of Capitalism?

by Anna M. Agathangelou

Slavery is one technology of imperialism that serves to generate more profits worldwide. Skinner brings this issue to our attention, arguing that many people think that slavery ended in the 19th century, but the current turning of peoples into slaves proves otherwise. Skinner points out that since 1817, there have been more than a dozen international conventions signed banning the slave trade and yet, the number of people sold as slaves is in the millions. He calls modern day slavery a “monstrous crime” and proceeds to provide us with insights from his research. He begins making his point through what is supposed to be a “fictional” story about the negotiation to sell a child in Haiti into slavery for fifty dollars. He later reveals that the story is not fictional but was recorded during his four-year research into slavery on five continents.

Skinner’s piece is timely as it highlights a phenomenon that violates the integrity of children, women, and the poor in the world today. The market has turned everything and everybody into a commodity for sale which brings to the fore again the question of “human rights” violations and political violence within the global context. As Skinner argues, it is important to bring “freedom to millions” by “tearing out the roots of slavery” and yet, at the same time his analysis of the United Nations’ inability to “hold its member states accountable for widespread slavery” “pushes” him to conclude that “absent an effective international body like the United Nations, such an effort will require pressure from the United States.” This position, while crucial, remains within the realm of the liberal pragmatic tradition where the human rights of individuals (which is turning them into slaves) would be less likely to be abused if the right to defend them was constitutively incorporated in the foreign policies of hegemonic states like the United States. However, such a pragmatic position makes invisible several issues: (1) the structural/institutional arrangements within which this “slavery” becomes a possibility; (2) who buys who and for what purpose; and (3) whether the capitalist logic of paying a laborer “\$1-an-hour” is not the same logic that guides what Skinner calls chattel slavery.

In addition, and perhaps in a way that gleans a post-colonial sensibility to Skinner’s analysis, I would like to suggest that contrary to his position that “freeing slaves is impossible unless the slaves themselves choose to be free” (Skinner). I would like to argue that peoples in Haiti and other sites that engage in modern day slavery have contributed, and are continuing to contribute, to the articulation and practices of self-actualization and the development and disruption of conditions that enable their exploitation, oppression, and perpetuation of human rights’ violations. Let’s not forget that Haiti was where one of the major revolutions took place against slavery, and also against the capitalist world formation. In an imperialist capitalist context that demands more and more the corporatization of social relations, including the commodification of people’s labor and bodies, we need to raise questions about the logics of capital and the intensification of slavery within it. Why is it crucial at this moment for capital to draw extensively on bodies (and mostly, bodies of color) to reproduce itself and to legitimize a (neo)liberal political power and authority? Why is it that the (re)production of capitalist social relations of power depend on the “intensification” of the private appropriation of the use-value and surplus labor of those who own nothing but their labor to sell?

Even when slavery was legally abolished, the (re)production of the structure of capital required in different “forms” such as cheap wages, women’s “free” labor at home, etc. The capitalist structure always depended on those bodies and those “unfree” subjects. It is my contention here and elsewhere (e.g., [2004](#)) that the production of a “free wager” depends on the creation of the “unfree” and reproductive subject (i.e., domestic workers, sex workers, wives, etc.) to secure profits even if it means re-introducing a new form of slavery. Being “equal” and “free” in the market to pursue one’s choice of labor does not account for the fact that these “democratic” market rules are constantly suspended, especially when the imperative of the market, that is the generation of profits, is not happening at the rate that the decision makers and organizers of it think it should be.

This brings me to my next point: many states, including many organizations in the Global South and the Global North struggling to put slavery and trafficking on the political agenda, have been struck down by the priorities of foreign policies which have redirected many of their resources to consolidate a Global state and a Global military-industrial complex to secure the demands made by capital to restructure their economies; this has had serious implications upon peoples’ lives, land, and capacities to seek alternatives, including their ability to earn a basic living in their sites of birth and/or countries of origin. As many states redirect their resources from the social welfare of their people to the welfare of corporations, taking care of the majority of peoples and especially women and children is pushed to the margins. Simultaneously, the state pushes to contain social struggles and movements by funding non-profit organizations which, in the process of trying to secure funding, end up stripping down complex social struggles into digestible, rationalized “issue areas.” This is significant insofar as ostensibly non-state “civil society” becomes and is presented now as a primary site of social struggle (as if it is were not before such a site). However, subservient to the market itself, NGOs and civil society are placed in a position to concede to market logics which push more and more to understand social problems (i.e., lack of social welfare; investment in militarization of the state; gender and racial inequalities, indeed, turning the bodies of peoples into slave conditions) as “individual problems with market solutions” ([Brown 2006](#), 704) in order to procure funding. These logics, including Skinner’s, silence nuances of power and, more pertinently, cordon off racial and sexual contradictions from the domain of both the state, the market, and the other institutions of power such as the family where women, children, and the poor of the world find themselves turning into “slaves” serving the desires, wills, and demands of upper and middle class families worldwide (See [Agathangelou and Spira 2006](#)). So, change begins with changing this asymmetrical socio-economic and power relation. But the mere desire of the “slaves” will not enable the disruption of the “crime” that Skinner talks about.

The countries and peoples Skinner engages as sites of slavery and trafficking are the same post-colonial nations that many of their resources, including their labor has been expropriated and exploited consistently even after their colonizers left their countries. It is not mere coincidence that now these countries are selling their people to sustain their power in world politics. Yet, it is crucial that we do not forget that these same countries and these “slaves” are the ones who fought revolutions against legalized slavery and articulated socio-political imaginaries as standards by which to measure social acts and political relations. These same people articulated and designed “ethical precepts” and continue to do so with the purpose of bettering the conditions and human rights of people and collectives everywhere.

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