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Modern Slavery's Ties to Systemic Injustice: A Proposal

The problem of 'modern slavery' can be defined as the ongoing existence of forced labor for profit; a person or group of people act as slaveholders, forcing victims to perform labor for little or no pay, often exerting strict control over their lives and threatening to harm them or their families if they try to escape or cease working. Although the concepts often overlap, 'human trafficking' refers specifically to people illegally being held and moved against their will. Forms of forced labor that are legal, such as arguably prison labor, exist in the present day but are often placed outside the scope of conversations of 'modern slavery' and would not necessarily be considered human trafficking. To understand human trafficking in the present day, it is essential to think of it in relations to the economy it exists within. As antislavery activist Kevin Bales put it, "No one enslaves another simply out of meanness" (13); he describes "the chance of a profit and a person weak enough and vulnerable enough to enslave" (6) as factors that tend to be present when slavery arises, and both factors can be understood as resulting from economic incentives. For someone whose business relies on other people's labor, one way to increase profits is to reduce labor costs, sometimes by reducing the amount paid to workers; there is a limit to how low someone can legally pay employees and an even lower one for how much someone might be willing to work with, but someone seeking to spend even less money on their workers might instead find it less expensive to spend what is necessary to force someone to work. Forcing someone to be in conditions barely good enough to remain alive and work costs less than the payment they would willingly take to do that same work, as well as contributes to the "sleep deprivation, hunger, and isolation" used by traffickers to exert control over victims

(Bales 14). While it is relatively straightforward to understand the relationship between economic circumstances and Bales' "chance of a profit" requirement, it is also important to understand a potential victim's vulnerability in an economic context. Traffickers often target people already facing financial difficulties as potential victims, presenting them with 'opportunities' which promise to pay enough to ease those difficulties; said promises serve the purpose of manipulating someone into a position they cannot escape from once they have realized the trafficker does not intend to stand by their promises. Not only is this vulnerability a key factor to how people become enslaved, it also continues to be an issue for the ones who are eventually rescued, who need support including but not limited to housing and healthcare. If victims are even entitled to support, such as child victims of sex trafficking are, they might not receive it for months and their ability to receive it might be conditional on factors such as cooperation with law enforcement (Bales 100-102).

In order to curtail the harm done by human trafficking, it is essential to unconditionally offer people the support they need with regards to food, housing, healthcare, and other resources needed to live. This could be done on the basis of need, with a strong emphasis on rescued victims who need rehabilitation but also being offered to people in vulnerable positions, who are often targeted by traffickers as potential victims. While Bales does mention the need for better support for rescued victims, offering support as unconditionally as possible to anyone who might need it would be beneficial to victims who struggle to get support with current requirements, as well as it would help people who might otherwise be pressured to take the sort of risky 'opportunities' traffickers take advantage of to bring people into slavery. Compared to the solutions proposed by Bales, this one would be relevant specifically for preventing people from becoming enslaved and providing necessary support for people who have escaped from slavery.

For it to be most effective, this solution would ideally be implemented through government action, with well-funded social programs providing for people's needs unconditionally. While a possible challenge to implementing this solution would be a lack of government resources, the more immediate challenge is its unwillingness to utilize resources it already has and its acceptance of people living in poor conditions. While the topic of prison reform is not entirely within the scope of this conversation, it has been compared to historical slavery (Browne, Gilmore, Smith) and can be useful for analyzing government response to the sort of vulnerable people that traffickers target for enslavement. The U.S.' prison population includes a disproportionate amount of people who suffer from poverty, addiction, or mental illness (Gilmore), as well as those who were recently unemployed (Smith). These are situations in which the government did not provide people with support they needed and could not afford, but it did then spend the resources to incarcerate them. While the government does sometimes offer aid to people who need it, requiring someone to fulfill specific conditions inevitably means that some who need it will not receive it, and those who do receive it will have to wait until their need is recognized by the government. While there are many parts of the government which could act to implement is, the most important one would be the Department of Health and Human Services, or HHS. Its purpose already is to "enhance the health and well-being of all Americans", which it does by providing the sort of social services that have been mentioned (About HHS). But although social services do exist in the United States, they are much more limited in availability than in other countries that have similar or lesser resources. An article analyzing the history of its social programs in comparison to Canada's states that "while the United States has developed substantive welfare state programs, none can be described as genuinely universal"(Béland), meaning that they are available to anyone living in the country

and don't require applying on the basis of low income. It uses healthcare as an example of a social service which in the U.S. public options, Medicare and Medicaid, require beneficiaries to fulfill a requirement of low income and old age respectively, with the latter including only partial coverage and still leaving beneficiaries with "significant out-of-pocket expenses" (Béland).

Although it might seem reasonable to place restrictions on services that are provided free of charge, the current limitations for their access in the U.S. are such that many people who need them cannot receive them or must wait to receive them despite the available supply. While it is difficult to directly influence government action, it is important to push for policies that expand availability of these social services to more people and provide more funding for their implementation. But a lack of government action doesn't mean that nothing can be done by individuals to aid towards this goal. Even without significant government action, people can help implement this solution by supporting local organizations such as food banks, shelters, and mutual aid groups that dedicate themselves to freely providing the sort of help victims need. Circumstances vary between each organization, but generally one could support them via donations or volunteering. Another contingency for the implementation of this proposal is that many victims of trafficking enter slavery outside the United States, and would not be aided by its social programs. For this solution to be implemented globally, there are additional challenges that must be overcome, and different roles for people in the U.S. to take. The proportionally high prevalence of slavery in some parts of the world is closely connected with the imbalances in power and resources different countries have; 'neocolonialism' refers to the power dynamics that have risen since decolonization between former colonial powers and former colonies, in which the former continue to exert influence over the latter via economic means (Koshy). It particularly relates to modern slavery in that corporations from wealthy countries ask for low prices for

resources produced by poorer countries, who due to competing with each other for business have little power to bargain for fairer prices (Athreya), have to decrease labor costs so that the payment received makes up for production costs (Koshy, Manzo). It is important to attain a more egalitarian distribution of resources worldwide, to enable communities everywhere to ensure their own wellbeing. While a U.S. government solution would be to hold U.S. companies more strongly accountable for profiting from slavery, even if indirectly, this would require the government prioritizing people's needs over corporate profits, something which it is not guaranteed to do without pressure. But there are ongoing efforts by people living in former colonies where slavery is now prevalent, people who are closely familiar with its nature in their local communities; it is important for people in the U.S. to support foreign communities' efforts while allowing them to advocate for their own need. In the case of Côte d'Ivoire's cocoa industry, Athreya's article directly criticizes activists from some multinational NGOs for seeking to "implement corporate-friendly programs" instead of suggesting changes that local Ivorian activists call for; generally, "fundamental reform of the commodity trade toward greater wealth distribution for farmers" and "greater accountability of corporate investors for exploitation in commodity chains". Foreign producers would have to be paid fairer prices for their labor, something companies might be unwilling to do if it means a decrease in profits, so the role people in the U.S. must take is to put pressure on companies to pay fairer prices and accept reduced profits. It is also essential to push for changes in government that would lead to a greater willingness to penalize companies who profit from slavery, rather than appeasing companies with measures such as tax breaks; measures meant to be "positive for American businesses" (Bales 159) might seem attractive since they require less change in U.S. power structures, but if the ongoing empowerment of companies and prioritization of profit is maintained, these

measures will only lead to the decreases in forced labor needed for companies to maintain or increase profit.

Simply put, slavery is reinforced by unjust power structures within our society. It is one of the crimes that many in the United States consider to be unacceptable, but in many ways it is an extension of abuses which are often legal and by some people considered acceptable. Bales described “the chance of a profit and a person weak enough and vulnerable enough to enslave”(6) as factors that lead to modern slavery. While some methods of profit are illegal on the basis of the harm they cause, such as slavery, many others which rely on exploitation are legal and commonplace; paying low wages for dangerous labor and charging high prices for basic necessities are just a few examples. And while it is seen as wrong for someone to be directly forced to perform labor, it is not seen as abnormal when someone is pressured to take risky low-paying jobs to meet the basic costs of living. Some might consider this too much of a broad perspective if one seeks just to end modern slavery, but I think that one cannot be truly separated from the other. Attempts to combat modern slavery that only address the illegal portion of it are insufficient because the mechanism through which people are enslaved relies on injustices which are treated as normal and acceptable. The goal of this proposal is to address one of the injustices that traffickers take advantage of to enslave people, one which continues to harm survivors who have regained their freedom. People should not have to put themselves in vulnerable situations because they need the money to survive; if food, housing, healthcare, and other resources needed to live are treated as a basic right everyone is entitled to, survivors will be better able to receive support without having to fulfill specific requirements or wait a long amount of time to be officially recognized as victims, and traffickers’ opportunities to bring people into exploitation will be limited, preventing many people from ever becoming victims of

slavery. In the case of global slavery, it is the formal colonialism of centuries past which is now often considered unacceptable, and it is its legacy of economic neocolonialism which continues to drive slavery modern slavery and is seen as just 'the way things are' by some. This additional factor is what makes it important for activists in the United States to not just collaborate with local activists who seek to end forced labor, but to prioritize their own opinions and desires when it comes to their situations, and to amplify them in a global discussion where they might otherwise be ignored by those who benefit from their exploitation. Overall, it is important to contextualize the persisting existence of slavery with the societies and economies that surround it. For slavery to be ended, it is essential to tear down the unjust power structures that support it.

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