



Modern Slavery in the Global Economy

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INTRODUCTION

A chapter with this title written thirty years ago would most likely have faced widespread skepticism and disbelief. Until then the phenomena involved were themed only by a few specialists and NGOs; today, although the subject has not taken over national public spheres with the same fervor, everyone has heard of “modern slavery.” The expression appeared with its current meaning in the mid-1970s and its use remained rare and more or less restricted to the circle of international humanitarian agencies until the late 1990s, when several successful publications began to systematically apply the term to a vast aggregation of overlapping types of phenomena of abuse and exploitation spread throughout the world—namely human trafficking, forced labor, debt bondage, sex and child trafficking, worst forms of child labor and state-enforced labor. A “new abolitionist” cause rapidly emerged around which thousands of public and private organizations sprang up and billions of dollars were mobilized, leading to the spectacularly rapid rise of an anti-slavery industrial complex that

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today has considerable prominence and influential power on the international political and humanitarian agenda. Quite easily, “modern slavery” has become institutionalized as a battle slogan, has taken on a life of its own and it is unreasonable to think that it will be out of the spotlight any time soon.

Decisive for its success was the entry into force in 2000 of the UN *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons*, a concern triggered by certain anxieties of Western States regarding migration resulting from the collapse of the USSR, and which immediately merged with the umbrella term of “modern slavery,” with which it is often confused and not always out of mere carelessness. Another success factor was the publication of a set of dubious estimates of the global number of slaves and their repetition throughout the media. The *Global Slavery Index* (GSI), developed by the mega-NGO *Walk Free Foundation*, estimated in 2013 the existence of 29.8 million slaves; in 2014 the number was 35.8 million; in 2016, 45.8 million and in 2018, 40.3 million. But, despite these quantifications, “modern slavery” is not an unequivocal and perfectly limited phenomenon that exists “out there” in the world and is immediately identified as such by everyone. It is not just that this two-word label applies to criminal practices that usually occur in the shadows or remote regions, and obviously it is not a collective worldwide hallucination either. There are indeed millions of human beings subsumed in the notion but there are also intense classification struggles over their representation. The emerging and rapidly evolving field is therefore both academic and political and involves a complex mix of theoretical and empirical research, discussions about subtleties of international and national laws, old and new NGOs competing for funding, grassroots activism, journalistic reporting and the unstable attention economy of social media. In this sense, despite the media dominance of the neo-abolitionist framework that in a way produced such an “object,” it is my understanding in this chapter that the term “modern slavery” names less a discrete set of phenomena than *a controversy around the legitimate modes of perception and representation* of a plethora of quite distinct but really existing and increasing practices of human bondage and exploitation in the capitalist world today. Using “slavery” as a strong catch-all word for all these phenomena sounds both a half-truth and a truth-and-a-half; it is as if it simultaneously explains too much and too little, precisely because the term seems to dispense explanation. But, on the other hand, it is not only a problem of representation but also of today’s confusing and dynamic objective reality.

An overview in a single chapter of this theoretically vast and politically rough field is a completely impossible task and there are already hundreds of publications that offer the reader very comprehensive and in-depth introductions. Considering the scope and purpose of this volume, it is appropriate above all to clarify and make more explicit the most relevant tensions at stake in the controversies of “modern slavery.” The first section seeks to present the main conceptual steps taken from the abolition of chattel slavery

to the umbrella term “modern slavery”; the second section presents an imminent critique of the ongoing classification struggles around “modern slavery”; the third and final section considers the so-called “root causes” and their frameworks.

THE CONCEPT OF SLAVERY: FROM THE ABOLITION OF CHATTEL SLAVERY TO THE UMBRELLA TERM “MODERN SLAVERY”

Concepts such as “slavery” are grounded in historical experience, mediate our perception of the world and cannot be reduced to mere verbal definitions; they are unstable and tension-filled social processes, inseparable from the life of a given social formation and sometimes full of emotional content, and even those with more universal pretensions cannot fail to have a particular history, gaining a status of abstract generality in specific social circumstances and to the detriment of other concepts. The particular experiences of the Atlantic world’s colonial slave system and the subsequent abolitionist movement so marked the collective consciousness of modern Western society that they ended up constituting fundamental moments in the modern concept of slavery itself. On the one hand, transatlantic slavery became the *prototype* of slavery, not only affecting our retrospective look at the servitude relations of pre-modern Western societies themselves, highlighting in particular the undeniably existing similarities, but also becoming the more or less explicit yardstick of comparison with many other institutions of human bondage in non-Western societies. On the other hand, it was in the course of the world-historical process of modernity that slavery emerged as “slavery-in-general,” a *general abstraction* (as nebulous as “king”) applied perhaps with too few reservations to diverse relations of personal dependence in different societies and thought of as a single universal institution with multiple forms (like “marriage”), but which, in the meantime, comparative historical research always ends up highlighting the New World slave system as something quite distinct (in terms of transcontinental scale, colonial setting, degrees of institutionalization, “economic” purpose and “racial” and gender bias). Transatlantic slavery was thus left in a paradoxical position: the most perfect and popular *example* of slavery (and, in Western culture, even of human bondage in general) which, at the same time, researches increasingly present as the *exception* in the history of a global meta-institution, a tension internal to the modern concept of slavery which even today proves very difficult to overcome.

Significantly, neo-abolitionism began precisely by calling on the Western public to abandon its mental image of slavery, advocating the need to elaborate a new, universal definition that encompasses “all forms of slavery.” Some believe that this is an epistemologically extremely complex and always unsatisfactory step; others that it is even inherently aporetic, since it is only possible to identify and compare the “slaves” in the most diverse historical societies if

we already have some concept of slavery. The search for a transhistorical definition tends to ignore this risk of an optical illusion or projection and to focus on the supposedly self-evident bundle of common attributes that converge in “slavery-in-general.”

A slave cannot exist alone; it thus seems safe to assert that considered abstractly slavery cannot but be a *relationship* between at least two individuals: the slave and the master. This is a logical inference from which the problem of identifying the remaining constituent elements of the dyad has usually been posed. Various concepts in themselves quite complex are evoked in this task, with each author presenting different sets: property, domination, exploitation, exclusion, violence, kinlessness, otherness (outsider, “racial” or ethnic other, etc.), dishonor, degradation, objectification of human beings, etc. Understanding concepts as a list of tick-boxes (slavery = a + b + c), the classification of phenomena tends to give rise to two questions: For “something” to be slavery must it necessarily exhibit all the attributes or only most or a “significant” part of them? Are all attributes of equal relevance, the “essence” of slavery being the respective set, or are some “more essential” than others? With the recent controversies over “modern slavery” and its criminal character, these questions seem increasingly crossed by another: while it is true that the relationship between at least two individuals is a *necessary* condition of slavery, is this a *sufficient* condition? While some of the attributes referred to above are inherently social (placing the slave in a certain position vis-à-vis society, in what Franz Steiner called a status of “total social range”¹), others are not, allowing conceptualizations reduced to a strictly interpersonal level. The interpersonal level is also always already social, but this cannot be represented in the legal sphere, whose specific concern is personal culpability, something essential after the illegalization of chattel slavery. At stake in these differences are fundamental problems that have long marked modern thinking about slavery.

First of all, it seems relatively clear that in the modern understanding of slavery, property and domination have stood out as the “most essential” concepts around which other attributes gravitate more or less close to this core. On the other hand, it seems also that in recent history they have not always had equivalent relevance, with property dominating the mode of representation most of the time. Rather than considering property as a bundle of features, it is important to bear in mind that although it appears to Western eyes to be only a private relationship between a subject and an object, it is actually a social relation of recognition between subjects mediated by objects, something that stands out when we speak of property as a *right* over something. The slave *qua* slave is an object of property, not a subject of property; hence he/she cannot recognize rights. Thus, if we observe slavery only in terms of property, it is not possible for it to be considered as only an interpersonal relationship, other actors being necessary and some form of legal admission of the relation (by a community, a “state”, etc.). From this point of view, the very term “chattel slavery” is a logical pleonasm, slavery is essentially a social status and has no genuine existence without some legal recognition

of ownership of human beings. This argument does not seem to consider the possibility of significant differences between actual social status and formalized legal permission, but we should not underestimate the historical force of its reasoning. After all, it was on this basis that the classical abolitionist project developed, also giving political expression to the historically new and specifically modern social beliefs that a human being cannot be property and that one of the conditions of his individual freedom is precisely to be the owner of himself (a condition that for a long-time excluded women and non-whites in general). Within this framework, the concept of slavery inevitably had to be fixed in a general legal abstraction on the inadmissibility of the ownership of human beings, simple enough to guarantee minimum legal certainty and the feasibility of the whole project on an international scale (although not all societies conceived property in Western terms). A historically important outcome of this process was the definition of slavery in the 1926 *Slavery Convention* as “the status or condition of a person over whom is exercised any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership” (Article 1). This legal definition was the product of a highly politicized conflict involving the various imperial powers struggling for colonial territories and their interest in keeping several forms of forced labor mobilized there outside the scope and concerns of the *Convention*.

Meanwhile, in 1956 came the *Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery*. In its draft form the *Convention* was called *On Slavery and Servitude*, but the final version replaced the last term with the expression “practices similar to slavery” referring to four types: debt bondage, serfdom, servile marriage and child exploitation. This option reflected the growing hegemony of the Western slavery/freedom dichotomy and the vocabulary and conceptual impoverishment associated with it, ending up intensifying already existing problems, full of legal and political consequences, about how to classify various other existing forms of human bondage, both “old” and “new” and especially outside the Western world. These ambiguities facilitated a more expansive interpretation of the legal definition of slavery in the second half of the twentieth century and the subsequent emergence and progressive consolidation of the notion of “modern slavery.”

For minimal credibility and legitimization, neo-abolitionism needed a new definition of slavery, whose starting point had to be the possibility of de facto individual enslavement regardless of the social admission of *de jure* chattel slavery. As a result, the recognized legal ownership of a human being lost conceptual relevance and the criterion of domination, which of course had never ceased to be presupposed and disputed (think of the liberal discussion force *vs* consent), ended up being more and more explicitly put as the “most essential.” The notion of property is not completely unequivocal, but it has long allowed a relatively stable representation of slavery as essentially a *reduced or entirely separate social status*, more or less institutionalized and “easy” to identify historically, within which slaves were excluded from all “rights” and

protections but could have *variable individual experiences* depending above all on the personal actions of their master (which makes empirical generalizations very difficult). Differently, the notion of domination seems to imply unlimited shades of gray and is commonly represented in the modern West as a continuum or spectrum in which slavery tends to appear as a kind of *extreme or special experience*. Thus represented, one might say that the main question has been: “What specific form of domination constitutes a relationship of slavery?”

Decades before the current controversies, Orlando Patterson attempted to provide an answer through a comparison of more than sixty pre-1900 “social systems” where “slavery” was an institutionalized social status: “the permanent, violent domination of natively alienated and generally dishonored persons.” Here the criterion of property is intentionally avoided and highlighted not only the personal, violent and permanent nature of the domination but also (and apparently with equal relevance) the specific social attributes of the individual victim (an uprooted outsider or a fallen insider that Patterson summed up in the concept of “social death”). Thus, the personal subjugation of the slave to the master seems to be a necessary but not sufficient condition of slavery, since the slave must also stand in a particular position in relation to society as a whole; only the set of all these characteristics constitutes genuine slavery, and any phenomena possessing only some of them always fall short. But Patterson’s approach is also somewhat ambiguous about the mediation between the social and the interpersonal and the exact role of violence, opening the door to “less sociological” interpretations: considering the facets of the power relation of slavery, Patterson states that “[t]he first is *social* and involves the use or threat of violence in the *control of one person by another*”; while slavery is presented as “*social death*” it is also considered “*primarily* a relation of *personal* domination.” This leads to a doubt: is slavery “a liminal state of social death” or the “permanent and violent domination” of one individual over another who is “socially dead”?²

Personal domination and control will become central for neo-abolitionism. Here the criterion of legal ownership is eliminated to account for the criminal character of slavery, but, significantly, the need for any social attributes of the enslaved is also erased for good; specificity is thus fundamentally in terms of the *relation of domination between two abstract individuals* (following legal rationality). Thus, similarly to other trends that also emerged in historiography, neo-abolitionism conceptualizes slavery not as a “social institution” but more abstractly as a “practice.” In Kevin Bales’ view and that of neo-abolitionism generally, “[t]he key characteristics of slavery are not about ownership but about how people are controlled”³; other attributes are also addressed but the most essential is the “control of one person (the slave) by another (the slaveholder or slaveholders),”⁴ something that is considered the common “matter” of all its “forms” and which occurs regardless of the existence of legal norms admitting such a relationship or any social particularities of its victim. “Defining slavery in all its forms” means defining its “matter”; thus, despite the frequent use of the term “form,” the “essence” is understood only

as the minimal abstract matter shared by all relations seen as “slavery” and both as not only analytically distinct but also separate from the form, which is actually treated as completely *inessential* (a “packaging” according to Bales). The problem is that at the phenomenological level there is no matter without a form; it is in fact the relation between matter and form that makes a “thing” what it really is, which is why in the real world both are *equally essential* (something neo-abolitionists realize when they try to practically “eradicate” a determinate “form of slavery”). We can mentally distinguish control from its form, but in actual reality control always has a particular form. Thus, since human beings can be controlled in various ways, one might ask: is there a form of control that always specifies “slavery” regardless of everything else? Usually, one tends to think in violent and physical forms of control; on the other hand, it is also known that historically this has not always proved to be a necessary or permanent condition for the control of slaves. Ambitioning trans-historical definitions, neo-abolitionists tend revealingly to oscillate between three different but partially overlapping attributes: the fact that the enslaved “are” controlled, the “way” they are controlled (alternating between the use of physical violence and its mere possibility) and the degree of control (“total,” “complete,” “overarching” are common predicates).

These and other ambiguities are inherent in a definition of slavery that is simply too abstract and naturally admits several “forms” or “manifestations”; if retro-applied in history it would significantly increase the number of “slaves.” But this is less the result of an epistemologically dubious process of abstraction than of a political-activist strategy to influence the matrix of public perception of personal domination, eventually muddying both popular taxonomies and the somewhat more formalized classification systems of the social and legal sciences. People in general tend to see slavery as a species of the genus human servitude or bondage, Marxists as a sub-class of “unfree labor” and the ILO as a sub-category of “forced labor.” Neo-abolitionists tend to pull “slavery” ever higher up the taxonomic hierarchies; it must continue to elicit the visceral and chilling reactions of a species (like “serpent”) but also have the degree of generality of a genus (like “animal”). But the fact that estimates of “modern slavery” rely on established classification systems ultimately gives rise to logical inconsistencies. Since 2013, GSI reports have included “slavery” and “slavery-like practices” as a sub-type of “modern slavery” and it is already common to refer to it as an “umbrella term” (as in GSI 2018). Meanwhile, the ILO, which for decades classified slavery as “a form of forced labor,” in its 2017 report⁵ adopted the nomenclature of its neo-abolitionist new partner (*Walk Free Foundation*), presenting “modern slavery” as an “umbrella term” and the genus of the species “forced labor” which in turn has a sub-type of “work imposed in the context of slavery”; slavery is thus both above and below the category “forced labor.” Surprisingly, “slavery” and “practices similar to slavery” “are not included explicitly in the estimates.”⁶ Thus, although the neo-abolitionist project has gained international visibility with uninterrupted declarations that

“modern slavery is real slavery,” these inconsistencies, its questionable statistics and the systematic use of the expression as a portmanteau have made it completely evident that it is “something” else.

CLASSIFICATION STRUGGLES AND THE THRESHOLD OF SLAVERY

Fierce classification struggles soon arose. Two critical approaches can be highlighted, very close to tendencies already present in the anti-slavery debates throughout the twentieth century: “strict equivalence” and “sufficient similarity.”⁷ Against neo-abolitionism’s transhistorical definition of slavery, a severe, fundamentally relativist and anti-essentialist critique was raised, based not on an alternative concept of slavery but rather on the transatlantic prototype; in this field we can highlight Julia O’Connell Davidson. Her critique, somewhat aporetic in this respect, is more or less as follows: it is not possible to universally define slavery because the result is always a political construct and a moral judgment, but it is absolutely certain that transatlantic slavery was slavery; since “none of the phenomena today described as such [‘modern slavery’] are the equivalent of transatlantic slavery”⁸ then none of them can be called “slavery” either. It is not clear what we are to understand by “equivalent” (functional? experience?) but the whole procedure seems to imply that the only genuine slavery was the exceptional transatlantic system of *de jure* chattel slavery and that there never really was slavery anywhere else or any time. Against the trivialization of the term “slavery” by neo-abolitionism an all-or-nothing game is played here that risks making it almost a forbidden word outside the transatlantic context.

A more moderate critique follows an epistemological trend derived from the Wittgensteinian concept of “family resemblances” (which inspired prototype theory). Patterson’s revision of his definition of slavery in his first reaction to the “modern slavery” controversy fits here: slavery is “the violent, corporeal possession of socially isolated and parasitically degraded persons.” Minimizing the differences with the previous formulation, Patterson also states that “there is no reason to demarcate an ‘old’ from a ‘new’ form of slavery.” Quite significantly, whereas his earlier understanding saw slavery as a class of objects with a restricted bundle of attributes necessarily in common, Patterson now admits a polythetic understanding, that is, a class where objects “have many but not all properties in common” and “more or less belong to such a class.” Although Patterson considers neo-abolitionist definitions and claims problematic, he also argues that “there are relations of domination today that have enough of these properties to justify being designated slavery.” Here, as before, it seems that the different properties of slavery continue to be seen as equally essential but now their quantification for class membership is admitted. A question arises: how many properties are “enough”? Patterson argues that “[p]olythetic definitions [...] have their limits” and that “other forms of forced labour and servitude in the world today may share some slave-like properties [...] but

they are not slavery, which is quite distinctive in its perfidy and its social, economic, cultural and psychological attributes.”⁹ But if it is “quite distinctive” it is not clear why a polythetic definition is needed whose “limits” seem to be subjectively determined, and which is exactly what allows for the expansive approach of neo-abolitionism. Meanwhile, Patterson’s replacement of “domination” with “corporeal possession” reflects a recent collective conceptual development.

Modern attempts to conceptualize slavery-in-general following the worldwide illegalization of chattel slavery have long since seemed to have an implicit central challenge: finding *the abstract point where the “domination” and “property” of a human being meet* (something already present in the Roman concept of *dominium*). Anticipating a topic of the current controversy, H. J. Nieboer argued in 1900 that slavery requires the “peculiar kind of compulsion, that is expressed by the word ‘possession’ or ‘property,’” arguing thereafter “to prefer the term ‘property’ that, better than the other term, conveys the notion, not only of a virtual subjection, but of a subjection considered legal in those communities where it exists.”¹⁰ Implicitly Nieboer’s formulation placed possession as a possible criterion of slavery (carefully qualified as virtual) on a strictly phenomenological and interpersonal level and in an extralegal context. In 2012, to clarify the legal definition of slavery in international law and to give some consistency to its use by neo-abolitionism, a research network of legal and social science scholars produced the *Bellagio-Harvard Guidelines on the Legal Parameters of Slavery* drawing precisely on this distinction between possession and property.¹¹ The *Guidelines* developed the consensual basis of neo-abolitionism with the interpretation that the 1926 legal definition of slavery, with the concepts of “status” (social) and “condition” (individual), perfectly accommodates both the old legal form and the current criminal form of slavery, and that the fundamental criterion is thus not the legal recognition of property but rather the factual exercise over an individual of the “powers attaching to the right of ownership,” with “possession” being conceivable without a legal system and the fundamental presupposed “power” of all the others (“use, management, profit, transfer or disposal”). In this sense, according to the *Guidelines*, “possession is foundational to slavery” and “[w]hile the exact form of possession might vary, in essence it supposes control over a person by another such as a person might control a thing. Such control may be physical, but physical constraints will not always be necessary to the maintenance of effective control over a person”; thus, slavery supposes the “control of a person tantamount to possession” (*Guideline 3–5*), possession being understood here *as a fact, not as a right*. The argument combines property with domination and seems both to clarify the terms of the 1926 definition and to reinforce the general neo-abolitionist transhistorical understanding that slavery is the existential condition of one individual controlled by another.

Meanwhile, it is highly significant that the *Guidelines* assume that slavery implies not a *form* of control but rather a *threshold of its intensity* (“tantamount to possession”); its measure is given by a metaphor (“such as a person might control a thing”), supplemented by a succession of other “examples” to compensate for cognitive uncertainty (*Guideline 4*). The “complete control” of the neo-abolitionists, which applied to humans is always a virtuality, finds its representation in a threshold of control where possession is achieved. But possession is a concept as pertinent as it is complicated, especially when applied to the special “things” that are living human beings. The now common analogy of a kilo of heroin¹² to show the difference between property and possession (and de jure and de facto slavery) may be legally instructive, but it is difficult to see the point of its application to human beings without more careful determinations. The *Guidelines* attempt to circumvent this ambiguity by repeatedly naming the threshold of control with a philosophical term that suggests something much more solid: “substance” (*Guidelines 5, 8–10*). Despite centuries-old disputes, it is consensual in the philosophical tradition that substances have relations but not the other way around, and it is difficult to understand what exactly is meant by the “substance of a relation” between two persons. This seems like an option with more rhetorical than analytical value. It is also not helpful that the *Guidelines* present what is in fact *another definition* of slavery: “control over a person in such a way as to significantly deprive that person of his or her individual liberty” (*Guidelines 2 and 3*). “Significantly” allows for subjective interpretations and it is symptomatic that the different scholars subscribing to the *Guidelines* end up diverging in their understanding of the threshold of control, with the consequence of guesstimates of modern slaves varying in the tens of millions. With these ambiguities around the relevance of the “form” of control and the differences between “effective control,” “control tantamount to possession” and “significant loss of liberty,” the *Guidelines* stimulate new uncertainties.

Despite the ambiguities (or because of them), the *Guidelines* acknowledge that slavery requires a necessarily empirical, a posteriori verification. But this is a requirement that very few neo-abolitionists actually comply with. Indeed, their success has always depended on a diametrically opposite orientation, and it does not seem to have changed one bit with the precisions attempted by the *Guidelines* (which is often evoked for legitimation purposes). Thus, for example, in flagrant contradiction to the spirit and content of the document, Kevin Bales and Monti N. Datta state that “[t]hese guidelines conceptualize slavery as an umbrella term,”¹³ seeking to reinforce once again their strategy of classifying certain relationships a priori as “forms of slavery.”

Also inspired by the *Guidelines* but strongly against the use of “modern slavery” as an umbrella term, Patterson and Zhuo have proposed the revitalization of “servitude” as the most generic term of the field, a term which has also long been used by other researchers to refer to the various non-Western hierarchies of personal dependency.¹⁴ Disagreeing with the terminology but assuming the estimates of the 2017 ILO report, the authors argue that more

than 40 million persons worldwide are presently in *servitude* but also that certain extreme forms “may be sufficiently slave-like to justify being called modern slavery”: “that condition in which one or more individuals or organizations exercise complete control and possession of a person’s body, labor, capabilities and movement through the overt or threatened use of violence or other forms of coercion.” According to the authors, “what is badly needed now is an approach that [...] attempts to estimate the differences between voluntarily initiated, though exploitative, relationships on the one hand and the cross-over to genuine slavery on the other.”¹⁵ The fact that Patterson and Zhuo present a concept of “modern slavery” but not “slavery” makes it difficult to understand how this new approach articulates with Patterson’s earlier definitions, not least for three reasons: (i) “modern slavery” is justified as a category because some relations “may be sufficiently *slave-like*,” but at the same time it is argued that some “cross-over to *genuine* slavery”; (ii) the criteria associated with “social death” is left out entirely for the first time and (iii) the focus is now on “complete control” and “corporeal possession,” following neo-abolitionist concerns with legal–criminal criteria.

In summary, it can be said that property (with its apparently recognizable silhouette) and domination (represented as a continuum of intensity) have been synthesized in the concept of possession, implying a devaluation of the understanding of “slavery” as a status of “total social range” and easily leading to an interpersonal abstraction based on the threshold of control of one individual by another (or others), *but each scholar seems to have a distinct understanding of what this means, of its exact measure, of the necessity of physical violence and of the possibilities or not of assuming a priori its presence in certain known forms of contemporary servitude.* In this sense, the expression “threshold of slavery,” which increasingly appears throughout the field, seems just a thoughtless compromise on which everyone agrees to disagree, being very difficult to reconcile with a general and almost obsessive impulse to urgently and a priori identify and count modern slaves.

Meanwhile, even if we follow the level of abstraction that characterizes the debate (in terms of an abstract dyad of slavery-in-general), all these approaches seem to demonstrate a longstanding difficulty in fully assuming slavery’s *relational character*. The relation of slavery does not exist without the relation of mastery, or rather they are the same relation observed from different points of view: the master–slave relationship. We must therefore consider what it necessarily implies and how it presents itself for each of the poles, but this is not exactly how modern thought tends to approach the problem. Theoretical analysis is haunted by the questions “What is slavery?” and “What is a slave?” Conversely, “What is mastery?” or “What is a master?” are rather rare explicit questions and hardly seem to disturb modern thought. At the same time, slavery tends to be represented as just the product of the objectifying practice of the master—the master is form and cause and the slave matter and effect (and do not the terms “enslaved” and “slaving” accentuate this understanding?); slavery is thus defined unilaterally by the abilities of the master.

The resulting paradox is that if one reads carefully some of the best-known definitions of “slavery” they seem much more like definitions of “mastery.”

This perspective is reinforced if we think of slavery as essentially a crime. The neo-abolitionist understanding is fundamentally guided by legal concerns and so the focus is on the criminal action of the slaveholder on the victim of enslavement. Without going beyond this framework, definitions of slavery cannot but continue to assume the master’s point of view, to emphasize his will and the purpose of his criminal practice and to represent the slave as a *liminal and metaphorical figure of objectification*; the so-called “substance” of slavery turns out to be just the power of the master. At the same time, neo-abolitionists make the master disappear, forget that no one is really a slave by themselves and present slavery as a “state of being” (comparing it to being “ill, lost, happy, recovering” which are *strictly individual conditions*).¹⁶ Hence, such definitions tend to assume the master’s point of view while removing him/her from the equation, thus giving the appearance of purely objective definitions.

Even assuming that complete control and the reduction of an individual to a mere possession are always the ultimate horizons of the master’s domination, we must acknowledge that this is only one side of the abstract dyad. Domination is a form of *interaction*, only a side of the domination–submission relationship, which in slavery means a violent dialectic of *command* and *forced obedience* (something that pre-modern thought knew all too well and that slave codes have always tried to guarantee). But the full implications of this dialectic tend to get lost amidst an ongoing struggle between a perspective that overemphasizes the reification of the slave and another that only sees the slave’s agency in resistance, insurrection, escape or even suicide. The former tends to reproduce the modern master’s representation of the ideal slave as an automaton, *as if* the slave were literally just a “thing” or his/her will could really be “appropriated,” “transferred” or an “extension” of the master’s will¹⁷; the latter seems to ignore the unfortunate truth that *submission is also an action* and that *obedient agents remain agents*, albeit through a paradoxical form of activity that appears to include passivity in itself (perhaps one of the reasons why the figure of the slave continues to intrigue Western metaphysics). The formulation “control tantamount to possession” aligns with the first perspective, but most neo-abolitionists make such a loose interpretation of it that slavery becomes the genus of the most disparate species of personal “unfreedoms.” Others try to prevent this expansion by emphasizing “corporeal possession.” But is this not also a logical pleonasm? What kind of possession of human beings would be if it were not “corporeal”? And will not slavery thus become indistinguishable from some conditions of detention and certain intimate forms of violence (abduction, kidnapping, prisoners of war, rape, etc.)? Historically, these phenomena are closely associated with enslavement (and may even be worse!) but such an emphatic concept of possession seems to imply the complete annulment of their conceptual differences with slavery. This ambiguity also exists in the *Guidelines*: it is not entirely clear

whether the “control of a person tantamount to possession” is considered a *precondition of slavery or in itself already slavery*.

Therefore, even at the level of the abstract dyad, unless we think that someone’s immobilized captive is immediately a slave, it seems that we cannot dispense with obedience. It is precisely obedience that allows the notion of a “maintenance of effective control over a person” (*Guidelines*) without the effective use of violence and “physical constraints,” *a threshold of complete control without implying a particular form of control*. And unless we think that all slaveries are mere variants of the Robinson Crusoe/Friday model, we also need to acknowledge that, although the slave is forced to obey the master, their dyad does not exist in a vacuum, and so the forces or powers at play are never only those of the master as an individual but also those of a certain *social context*, forces that he/she himself/herself did not create or control but that undeniably favor him/her, even when they do not legally support him/her.

These very general considerations are not intended to specify “slavery” (“modern” or otherwise) but just to remind us that *whatever the threshold of slavery, it will always be mediated by the slave’s obedience and a particular social whole*. A concept of slavery primarily concerned with *post factum* determination of criminal responsibility will tend to ignore or downplay these mediations and, conversely, to emphasize the slaveholder’s strategic action as *the main cause of both entry and permanence* of the “enslaved” in bondage; but for a significant part of the phenomena represented as “modern slavery” this can be a very problematic framework. At the heart of the controversy over the threshold of slavery is, first, the difficulty in conceptually dealing with the widely documented and recognized fact that *the most frequent entry point* into the relationships labeled “modern slavery” is a convergence between a desperate job search or an opportunity for a slightly better life and a more or less fictitious or fraudulent offer of any kind, through a process in which violence is very rarely present. Secondly, there is the acknowledged fact that, on many occasions, it is far from obvious that *the permanence of the “enslaved”* in bondage and its “effective control” depends fundamentally on the exercise of violence or even on its threat. There are powerful impersonal forces at play here, the same social forces that condemn a growing part of humanity to misery and destitution and confront them with impossible choices. For this reason, perhaps it was too hasty to abandon the notion of “social death.”

FRAMEWORKS AND ROOT CAUSES: HOW WIDE AND HOW DEEP?

“Modern slavery,” “human trafficking,” “modern servitude,” “forced labor”: the terminology is not neutral and reflects different agendas, but the long and intense controversies surrounding the umbrella term clearly contrast with the small space dedicated to explanations of phenomena and even a certain formal consensus regarding what in the field is often called “root causes.” Here we are at the level of theory, not classifications, and whatever the generic

term, the common central challenge seems to be in explaining the current growth of the number of individuals living and working daily under more or less violent forms of personal domination through their mediation with the objective structures of the contemporary global economy. It is impossible to adequately present the complexity of the different positions here, but we can sketch some contrasts.

By root cause we can understand the underlying, fundamental, deep and not directly visible cause of a certain phenomenon or event; its determination is carried out through careful abstraction and requires a theoretically oriented reflection that considers the objectivity of the global social process and goes beyond appearances and immediate factuality which, however, cannot fail to be the starting point of reflection. Usually, these causes are distinguished from proximate causes, which are the more immediate, particular and contingent conditions or decisions that trigger the phenomenon or event. This distinction arises across the field but there are different understandings of what it means and what its content is. Poverty and globalization are unanimously considered the main root causes of “modern slavery”; to these are often added others such as demographic growth, government corruption, migratory movements, labor market deregulation, racial, caste and gender discrimination, etc. Some authors classify as proximate all the previous factors that involve national state policies of any scope, corruption or poor law enforcement¹⁸; others seem to regard as proximate causes exclusively the immediate criminal activities of “slaveholders.” In many neo-abolitionist authors, rhetoric and the lack of clarity can lead to an immediate identification between underlying and proximate causes, when, for example, the human greed of “traffickers” is presented as a root cause; this confusion is accentuated when the representation of slavery as a millenary practice of malefic slaveholders is accompanied by mathematical models that supposedly predict the crime of “modern slavery,” leading to parallel and contradictory accusations of both subjectivism and objectivism.

What does it mean to say that poverty is a root cause of “modern slavery”? The idea seems to be that poverty somehow “pushes” free individuals into “modern slavery.” In itself this is not new; after all, historiography has long shown that poverty is one of the main reasons for self-enslavement or the “selling” of children in pre-modern societies. But is this poverty the same poverty we have today? And is the wealth of pre-modern societies the same wealth that we have in global contemporary society? Poverty and wealth are indeterminate abstractions; nothing is specified with these terms without considering a particular social form. And is not there also a close historical relationship between what is generically called “globalization” and the peculiar modern forms of poverty and wealth? And do not these root causes have also historical roots?

It seems relatively consensual that the global economy is a capitalist economy, that capitalist economy is a money economy and that capitalism is based on a socially generalized competitive process of transforming money into more money. Exactly how this purpose is achieved and the social effects

it has are what seem to be the motives of the most heated controversies. Even so, it can hardly be disputed that historically the constitution and development of world capitalism has always entailed the progressive monetization of social relations. Retrospectively and seen in the long run, the general trend was the historical metamorphosis, certainly asynchronous but real, of the most diverse relations of personal dependence and obligation into more abstract relations increasingly mediated by money and the socially objective presence of the market. This supposed “civilizing process” was far from peaceful and always combined indirect coercion and direct organized violence on an international scale, both private and state-led, with the fundamental purpose of expropriating populations from their immediate means of subsistence and pushing them to commodity-producing labor. Many times, this strategy even accompanied the formal abolition of chattel slavery. The “civilizing mission” of twentieth-century Eurocolonialism usually meant: “No one will be your legal owner anymore, but you will work, be it the easy way or the hard way!”; the “easy way” usually involved the monetization of taxes to coerce local populations into wage labor, and in non-existent or still incipient monetary national economies the very “hard way” was the norm. It is not difficult to see that the practical international success of abolitionism, especially when it aimed at something more than the simple juridical ban on chattel slavery, has always been fundamentally dependent on the implementation and expansion of the monetary economy, some form of paid labor and the historically specific capitalist *social nexus between labor and money* that today permeates the world as a whole. At the same time, this process of worldwide imposition of the market economy was accompanied by the territorialization of the national state form. Of the one hundred and ninety-five existing states, more than one hundred were constituted during the twentieth century, implying more than one hundred and thirty thousand kilometers of new borders; this means that more than half of the border perimeters existing today in the world emerged more or less in the last hundred years, demonstrating that the globalization of market freedom has historically been accompanied by an unprecedented deployment of new boundaries and control systems of human mobility. Together, *the transnational economic form of capital and the territorialized political form of the nation-state constitute the fundamental structure of the contemporary world*, and there are no “traditional” relationships or remote villages that have not been touched or affected by this global complex.

It is the systemic character of this planetary social totality that allows the very idea of prediction models of modern slavery. But although modern slavery is declared to be global, the data, results and matrix of interpretation usually follow methodological nationalism, that is, they have countries as the unit of analysis and explanation (countries have slaves, economies, poverty, etc.). But do statistical correlations between national estimates of “modern slaves” with poverty indexes or corruption rankings make the root causes “visible”? And does not methodological nationalism cause serious distortions? For

some time now, “modern slavery” has been called “the underside of globalization,” but by reducing globalization to the degree of national openness to world trade and the like, some authors now try to statistically demonstrate that “modern slavery” prevalence is much lower in those countries that are more globalized.¹⁹ So, if we ask what is the cause of poverty, some neo-abolitionists immediately answer “modern slavery.” Indeed, one of the tendencies is to *represent “modern slavery” as a cause of its own root causes and several other global problems.* Is this dialectical or circular reasoning? Kevin Bales argues that “modern slavery” is “a major cause of depressed economies,” what “best explains differences in human development between countries,” “one of the world’s largest greenhouse gas producers” and “a leading cause of the natural world’s destruction.”²⁰ These arguments seem to herald a metamorphosis of the “modern slavery” framework into a worldview.

Critics of the “modern slavery” framework tend in general to opt for the term “forced labor,” inserting the phenomena in a *critical analysis of neoliberalism* and sometimes showing thoroughly its relations with the deregulation of labor markets, public disinvestment, global commodity chains, immigration laws, etc. Although not shared equally by all, perhaps the key argument here is that “the root causes of forced labor are fundamentally and inherently *political.*”²¹ But is not this another way of immediately re-identifying root causes with proximate causes, this time at the level of governing elites? It is undeniable that political power and decisions partially shape or condition the evolution of events and in some countries forced labor is even state-driven (and as such should be fought on principle), but the idea that the root causes of forced labor that proliferates in the private economy throughout the world are “fundamentally political” seems an attempt to change the very meaning of the concept of root cause. And is there not here also some illusion as to the power of political will and the purpose and capacity of states? Is “modern slavery” fundamentally a consequence of decades of neoliberalism, reversible with new neo-Keynesian reforms, or rather the expression of a deeper problem in the capitalist social form of which neoliberalism was already a symptom?

Over the years Kevin Bales has insisted that the modern demographic explosion is the main root cause or push factor of “modern slavery”; this thesis is rarely adopted by other neo-abolitionists, but, surprisingly, it is also not theoretically refuted by their critics, who overwhelmingly ignore it or simply dismiss it with short comments. Bales uses a Malthusian argument and the principle of supply and demand to cover five thousand years of human history and sustain that the number of “modern slaves” is above all determined by the rapid population growth of the twentieth century, especially in the Global South, which combined with poverty have “flooded the market with potentially enslavable people” and caused an unprecedented slave price collapse.²² But what exactly is a “potentially enslavable person”? One thing is certain: he/she is not a *de facto* slave yet. So, which “market” is it that is “flooded”? A labor market saturated by the supply of “free” and cheap self-owners. But this means there is also something deeply wrong with the “freedom”

that neo-abolitionism promises. Neo-abolitionists argue frequently that freeing “modern slaves” is a “great investment,” that “freed slaves” are an “asset” that will “pump the economy” and stimulate national markets; but why are not still “free” “potential slaves” doing this? The answer is implicit in other moments of Bales’ argument: “The sheer volume of people in the developing world compared to the number of new industrial jobs means that many of them are [...] ‘redundant.’”²³ So it is not just about population growth but also and simultaneously the size of the industrial labor market. This dual character of the problem is far from being specific to the “developing world”; what has not been noticed is that this is exactly what Karl Marx called “the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation,” the fact that globally the “working population always increases more rapidly than the valorization requirements of capital,” creating an ever-increasing share of a “stagnant” and “consolidated surplus population” that is more abandoned than exploited by capital.²⁴

Unlike the classical abolitionism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which had a whole world-historical horizon of several decades of expansion of the monetary economy and industrial development, enabling the massive increase in “free” wage labor and the corresponding creation of domestic markets, twenty-first century neo-abolitionists face the consequences of the Third Industrial Revolution of microelectronics and increasing automation that for the first time in the history of capitalism start to create far fewer jobs than those they eliminate, all this in a fully monetized global economy where the social nexus labor-money has become naturalized as a mediation between individual human beings’ physical existence and their social recognition. An increasing mass of human beings is thus objectively dismissed from the labor market and at the same time objectively coerced into competing with each other for the “free” sale of their labor power; obviously, this contradiction has terrible barbaric potential.

However, neither the neo-abolitionists nor their critics hypothesize that the phenomena of “modern slavery” are an expression of *a deep and irreversible structural crisis of capitalism*, although their positions express the real contradictions of the situation and their research seems to describe in detail its very effects: *a global crisis of labor, a logic of social superfluity and the violent containment of “redundant” populations.*²⁵ The crisis does not manifest itself with equal intensity and scale everywhere and so we must in no way ignore the real differences, not only in terms of social stratification but also gender, “race,” age, nationality and geographic location; but these are differences within *a global trend of negative development*, giving rise to an unstable *hierarchy of superfluity* that crosses world society from one end to the other and feeds all types of social Darwinism and exclusion ideologies. Thus, instead of continuing to consider “developing” countries as delayed in their modernization or globalization and as places where slavery “still exists,” it might be better to understand them as the most advanced stage of the ongoing crisis of capitalism, a process that in one way or another will inevitably reach the “developed” world as well.

CONCLUSION

The clarification about the truth of contemporary relationships loosely subsumed in the umbrella term “modern slavery” has become hopelessly entangled in a discussion about what slavery has always been, as if this distillation was simultaneously more true and more real than what is transitory and new. Devaluing the *historical and social dimensions of both phenomena and our perception of them*, the discussion intends to reach a minimum content common to all relational forms considered “slavery,” while seeming to ignore that the result can only be a general abstraction, a master key that enters all locks but does not actually open any door. The question rapidly becomes whether a large and diffuse set of phenomena “justifies” or “deserves” a particular name, with all the political, legal and emotional effects that such a name implies (and it is probable that if the umbrella term was “modern servitude” the controversy would not even have started), but beyond a tactical moral discomfort that raises the profile of many of these practices, the naming itself seems to add very little real knowledge about what is happening.

NOTES

1. Franz B. Steiner, “A Comparative Study of the Forms of Slavery” (PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 1949), 74.
2. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 1, 13, 50, 293.
3. Kevin Bales, *New Slavery: A Reference Handbook* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2004), 3.
4. “Slavery in Its Contemporary Manifestations,” in *The Legal Understanding of Slavery: From the Historical to the Contemporary*, ed. Jean Allain (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 370.
5. ILO, Walk Free, and IOM, *Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labor & Forced Marriage* (Geneva: ILO, Walk Free Foundation, IOM, 2017).
6. *Ibid.*, 17.
7. Joel Quirk, “The Anti-Slavery Project: Linking the Historical and Contemporary,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (2006): 569.
8. Julia O’Connell Davidson, *Modern Slavery: The Margins of Freedom* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 207.
9. Orlando Patterson, “Trafficking, Gender & Slavery: Past and Present,” in *The Legal Understanding of Slavery: From the Historical to the Contemporary*, ed. Jean Allain (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 322, 329, 359.
10. H.J. Nieboer, *Slavery as an Industrial System. Ethnological Researches* (Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1900), 4, 31.
11. Jean Allain, ed., *The Legal Understanding of Slavery: From the Historical to the Contemporary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 375–81.
12. Jean Allain and Kevin Bales, “Slavery and Its Definition,” *Global Dialogue* 14, no. 2 (2012): 3.
13. Kevin Bales and Monti Datta, “Slavery as a Social Institution,” in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (2^oed.) (Elsevier, 2015), 43.

14. Orlando Patterson and Xiaolin Zhuo, "Modern Trafficking, Slavery, and Other Forms of Servitude," *Annual Review of Sociology* 44 (2018): 410.
15. *Ibid.*, 410, 411, 430.
16. Jean Allain, "Identifying a Case of Slavery," in *The Antislavery Usable Past*, eds. Kevin Bales and Zoe Trodd (Nottingham: The Rights Lab, 2020), 221.
17. Neo-abolitionists tend to be contradictory in this respect: they often argue simultaneously that the slave's will has been "transferred" and that he/she works "against his/her will."
18. See, for example, Sally Cameron and Edward Newman, *Trafficking in Humans: Social, Cultural and Political Dimensions* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2008).
19. See, for example, Todd Landman and Bernard W. Silverman, "Globalization and Modern Slavery," *Politics and Governance* 7, no. 4 (2019).
20. Kevin Bales, *Ending Slavery: How We Free Today's Slaves* (University of California Press, 2007), 219; Kevin Bales and Benjamin K. Sovacool, "From Forests to Factories: How Modern Slavery Deepens the Crisis of Climate Change," *Energy Research & Social Science* 77 (2021): 8–9.
21. Genevieve LeBaron et al., *Confronting Root Causes: Forced Labour in Global Supply Chains* (Sheffield: openDemocracy and the Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute [SPERI], University of Sheffield, 2018), 62.
22. Kevin Bales, "Contemporary Coercive Labor Practices—Slavery Today," in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery. Volume 4: Ad 1804–Ad 2016*, eds. David Eltis, et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 661.
23. Kevin Bales, *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy* (University of California Press, 2012), 234.
24. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Volume One* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 798.
25. See Bruno Lamas, *When Looms Begin to Weave by Themselves: The Decomposition of Capitalism, Automation and the Problem of "Modern Slavery,"* Joseph C. Miller Memorial Lecture Series (Berlin: EB-Verlag, 2021).

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