The Truth About Modern Slavery

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Introduction

> Just as it was Britain that took an historic stand to ban slavery two centuries ago, so Britain will once again lead the way in defeating modern slavery and preserving the freedoms and values that have defined our country for generations.
>
> Former Home Secretary Theresa May[1]

> The people who get to impose their metaphors on the culture get to define what we consider to be true.
>
> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson[2]

There are more slaves in the world now than ever before. Or at least that's what we're told. A former British prime minister called modern slavery the 'greatest human rights issue of our time', the US president described it as an 'outrage' and the Pope has spoken out about this 'crime against humanity'. Business leaders are signing pledges, joining anti-slavery coalitions and hiring investigators to root it out of their supply chains. Celebrities aren't to be left out of the picture: from Emma Thompson to Princess Eugenie, everyone's trying to fight modern slavery. We are under siege, it seems, from a new and horrific phenomenon against which the great and the good are fighting heroically. We – the public – can participate too, through marches, petitions, donations, shopping habits and apps. But is all this really what it seems? This book will suggest that the answer is no.

Modern slavery isn't what you think it is. It isn't what governments or corporations say it is. And it's certainly not what most of the media portrays it to be. This is a book about what today's modern slavery story is telling us, what's wrong with it and why.

We'll find out what we need to 'unknow' in order to understand it, and why its mistaken identity means we're failing to address the genuine exploitation that lies beneath.

The phrase 'modern slavery' has grown in popularity over the past ten years, though its roots stretch further back, as Chapter 1 will explain. According to the UN's International Organization for Migration (IOM), 'modern slavery' refers to 'situations of exploitation in which a person cannot refuse or leave an exploitative situation due to threats, violence, coercion, deception or abuse of power'.[3] This is useful, but it also shows us something important about the phrase: its enormous breadth. It's an incredibly wide term encapsulating a huge range of circumstances around the world, as we'll see. In law, 'modern slavery' doesn't actually mean anything; it's an umbrella term housing several other types of exploitation, each with their own separate definition and including forced labour, human trafficking, servitude and slavery. These terms each have instances where they apply very clearly because specific criteria are met and the individual experiencing the harm considers themselves to be a victim of it, but they also have instances where they seem to be misapplied, and instances where they should be applied but are not. In terms of misapplication, we'll see this in Chapters 3 and 5 when we learn of people being told they're victims who consider themselves not to be, and instead view themselves as pursuing rational livelihood strategies. In these instances, it's often distinctly unhelpful to 'rescue' them. On cases where such terms ought to be applied but are not, we'll see this in Chapter 4 on big brands which finds that the parameters around what is and is not 'forced labour' are drawn tightly in order to avoid critique of commonplace business practices. In general, it'll become obvious that 'modern slavery' is an overcrowded house, jammed to the roof with different types of experiences and circumstances. For the most part, this isn't something I'll explore; others have already done this work, many of whom are cited in this book, and they have done it far better than

I could. Rather than interrogating the specific meanings of these terms, the terrain we'll be covering is different; we will be exploring the application of modern slavery to the world, understanding it as a 'frame'. According to the influential American cognitive linguist George Lakoff, frames are

> mental structures that shape the way we see the world … You can't see or hear frames. They are part of what cognitive scientists call the 'cognitive unconscious' – structures in our brains that we cannot consciously access, but know by their consequences: the way we reason and what counts as common sense. We also know frames through language. All words are defined relative to conceptual frames. When you hear a word, its frame … is activated in your brain.[4]

In this way, words aren't just words.

They're like a fly landing on a spider's web; they set off a chain reaction of vibrations, impulses, rationales, decisions and actions that determine what happens next. They tell us how we should connect different pieces of information, what is right and wrong and, as a result, what will make sense in terms of solutions. When we learn new information, like facts or case studies, our frames shape how we receive and understand it. You may not have thought of modern slavery in this way, but there are many frames with which you'll be familiar. For example, the idea of the 'nanny state' is a commonly held frame in the UK. We know, seemingly instinctively, what it means: an overbearing and overprotective government, trying to limit and curtail choices that should 'rightly' remain personal. We also know it's a pejorative term, commonly applied to things like taxes on plastic bags or sugary foods and drinks. Or consider the 'bedroom tax'. This was the label applied to a UK government policy introduced in 2013 that changed housing benefit entitlements such that people got less benefit if they lived in a council property that had one or more

spare rooms. The government itself didn't call it the bedroom tax, but rather the 'spare room subsidy'. Their phrase focused on the idea that housing benefits were subsidising extra space, activating a political frame made up of ideas around unfairness and what the state should and shouldn't be, including superfluous generosity and 'scroungers', that is, people perceived to be taking too much from the state. The reframing of the policy as a 'bedroom tax' was genius, refocusing our understanding on ideas around the burden of tax and the necessity of bedrooms, so that rather than removing something unnecessary, the government now seemed to be imposing something unfairly. The same policy, totally different values and opinions activated through the clever deployment of a phrase that triggers a totally different frame. Or we can consider how we think about the economy as a whole. According to the Public Interest Research Centre, the New Economy Organisers Network and their partners, the 'economy as a container' is a frame that's common in the UK when considering the economy. People who hold this frame see it 'as functioning like a national pot, with people putting in (contributing) or taking out (draining)'. Within this frame are lots of ways of thinking about wider socio-economic issues. For example, if you think the economy is a pot with set limits that can be emptied, then 'being a responsible member of society means not taking out more than you put in', which restricts people's willingness to support policies like welfare.[5] In contrast, how would we think about the economy if we saw it as more like a plant; able to grow or retract, able to extend in different directions, and capable of springing new shoots to support new needs?

With regard to modern slavery, the frame operates as a specific conceptualisation of diverse patterns of severe exploitation – as wide-ranging as forced marriage in Chad to farm-working in Italy or housekeeping in England. Once we see the frame, we have to ask what's inside it – what are the constituent parts of that story? What assumptions? What meanings? And what's outside it – what are we leaving out, not seeing, forgetting? And we need to

assess what this might mean about how we're thinking about the topic. Lakoff says frames tell us about what counts as common sense on a particular issue, so what counts as common sense when it comes to modern slavery? And, crucially, to whose benefit? It's vital we get this right because if we don't, we'll be choosing the wrong solutions perpetually. And that's exactly what's happening with modern slavery at the moment.

Before we delve into what's happening now, we need to look to the past. The phrase 'modern slavery' piggybacks on understandings of the historical transatlantic slave trade to draw a connection between the two, so that we sit up and pay attention. It triggers a range of associated meanings in our minds, such as shackles, boats, racial oppression, lack of freedom, beatings, cruelty and so on. Constructing the idea of 'modern slavery' is to tap into all those associations in order to link current circumstances to well-known past ones, and to conjure the associated outrage and sense of potent heroism. This is made evident by direct references to historical slavery in speeches by politicians and others who form part of the new 'modern slavery' movement. Indeed, the UK's former and first independent anti-slavery commissioner, for whom I used to work, made many speeches and presentations peppered with references to William Wilberforce. But how relevant is this allusion to historical slavery? And what might it be achieving? Wilberforce is usually understood as the leader of the abolition of the slave trade and pitched as its hero in history books. It is doubtless that without his work the 1807 and 1833 Acts that abolished the slave trade may never have happened, although as with all heroes his actions were enabled, informed and encouraged by the work of many others. Some of those 'others' were not white Christian reformers but were actual slaves themselves, such as those who participated in the massive slave revolt in the late eighteenth century that spurred Haiti's independence from colonial rule and the emancipation of its slaves.[6] But there is a larger problem with this allusion to the transatlantic slave trade than the lauding of

Wilberforce alone and its erasure of the role of the enslaved in their freedom.

Abolition overturned a *legal trade* in human beings and the right to own someone else *by law.** It did not abolish 'situations of exploitation in which a person cannot refuse or leave an exploitative situation due to threats, violence, coercion, deception or abuse of power' which is modern slavery, according to the IOM. In fact, it did precisely the opposite: it actually generated this kind of circumstance. Abolition left colonial powers with a problem: how to fill their need for a cheap workforce. This was solved by various mechanisms of exploitation, many of which would fit neatly into the 'modern slavery' idea used today. The British introduced a system of indentured labour primarily from India and China – that is, workers who were contractually bound rather than legally owned – which was termed pejoratively the 'coolie trade'. Deception about the location and nature of the work were common and conditions on the ships that transported them are described as similar to those on slave ships, with many deaths. On arrival, things did not improve: working conditions were harsh with long hours, corporal punishment was used and workers were described as being abused and beaten. If workers escaped and were recaptured, they could have their initial contract term doubled from five years to ten. Over the course of around a hundred years after abolition, more than 30 million people are estimated to have left India as indentured workers.[7] In the Caribbean, a different technique was used: emancipated slaves were redesignated as forced apprentices. They weren't allowed to be bought or sold like property, but

* Arguably, this reading of history excludes the 'herstory' of 'coverture', a system by which married women's legal existence as an individual was suspended under 'marital unity', with the husband and wife considered a single entity: the husband. While subsuming one individual into the other is perhaps distinct from ownership, these concepts certainly have a lot in common. Coverture continued in law until the mid to late nineteenth century.

they did have to work without payment for between four and six years.[8] The result of nineteenth-century abolitionism was to spur precisely the kinds of exploitation the modern slavery movement now attempts to tackle, all the while harking back to Wilberforce et al. for inspiration.

This is contrary to the idea many of us hold about the abolition of slavery and the situations it's supposed to have ended. This is partly because of a key misconception about the white abolitionists' aims: rather than aiming to end slavery because of anti-racism, principles of equality or commitments to universal human dignity, leading anti-slavery scholar Joel Quirk and others have found that the legal abolition of slavery 'had more to do with questions of collective honour and identity … the status of slavery and the slave trade would come to be construed as a key determinant of "civilised" status and national virtue (or vice)'.[9] Abolition symbolised being a civilised nation; it was not driven by an idea of those formerly enslaved as being human equals to the enslavers. This helps to explain why leading figures such as William Wilberforce and Granville Sharp were, by twenty-first-century standards, racist, yet also abolitionists. For example, Wilberforce described his ambition as 'stopping the influx of uninstructed savages, to advance slowly towards a period when these unhappy things might exchange their degraded state of slavery for that of free and industrious peasantry'.[10]Additionally, and equally often overlooked, the nineteenth-century abolition movement did not listen to the needs of those who were enslaved but simply removed the laws. It was the slave *owners*, rather than the enslaved, who were paid compensation for the 'loss' of their 'property'. For this reason, we shouldn't expect the outcome of legal abolition to be the provision of markedly better conditions for workers at the bottom of the colonial system because this was never its motive or process.

So, if we are talking about legal ownership of another human being as if they are a piece of property, then yes, slavery by and

large was ended in the nineteenth century. But if we are talking about exploitation in terms of being 'modern slavery', there is nothing 'modern' about it per se: it is simply the continuation of exploitation by subtler means than legal ownership. And it has also never been something with which nation-states and global powers have a problem; rather, it has been something they have created and perpetuated actively because it brings profit. Yet today, world leaders can't tell us enough how much they want to 'eradicate' this 'scourge'. What on earth is going on?

As we'll see through the course of this book, the modern slavery story uses the tale of nineteenth-century abolition and its heroic figures to make us think that today's forms of severe exploitation are just like historical slavery in a specific and important aspect: they are immoral aberrations that we are all on the same side against, and that we can overthrow and then carry on in a more humane manner. This way of portraying exploitation tells us that it's not a 'political' issue, that is, something relating to our social and economic structures; after all, abolishing traditional slavery didn't overthrow our entire system nor undo the racism that still pervades the world today. The particular legal status of 'slave' was merely skimmed off the top of what else existed. In a kindred manner, modern slavery is meant to be understood as a humanitarian or public health problem. This means we can 'eradicate' it without questioning the principles of our societies. We might harness governments or businesses to tackle this 'scourge', but we don't need to change them fundamentally. In this way, it's pitched as an abnormality that is separate from, and anomalous to, how we're running things. It is 'a 'wasting moral disease'[11] that has inveigled its way into our communities. We're told that, like other diseases, it can be eradicated; indeed, one of the foremost new abolitionists, Professor Kevin Bales, has written that 'like a smallpox vaccination, once inoculated against slavery, villages almost never go back'.[12] Power-holders like governments and businesses are trying hard to eradicate this stain on civilisation, they tell us.

You, the public, can also help to eradicate it by learning to 'spot the signs' of this abnormality and alerting law enforcement. And because it's separate from the fundamental systems of our societies, once we've rescued a person from this contaminant they'll be free and live a better life.

In a post-truth world, where global leaders routinely peddle lies and half-truths, we should be familiar with the idea that everything might not be what it seems. And yet, when it comes to modern slavery it's almost impossible to get people to interrogate this story. No one wants to seem as if they're denigrating a tale about human pain. And no one is. But if we really want to get closer to a world with less of it, we need to get real about what's happening.

Rather than being accurate, this story is ignorance cloaked as knowledge. That is, it purports to tell us something, to give us vital information about the world in which we live, and how and why human harm is occurring. But in telling us this information it's often doing the opposite to informing us. Robert N. Proctor, professor of the history of science at Stanford University, has created the idea of 'agnotology', meaning the study of ignorance production. He notes that we tend to think of ignorance as a void, and something from which knowledge grows 'as a flower from honest soil'.[13] Instead, he says, we need to see ignorance as something in its own right, which can be 'deliberately engineered' and is part of a strategy to produce a particular way of seeing.[14]

Modern slavery as a metaphor for severe exploitation and as a political frame constructs a way of seeing that makes us blind to things we need to know. By characterising severe exploitation as exceptional and making it into its own category, with its own heroes and villains, its ideal victim types and its solutions, the modern slavery frame hides crucial information. It hides realities about history, as we've seen. It also hides how the present global economy constructs harm, how immigration policies are creating exploitation, the reality of what our role is or can be, and what

freedom means. And it doesn't only hide; it also produces. The modern slavery story is adept at providing moral legitimacy for the very policies that enable severe exploitation in the first place.

We'll explore all these facets but, for now, here are some brief explanations of what this book will and won't cover. I haven't worked on child trafficking or forced marriage and consider them distinct issues for many reasons; as such, this book covers neither, except briefly in passing where relevant. Modern slavery is such a broad concept that it covers an incredibly diverse range of circumstances, experiences and crimes, from organ harvesting to forced benefit fraud, from the exploitation of young girls under the 'sumangali' scheme in India to forced begging on the streets of Western capitals. There is also much that could be said about geopolitics, war and insurgency and how these generate severe exploitation, such as Boko Haram's exploitation of girls or the ways in which their actions drive vulnerable migration.[15] This book does not cover many of these circumstances. Its focus is also almost entirely on the UK except for instances where overseas examples can illuminate or explain UK phenomena. However, it will explore several of the key themes you need to know in order to understand the modern slavery story and how it operates, and it'll give you clear ideas on the real solutions to exploitation.

Academics Bridget Anderson and Rutvica Andrijasevic have suggested that writing critically about this topic is 'akin to saying that one … is against motherhood and apple pie'.[16] At no point should the critiques in this book be taken to devalue or denigrate the true lived experiences of people in exploitation or on its brink. Rather, its aim is to disabuse us of misinformed notions and myths. These are allowing the systems that produce exploitation to continue and to keep people entrapped. Without rewriting the modern slavery story in this way, we cannot solve the serious exploitation taking place around the world today.