

Capitalism and the Rise of New Slavery: From Slave Trade to Slave in Trade

Written by Akshat Sogani

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AKSHAT SOGANI, FEB 2 2019

Introduction

Slavery was tolerated for two hundred and fifty years in the United States[1]. Slaves were treated as mere objects and were deprived from even basic human rights. In order to emancipate all slaves and get rid of racism against the blacks, President Abraham Lincoln signed the 13th Amendment in 1865 to abolish slavery: “neither slavery nor involuntary servitude... shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction”[2]. However, even after its abolishment, there were still racial systems and laws in place that gave leeway for slavery to prevail. This especially included the Jim Crow laws which existed between 1877 and 1960s which was a racial caste system that legitimized racial caste segregation[3]. After an eruption of several civil right movements by the black community, Jim Crow laws faced their denouement after a Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964 by President Lyndon Johnson[4].

But has slavery really been eliminated? This paper seeks to argue that after the appearance of capitalism, in fact new forms of slavery have started to emerge. As Angela Chan argues in her article, slavery was never actually abolished, rather it has redefined itself into newer forms[5]. One of its manifestation is in the form of worker exploitation. Capitalism has led to severe exploitation of workers working in the factories, where they are forced to work for long hours in extremely harsh conditions to make a living in order to serve the luxuries of the rich-income class. Indeed, they are almost working as slaves. Another way in which capitalism has caused enslavement is of the prison population. Private organisations in the United States are generating private profits out of the prison population. Governments especially US are lending contracts to private companies to build prisons which has led to a serious escalation of incarceration rates, victims mostly the black communities. For the sake of profits, people are put into prison even for smallest of acts and are used as cheap labour to work for other companies.

The most worrying problem is that capitalism has exuberantly spread its roots everywhere, in every country. Even communist states like China and Russia are working on the formulas of capitalism and are in constant strife to increase their GDP[6]. Thus, as every state has started to preach capitalism, we have started to conceive the international realm as a homogenous identity and have obscured ourselves from having an alternate perception of how the international could be. We have internalised this system to such an extent, that we do not voice against these grave exploitations as we do not see them as explicit manifestations of slavery. We do not realise how certain individuals such as the workers and the prisoners are getting enslaved and we live in the illusion that slavery has been abolished. Thus, if one notices, slavery is still existing in this ambit of capitalism – workers and the prisoners do not have the freedom and the agency to act and are working as mere puppets of this system. In addition, it is also important to consider that the earlier forms of direct slavery have actually played a monumental role in accompanying the emergence of capitalism. Before the abolishment of slavery, in countries like Saint Domingue, ‘slaves represented 89% of the population’ and the country produced ‘half of the world’s coffee’[7]. Today, this very capitalism has now produced newer kinds of slavery.

This paper will first examine these newer forms of slavery through the lens of Marx’s philosophies as he critiqued a lot of the aspects of capitalism and how it has enslaved people’s consciousness to think. Then, it will go on to explain its relevance in international relations to get a better understanding of why is this such big an issue which beseeches

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for serious attention.

Viewing Slavery Through the Lens of Marx

While living in the setting when industrialisation was blooming at a very fast pace, Karl Marx wrote in lengths about how due to capitalism, workers had to work in severe, tormenting conditions. When Friedrich Engels met Marx in 1848, he provided his first-hand empirical information to Marx about the poor lifestyle of the workers. In the first draft of his 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts' which got published in 1932, Marx staunchly critiques capitalism by arguing about the layers and layers of alienation of the labour in mass production because of the division of labour[8].

His main contention against capitalism was how it alienates, and exploits and enslaves the working class. Marx believed that a worker working in a factory is not living in solitude, but he lives in a social fabric. It is in man's essential nature to be social because this is how he relates and lives with other men. And so, he argued that there are two different polarities that a man faces in his life. The first polarity is between man and the nature. Marx said that capitalism has pulled back the worker from his essential nature of being social because he must constantly use his labour on one specialised segment of the work and so his life just becomes working on that product to earn wages[9]. While Amazon celebrates its \$1 trillion brand value, its 1 in 3 employees working in Arizona are so poor that they have to rely on government food stamps as they receive extremely low wages [10] [11]. The only thing that a worker working in Arizona cares about is his survival and having a social life becomes another luxury for him, which as Marx would argue, subjugates them to alienation as it is a departure from their human essence[12].

Furthermore, Marx claims that there is a second polarity that exists which is from man to man. He argues that the reality of the man is defined by the material conditions in which he is living. When a worker in the Amazon warehouse in Arizona is working, there is less bonding and meaning attached to the product because the labour is only producing to earn wages and is engaged in a monotonous job. This results in a restricted usage of his senses which is a confirmation of only one of his essential power. In addition, since the worker is only producing a part of the product, he does not even know what the final product is. He just receives orders from his boss to perform the task and thus he loses his ability to consciously think[13]. And as Marx argues in the 'German Ideology', it is not consciousness that determines life, but it is your material conditions in life that determines your consciousness[14]. As Elk and Sloan tell in their article, even in the case of private prisons in the US, in the name of rehabilitation, the prisoners are used as a source of cheap labour by companies as often the inmates are either not paid or are paid very low for their job[15]. Thus, they have no incentives whatsoever to work and they lose their ability to think. Marx argues there is only one element that differentiates humans from animals i.e consciousness, the ability to critically think. And thus, if one loses this human ability, it is just another form of slavery that capitalism has produced. A good example to prove how material conditions in capitalism have led to enslavement, is the workers working in the Foxconn factory, where Apple iPhones are produced. The factory has seen such a tremendous rise in the rate of worker suicides that they have now installed large nets outside their factories to 'catch falling bodies'. The reasons for suicides came out to be immense stress, long working hours and 'harsh managers' who humiliated workers for mistakes[16]. How is this different from the ancient form of slavery? If wage is a justification, then one should note that the wages are already too less that one can barely survive on that money.

Furthermore, capitalism has caused the human nature to become self-interested and self-centric individuals. It has caused humans to constantly demand for more and more and there is no end to these wants. Marx realised that the source of this problem is private property. There is a constant tendency of humans to strive for private property, where greed reasserts and satisfies itself due to competition[17]. And thus, in the quest to earn more and more profits, companies are willing to create business out of everything even if it requires of them to engage in inhumane or immoral activities. In the example of private prisons in the US, as government has leased out contracts to private companies to construct penitentiaries, these companies have been advocating for laws that allows government to be more stringent on crimes. And as prisons get overloaded with more and more prisoners, these companies are able to maximise their profits[18]. In addition, another business that has been created out of this is these prisoners are now used as cheap labour to produce goods for other private companies and are almost working like workers. Hence, in the strife to earn more and more money to have more share of the private property, the crony capitalists are willing to go to any extent even if it requires enslaving and alienating other people in prisons or exploiting workers in a factory.

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The suicides happening in Foxconn factories is testament to how workers are living such a congested, entrapped life. Therefore, Marx argued that the only way to extricate workers from this web of slavery is to transcend private property, by transforming it to something else and have a world where the very desire to own private possessions would not exist. This transcendence would stop the labour from getting alienated i.e. every person will engage and labour in those products that he is passionate about and where he can willingly utilise his full potential[19]. And these private companies will stop enslaving people in the prisons.

Why is this a Pressing Discussion?

This paper believes that this topic needs urgent scrutiny. This is because the moment we start fathoming the way capitalism is producing these newer forms of slavery, we also come to realise how dictated we are by the predominant western world and thus it changes our notion of what the international is. As Sankaran Krishna argues in her article, international is not just about interaction between states as entities but international is an everyday living experience. In addition, he also argues about how the western world has done a great job in projecting the non-western side as 'gothic'[20]. It was also the West which portrayed communism and Marxist philosophies as evil and gothic[21]. Acharya and Buzan argue in their paper about how everyone is living under the impression that 'Western international relations theory has discovered the right path to understanding international relations'[22]. This is exactly the reason why today every country (including communist countries) has imbibed some form of capitalism and following the path of the West. And as we look in awe towards the western modes of living, we enshroud ourselves from realising the problems that capitalism creates; how workers are getting exploited and are living the life of slaves. The below three arguments aim to tamper with the western ideas of freedom, sovereignty and the realist school of thought.

The False Premise of Realism

Hans Morgenthau is regarded as one of the founding fathers of the Realist school of thought. As the political scientist John Mearsheimer argues, realism has defined international relations for us and that every country is following the same principles defined by realism and thus every state is striving for power[23]. Indeed, as it is always seen as the West setting the tone of the international scene, Morgenthau's realism theory is seen as the Bible for how international relations work. Mearsheimer in his essay, "The False Promise of International institutions", regards political realism as one of the most 'influential' and the 'pervasive' theories. It is important to note that realists often argue that realism does not tell how international relations *should* work, but in fact it paints the picture of this is how international relations actually works because the international system is engineered as such[24].

However, in his "Six Principles of Political Realism", Morgenthau's sixth principle states that politics is an 'autonomous sphere of action' and that all other spheres such as morality, religion, gender and even economics are different and are subordinated under the realm of politics. But is politics really a separate entity? Indeed, it is not wrong to argue that economics plays a monumental role in influencing politics of states and thus it must not be called a different entity altogether. Even when we talk about global political *economy*, there is a prefix attached to economics which is politics. One must realise about the interplay between politics and economics. The capitalistic forms of exploitations are the manifestations of this interplay. The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), an organisation in the US which includes both state legislators and private companies engaged in building private prisons, has played a colossal role in pushing for 'harsher sentencing for non-violent offenses'[25]. This has led to a serious escalation of more people going behind bars, and the companies making profit out of it. This is a clear example of how politics can be influenced by economics; new laws are being brought to the table for the benefit of private companies. By colluding with state legislators and politicians, private companies are seeking for more opportunities to advocate for laws that basically allows enslaving more people in prisons. Therefore, by drawing a linkage between politics and economics, it completely breaks our conception of how we conceive of international. By bringing this relationship between politics and economics to light and by also highlighting how deeply economics is ingrained in politics, it opens up more horizons for us to look at international in much more different ways and not just restrict to the realist lens. Through this, one realises that international relations should not just be about how states act towards each other but international encompasses a lot of other things as well including for example how workers are getting exploited due to capitalism.

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The Fallacy of Freedom

The idea of a neo-liberal society is built on the premise of freedom of individuals, where an individual is free to engage in trade, commerce, etc with less and less restrictions. Yusuf Abdullahi Manu argues in his paper, "liberal democracy is the political correlate of the free market (Liberal Capitalism)"[26]. Liberalism as an ideology is always looked upon because it claims to believe in the ideas of individualism and individual freedom. And the idea of an unregulated, free market in capitalism is considered as one of the strands which embodies the idea of freedom and liberty[27]. Since capitalism is one of the main propagators to enact freedom in the neo-liberal society, one must realize that freedom and capitalist forms of exploitation also tie very well because this very exploitation is a product of the system which is happening in liberal democracies. It is a *paradox* that capitalism is dealing with – in the name of freedom on which it stands, capitalism in turn is eating freedom by exploiting workers, by enslaving people in jails etc. In fact, one can thus see that the reason why capitalism is able to sustain itself is precisely because it is living on the very idea of inequality and captivity. As Haralambos and Heald argue in their paper, 'capital is gained from the exploitation of the mass of population, the working class'[28]. As capitalism is expanding due to an increase in production everywhere, there is a desire to earn more and more profits which is in turn causing more and more exploitation of the working class and their freedom is pilfered as they feel more alienated and imprisoned in their lives.

As the Western predominant force promulgates this idea of individual freedom and liberty, one must ascertain what exactly freedom and liberty is. Is really every individual free in a liberal, capitalist democratic state? Capitalism is in fact enslaving people more. This helps us question the very conception of freedom and it is extremely important to ask these questions because it is the western liberal capitalism which controls the economic spheres in the global affairs. Moreover, this is exactly why Marx's idea of communism also become so important. Rather than being forced to produce a good for the sake of earning wages, which the worker is not even interested in, Marx believed in the idea of 'each according to his ability, to each according to his needs' to have free access and distribution of goods. Marx's conception of freedom was about blossoming of a human being where individual could act on his/her will and where everyone will be on the same platform with no disparities and inequalities[29].

Redefining Sovereignty

According to Stanford encyclopedia, sovereignty is defined as 'having supreme authority within a territory' where 'the state is the political institution in which sovereignty is embodied'. The idea of sovereignty stems from the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 and it has now gained more prominence in the modern political arena, especially after the end of World War II[30]. However, one must also realise that modern politics is also been shaped by the emergence of capitalism. This is another paradox that one can notice – while the western modernists give high salience to sovereignty and believe states living as different, separate entities, capitalism which is also a western product has in fact compromised on the notion of this idea of sovereignty. Capitalism has given rise to globalisation which has now created porous borders with flow of goods and services across different states. And as Helen Stacy argues in her paper, technology is another factor which 'has permitted a corporation to operate "virtually" in a jurisdiction or across several jurisdictions'[31]. She believes that globalisation has thus caused a revolution in the idea of sovereignty. As capitalism becomes a pervasive force and has spread all around the world, it is also carrying the baggage of various forms of exploitations that it has. The very existence of multinationals (MNCs) in different nations is a proof to how capitalism is tampering with the notion of sovereignty[32]. Most importantly, since these MNCs work at such an extensive level in different countries, exploitation of labour thus does not become a mere national issue. In fact, it becomes a world issue. As most of the MNCs are headquartered in the western, developed countries, they have established their production houses in third world, underdeveloped countries in order to have cheap labour which shows how companies are exploiting workers at a global level[33] [34]. According to Arlo Shultz, the African peoples are struggling against neo-colonialism which has occurred due to the role of MNCs and the foreign aid that they receive from the developed countries[35]. Indeed, when the United States carried out its 'Axis of Evil' campaign, it was in the name of defending the American sovereignty from terrorism[36]. But then why do we not see any voice raised against the dilution of sovereignty occurring through for instance, MNCs and foreign aid?

Conclusion

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In order to highlight the grave realities of capitalism, this paper shed light on how it has produced new kinds of slavery and explained it through a non-western approach, i.e. through the lens of Marx. It accentuated on Marx's ideas on how capitalism has imprisoned people through two main examples. Firstly, how the workers are getting alienated and feel depressed as they get exploited and are living the lives of slaves such as in the case of Foxconn. Secondly, the paper elucidated on how private prisons in the US have advocated for laws that could allow more people to go behind bars so that they could benefit and earn more money, which is another kind of slavery that has emerged. Hence, capitalism has resurrected the ideas of slavery again, even after it got properly abolished in 1964. The paper then asserted the importance of these ideas to be discussed at the international stage. This is because we have restricted our scope of 'international' to just the western lens. Thus, we need to rescue ourselves from getting subsumed to this one-sided, predominant thinking of international relations. It is important for us to expand on our notion of what the international is and look at themes of alienation and the exploitative nature of capitalism within the realm of global politics. They explain to us so much that is happening in the world which is not considered to be important, or relevant enough, yet it makes such an impact on everyday living of our international. As the British historian, Eric Hobsbawm once said, we have developed a culture of quiescence and apathy[37]. o.

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