

OSCE Alliance Against Trafficking in Persons

Annual Conference 25-26 June 2013

Vienna

Stolen Lives, Stolen Money: The
Price of Modern Day Slavery

Panel 1: Historical and Contemporary Slavery

Gulliver in Brobdingnag: Jonathan Swift,
Globalization and Slavery

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Cultural Change and Anti-Slavery

Shifts in cultural values critical to anti-slavery

Two recent interpretations of such change:

(1) Decline in tolerance of violence (Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of our Nature*)

(2) Rise in empathy towards 'others' (Lynn Hunt, *The Invention of Human Rights*)

Both link change to growing sense of shared humanity that continues to evolve but is reflected in statistics (Pinker) and eighteenth-century European literature (Hunt). The latter embraces attitudes towards state torture and slavery, among other things.

Gulliver's Travels (1726)

One also finds images of slavery in such literature, as in Gulliver's Travels, second voyage to Brobdingnag (the land of giants):

The Queen observed my Coldness; and when the Farmer was gone out of the Apartment, asked me the Reason. I made bold to tell her Majesty, that I owed no other Obligation to my late Master, than his not dashing out the Brains of a poor harmless Creature found by Chance in his Field: which Obligation was amply recompenced by the Gain he had made in shewing [ie displaying] me through half the Kingdom, and the price he had now sold me for. That the Life I has since led, was laborious enough to kill an Animal of ten Times my Strength. That my Health was much impaired by the Continual Drudgery of entertaining the Rabble every Hour of the Day: and that if my Master had not thought my Life in Danger, her Majesty perhaps would not have got so cheap a Bargain (Oxford World's Classics edition, p.90).

Enduring Insights from Swift

First: Historical Contexts of Enslavement

- (1) Slavery typically an economic transaction
- (2) Slavery a global phenomenon (and its growth was often linked to empire or other forms of domination and thus to political legitimation)
- (3) Slavery linked to violence, whether overt or covert
- (4) Slavery colour-blind (Linda Colley), but commonly linked to perceptions of cultural difference (or 'otherness')
- (5) Vulnerability of people to enslavement and its relationship to debt (or obligation) to others

Enduring Insights from Swift (2)

Second: exploitation and the human costs of slavery historically

- (1) Slaves employed in a vast range of activities and in varying levels of concentration (debate over 'slave' and 'slave owning' societies) with varying mixes of slaves by age, gender and ethnicity
- (2) Large costs to individual victims, notably in terms of mortality, whether in transit (eg the 'Middle passage') or in work regimes and nutritional status (eg sugar production and its human costs)
- (3) Wider social costs, including resource transfers and skewing of age and gender distributions, political ramifications (eg rent seeking), and long-term development of source societies
- (4) Slavery and global inequalities (eg debates over unjust enrichment of West (Williams), African 'underdevelopment' and its links to slave trade (Rodney, Inikori and Nunn), and reversals of fortune (Acemoglu and others)

Enduring Insights from Swift (3)

Escaping Slavery

Gulliver saw his re-sale to the Brobdingnag Queen as easing his burdens, but he remained in slavery.

So how did he escape? Swift's work reminds us of three factors of enduring significance:

- (1) Slavery's robustness as an institution
- (2) Slave agency, including a refusal to accept slavery
- (3) External intervention, in Gulliver's case, by a giant eagle that seized and jettisoned at sea the wooden home that had been built for him.

Each foreshadowed major historical debates relating to slavery and emancipation that have resonance today, specifically the balance between economic and non-economic factors in challenging and ending slavery.

Swift's caution

On his third voyage to Laputa (a land of scientists and a floating island), Gulliver visited the school of political projectors.

Describes the professors there as 'appearing in my Judgment wholly out of their Senses, which is a Scene that never fails to make me melancholy' (p.179).

END

