

**Ben Cartwright**

## **René Cassin Essay Competition 2017 – winner (age 18 and under)**

Competition judge Joshua Rozenberg comments:

*“Begins with a good summary of the problem and its causes. Realistic about the difficulties of a solution. Compares favourably with the essays by the over-18s.”*

### **Theresa May calls modern slavery “the great human rights issue of our time”. Do you agree with her?**

Despite having been formally abolished in all countries,<sup>1</sup> slavery persists to the extent that the abolition of *de facto* modern slavery is included in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 2015.<sup>2</sup> Bales defines a slave as someone whom is compelled to work, through force of fraud, for no pay beyond subsistence level.<sup>3</sup> Although commonly perceived as a human rights issue of the past, it is estimated that up to 45.8 million people worldwide currently live in such circumstances; two-thirds of whom are in Asia.<sup>4</sup> More striking is the extent to which modern slavery lingers in developed, democratic nations, such as the United Kingdom: in 2013, it was estimated that there were up to 13,000 victims of slavery in the UK.<sup>5</sup> These victims are often those most marginalised by society and usually live in poverty, thereby making them more susceptible to exploitation through slavery and forced labour.<sup>6</sup> With a global economy which has entrenched economic disparity,<sup>7</sup> the conditions upon which slavery thrives, such as poverty and inequality, have been exacerbated, to the

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<sup>1</sup> Bales, Kevin. *New Slavery: A Reference Handbook*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO. 2004. p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations. *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. New York: United Nations. 2015. p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Bales, Kevin. *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy*. Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Mineroo Foundation. “The Global Slavery Index Report.” Global Slavery Index. <http://assets.globallslaveryindex.org/downloads/Global+Slavery+Index+2016.pdf> (accessed 4 January 2017). p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> HM Government. “2015 Report of the Inter-Departmental Ministerial Group on Modern Slavery.” Gov.uk. [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/469968/IDMG\\_Report\\_Final.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/469968/IDMG_Report_Final.pdf) (accessed 4 January 2017). [1.02]

<sup>6</sup> Guay, Justin. “The Economic Foundations of Contemporary Slavery”. *Topical Research Digest* (2014): pp. 72-83. p. 73.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, the Global Wealth Report 2015 by Credit Suisse Research Institute, October 2015. Their findings include that the poorest 71% of adults collectively hold 3% of the wealth, whereas the richest 0.7% hold 45.2% of the wealth.

extent that modern slavery has become a product of the modern economy.<sup>8</sup> Bales estimates that, as a result of endemic global exploitation of minorities and vulnerable groups in supply chains, “[t]he direct value of slave labor in today’s economy is estimated between thirteen and twenty billion dollars.”<sup>9</sup> Hence, whereas other contemporary human rights issues, such as entrenched racism and discrimination, may be combatted by legislation,<sup>10</sup> the issue of modern slavery can only be combatted by a change in attitudes among states and in the business community. Given the international scope of modern slavery in global supply chains, and that the products of slavery include “the food we consume and the goods we purchase”,<sup>11</sup> it is arguably the human rights issue that has the most significant impact on people’s lives. It is only with a global effort to eradicate modern slavery that success may be achieved.

The sheer variety of economic sectors which are reliant on the work of slaves is startling. In the UK, and indeed much of the developed world, hundreds of slaves (and forced labourers) have been recorded as working in sectors as diverse as construction, fishing, and the illegal sex industry.<sup>12</sup> Even in countries like the UK, ‘hidden’ slavery is common: in 2016, a man was convicted for two years for holding his wife in domestic servitude – he tortured her and did not allow her to leave the home.<sup>13</sup> The essence of slavery, that of the total control and dehumanisation of other individuals, is fundamentally inconsistent with the principles of liberal democracy. Notwithstanding this, illegal practices persist in ‘liberal’ nations like the UK. Legislation such as the Modern Slavery Act 2015, whilst committing the Government to actively combatting modern slavery, does not, in itself, increase awareness of the issue with the public, who are rarely aware of its extent<sup>14</sup>. Slavery is thus a “hidden crime”<sup>15</sup>: victims of slavery are comparatively ignored, “[finding] themselves in the musty shadows between the visibility of the spotlights shone on homelessness and poverty.”<sup>16</sup>

What is all the more startling about modern slavery is that, “[u]nlike other worldwide epidemics such as malaria and HIV/AIDS, slavery is a human condition of our own making.”<sup>17</sup> Many scholars regard it as inherently connected with the modern system of capitalism, with its emphasis on “big profits” and

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<sup>8</sup> Bales (n 3).

<sup>9</sup> Bales, Kevin. “Expendable People: Slavery in the Age of Globalization.” *Journal of International Affairs* 53, no 2 (2000). pp. 461-485. p. 474

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, the American Civil Rights Act 1964 and the British Equality Act 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Bales (n 3).

<sup>12</sup> HM Government (n 5) p. 16.

<sup>13</sup> BBC News. “What does modern slavery look like?” BBC.co.uk. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-36416751> (accessed 4 January 2017).

<sup>14</sup> HM Government (n 5) p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Spiro, Zachary. “The great human rights issue of our time: Modern slavery.” BrightBlue.org. <https://humanrights.brightblue.org.uk/blog-1/2016/8/12/the-great-human-rights-issue-of-our-time-modern-slavery> (accessed 4 January 2017).

<sup>17</sup> Mineroo Foundation (n 4) pp. 2-3.

“cheap lives”.<sup>18</sup> It is submitted that the extent of modern slavery, particularly in developed nations, derives from the desire for low-cost goods and services, as employers often take advantage of vulnerable workers to force down wages to maintain profits, whilst ensuring an obedient workforce.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, as a result of desires to minimise production costs, companies often passively ignore potential issues of modern slavery in their own supply chains.<sup>20</sup> The recent addition of a textile protocol to the EU-Uzbekistan Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, despite proof of widespread slave-like practices and forced labour in the Uzbek cotton industry, is evidence of such passive ignorance, and indicates that the EU is willing to forego the elimination of slavery in return for economic benefit.<sup>21</sup> The apparent support for such practices appears to encourage countries whose primary industries are reliant on slavery and forced labour.

It is therefore evident that modern slavery is intrinsically linked with the world economy. Guay argues that it “firmly rests” on the “modern set of economic conditions ... [determined by] capitalism and free trade.”<sup>22</sup> Given that the global economic framework appears to permit and encourage the growth of international (and intra-national) wealth inequality,<sup>23</sup> in order to lower prices and increase profits, slaves are consequentially regarded, “in purely economic terms”, as “short-term, low-capital investments with incredibly high rates of return.”<sup>24</sup> Bales emphasises it thus: the expansion of international trade effectively destroys small-scale farming and the rural communities that surround family farms. As a result, these workers converge on the cities where they seek work. However, given that they have no support network (having abandoned their former communities), they are liable to exploitation by groups who often form part of the supply chains of companies.<sup>25</sup> For instance, many Asian countries, often those countries where modern slavery is prominent, provide low-skilled labour “for the production stage of global supply chains for various industries.”<sup>26</sup> This only further entrenches the interrelatedness of slavery and the modern economy.

Given the large proportion of the global economy that is reliant on modern slavery, it is hardly surprising that the issue remains endemic. Whereas other human rights issues can be defined as unwelcome *consequences* of global capitalism, such as poverty and homelessness, modern slavery as an economic notion is a factor spurring global economic growth. Moreover, slavery entrenches other

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<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, Bales (n 3).

<sup>19</sup> Telegraph Reporters. “97 nail bar workers arrested in crackdown on ‘barbaric’ modern slavery.” Telegraph.co.uk. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/12/28/97-nail-bar-workers-arrested-incrackdown-barbaric-modern-slavery/> (accessed 26 January 2017).

<sup>20</sup> However, companies such as Nestlé do now publish reports as to modern slavery and their strategies to combat it. See, for instance, Nestlé UK’s “Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Report 2016.” Nestle.co.uk. [http://www.nestle.co.uk/asset-library/documents/39506\\_nestle\\_mod-slave-act\\_ab\\_30sep.pdf](http://www.nestle.co.uk/asset-library/documents/39506_nestle_mod-slave-act_ab_30sep.pdf). (accessed 4 January 2017).

<sup>21</sup> Barrie, Leonie. “EU lawmakers back textile trade with Uzbekistan.” Just-Style.com. [http://www.just-style.com/news/eu-lawmakers-back-textile-trade-with-uzbekistan\\_id129288.aspx](http://www.just-style.com/news/eu-lawmakers-back-textile-trade-with-uzbekistan_id129288.aspx) (accessed 22 January 2017).

<sup>22</sup> Guay (n 6) p. 72.

<sup>23</sup> Credit Suisse Research Institute, Global Wealth Report 2015, October 2015

<sup>24</sup> Guay (n 6) pp. 72-73.

<sup>25</sup> Bales (n 9).

<sup>26</sup> Mineroo Foundation (n 4) p. 51.

associated human rights issues, such as racial discrimination and human trafficking. It must, however, be reiterated that the wholesale abolition of the practice of modern slavery would only be feasible if a co-ordinated effort by states and companies were to be taken.

Progress thus far has been somewhat encouraging. For instance, Goal 8.7 of the UN Agenda for Sustainable Development commits its signatories to the abolition of slavery by 2030.<sup>27</sup> At national level, the Modern Slavery Act 2015 commits the UK Government to the abolition of slavery, and provides for greater enforcement proceedings against slaveholders and human traffickers.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, regular reviews by companies such as Nestlé regarding the extent of slavery and slave-like practices in their supply chains indicates that there indeed has been at least notional progress towards the elimination of modern slavery.<sup>29</sup>

However, one must acknowledge that the above ‘progress’ is largely theoretical, and that, on a practical basis, there are fundamental impediments to the total abolition of modern slavery. Indeed, Bales has contested that the number of slaves is currently increasing, despite measures taken to limit modern slavery.<sup>30</sup> Skinner’s assertion that there are now more slaves in the world than at any time in history is a harrowing perception.<sup>31</sup> It is evident, therefore, at a time where the extent of other human rights issues is diminishing,<sup>32</sup> that progress with regard to modern slavery has been lacklustre. Indeed, for as long as unabated free trade is championed as fundamental to the global economy, it is submitted that exploitation of the most vulnerable in society, ultimately culminating in variants of slavery and forced labour, will continue. Thus, where other human rights issues can be resolved, or at least mitigated, by the efforts of the international community, much of modern slavery will persist unless there are fundamental structural changes to the global economy which protect the poorest and most vulnerable.

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<sup>27</sup> United Nations (n 2) p. 7.

<sup>28</sup> Modern Slavery Act 2015. For enforcement procedures, see ss. 5-11.

<sup>29</sup> See Nestlé UK (n 20).

<sup>30</sup> Bales (n 3) p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> Skinner, E Benjamin. *A Crime So Monstrous: A Shocking Exposé of Modern-Day Sex Slavery, Human Trafficking and Urban Child Markets*. New York: Free Press. 2008. p 2.

<sup>32</sup> See, for instance, Statistics Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations. “Millennium Development Goals: 2015 Progress Chart.” UN.org. [http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2015\\_MDG\\_Report/pdf/MDG%202015%20PC%20final.pdf](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2015_MDG_Report/pdf/MDG%202015%20PC%20final.pdf) (accessed 24 January 2017)

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