

21st Century Slaves

Andrew Cockburn (2003)

Though we tend to think of slavery as a thing of the past, Andrew Cockburn documents the extent of “debt slavery” that exists throughout the world today. Many are lured into debt slavery with the expectation of a better life, leaving them exposed to victimization and cruelty at the hands of slave traffickers and employers. Cockburn analyzes the reasons for the upsurge in this increasingly profitable industry.

The headline below is not a metaphor. This story is about slaves. Not people 200 years ago. It's about 27 million people worldwide who are bought and sold, held captive, brutalized, exploited for profit. It's about 21ST CENTURY SLAVES.

Sherwood Castle, headquarters to Milorad Milakovic, the former railway official who rose to become a notorious slave trafficker in Bosnia, looms beside the main road just outside the northwest Bosnian town of Prijedor. Under stucco battlements, the entrance is guarded by well-muscled, heavily tattooed young men, while off to one side Milakovic's trio of pet Siberian tigers prowl their caged compound.

I arrived there alone one gray spring morning—alone because no local guide or translator dared accompany me—and found my burly 54-year-old host waiting for me at a table set for lunch beside a glassed-in aquamarine swimming pool.

The master of Sherwood has never been shy about his business. He once asked a dauntless human rights activist who has publicly detailed his record of buying women for his brothels in Prijedor: “Is it a crime to sell women? They sell footballers, don't they?”

Milakovic threatened to kill the activist for her outspokenness, but to me he sang a softer tune. Over a pool-side luncheon of seafood salad and steak, we discussed

the stream of young women fleeing the shattered economies of their home countries in the former Soviet bloc. Milakovic said he was eager to promote his scheme to legalize prostitution in Bosnia—“to stop the selling of people, because each of those girls is someone's child.”

One such child is a nearsighted, chain-smoking blonde named Victoria, at 20 a veteran of the international slave trade. For three years of her life she was among the estimated 27 million men, women, and children in the world who are enslaved—physically confined or restrained and forced to work, or controlled through violence, or in some way treated as property.

Victoria's odyssey began when she was 17, fresh out of school in Chisinau, the decayed capital of the former Soviet republic of Moldova. “There was no work, no money,” she explained simply. So when a friend—“at least I thought he was a friend”—suggested he could help her get a job in a factory in Turkey, she jumped at the idea and took up his offer to drive her there, through Romania. “But when I realized we had driven west, to the border with Serbia, I knew something was wrong.”

It was too late. At the border she was handed over to a group of Serb men, who produced a new passport saying she was 18. They led her on foot into Serbia and raped her, telling her that she would be killed if she resisted. Then they sent her under guard to Bosnia, the

Balkan republic being rebuilt under a torrent of international aid after its years of genocidal civil war.

Victoria was now a piece of property and, as such, was bought and sold by different brothel owners ten times over the next two years for an average price of \$1,500. Finally, four months pregnant and fearful of a forced abortion, she escaped. I found her hiding in the Bosnian city of Mostar, sheltered by a group of Bosnian women.

In a soft monotone she recited the names of clubs and bars in various towns where she had to dance semi-naked, look cheerful, and have sex with any customer who wanted her for the price of a few packs of cigarettes. "The clubs were all awful, although the Artemdia, in Banja Luka, was the worst—all the customers were cops," she recalled.

Victoria was a debt slave. Payment for her services went straight to her owner of the moment to cover her "debt"—the amount he had paid to buy her from her previous owner. She was held in servitude unless or until the money she owed to whomever controlled her had been recovered, at which point she would be sold again and would begin to work off the purchase price paid by her new owner. Although slavery in its traditional form survives in many parts of the world, debt slavery of this kind, with variations, is the most common form of servitude today.

According to Milorad Milakovic, such a system is perfectly aboveboard. "There is the problem of expense in bringing a girl here," he had explained to me. "The plane, transport, hotels along the way, as well as food. That girl must work to get that money back."

In November 2000 the UN-sponsored International Police Task Force (IPTF) raided Milakovic's nightclub-brothels in Prijedor, liberating 34 young women who told stories of servitude similar to Victoria's. "We had to dance, drink a lot, and go to our rooms with anyone," said one. "We were eating once a day and sleeping five to six hours. If we would not do what we were told, guards would beat us."

Following the IPTF raids, Milakovic complained to the press that the now liberated women had cost a lot of money to buy, that he would have to buy more, and that he wanted compensation. He also spoke openly about the cozy relations he had enjoyed with the IPTF peacekeepers, many of whom had been his customers.

But there were no influential friends to protect him in May this year, when local police finally raided Sherwood Castle and arrested Milakovic for trafficking in humans and possessing slaves.

We think of slavery as something that is over and done with, and our images of it tend to be grounded in the 19th century: black field hands in chains. "In those

days slavery thrived on a shortage of person power," explains Mike Dottridge, former director of Anti-Slavery International, founded in 1839 to carry on the campaign that had already abolished slavery in the British Empire. The average slave in 1850, according to the research of slavery expert Kevin Bales, sold for around \$40,000 in today's money.

I visited Dottridge at the organization's headquarters in a small building in Stockwell, a non-descript district in south London. "Back then," said Dottridge, "black people were kidnapped and forced to work as slaves. Today vulnerable people are lured into debt slavery in the expectation of a better life. There are so many of them because there are so many desperate people in the world."

The offices are festooned with images of contemporary slavery—forced labor in West Africa, five- and six-year-old Pakistani children delivered to the Persian Gulf to serve as jockeys on racing camels, Thai child prostitutes. File cabinets bulge with reports: Brazilian slave gangs hacking at the Amazon rain forest to make charcoal for the steel industry, farm laborers in India bound to landlords by debt they have inherited from their parents and will pass on to their children.

The buying and selling of people is a profitable business because, while globalization has made it easier to move goods and money around the world, people who want to move to where jobs are face ever more stringent restrictions on legal migration.

Almost invariably those who cannot migrate legally or pay fees up front to be smuggled across borders end up in the hands of trafficking mafias. "Alien smuggling [bringing in illegal aliens who then find paying jobs] and human trafficking [where people end up enslaved or sold by the traffickers] operate exactly the same way, using the same routes," said a veteran field agent from the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). "The only difference is what happens to people at the other end." As the fees people must pay for transport rise in step with tightening border controls, illegal immigrants are ever more likely to end up in debt to the traffickers who have moved them—and are forced to work off their obligations as slaves.

It's dangerous for outsiders to show too close an interest in how these trafficking mafias work (a point that had occurred to me at Sherwood Castle), but in Athens I found a man who has made the study of slave trafficking his specialty and lives to tell the tale.

In 1990 Grigoris Lazos, a sociology professor at Panteion University, embarked on what he thought would be straightforward research on prostitution in Greece. Bright and intense, he resolved to go straight to the

source, the prostitutes themselves. Through them he eventually made contact with the people who had enslaved them. Over the course of a decade—and in the face of intense disapproval from his professional colleagues—Lazos gained access to trafficking operations from the inside and was able to paint a clear picture of the interplay between prostitution and slavery in his country.

“You should note the difference between a small trafficking gang and a large network, which uses the Internet and bank accounts,” he said. “Any bar owner or group of bar owners in Greece can send someone up to southern Bulgaria to buy women for cash. The cost of a girl in that area is \$1,000, or, if you negotiate, you might be able to get two for \$1,000. Best to try on a Monday for cheap prices, because most trafficking happens at the weekends. Mondays are slow, so you can get the leftovers.”

“A network on the other hand,” he continued, “has the ability to bargain and complete financial transactions from a distance. Simply call Moscow, ask for women, and they will be sent to Romania and from there on through Bulgaria to Greece. The parties don’t even have to know each other. The importer simply says, ‘I want so-and-so many first quality women, so-and-so many second quality, so-and-so many third quality.’”

Flicking through his exhaustive files, the professor rattled off the cold data of human trade. “Between 1990 and 2000 the total amount earned in Greece from trafficked women, that is to say those who were forced into this kind of prostitution, was 5.5 billion dollars. Voluntary prostitutes, those who were working of their own accord and are mostly Greek women, earned 1.5 billion dollars.”

The efficiency and scope of the Greek traffickers’ operations studied by Lazos are by no means unique. In Trieste, the gateway from the Balkans into northern Italy, investigators from the local anti-mafia commission tracked the activities of Josip Loncaric, a former taxi driver from Zagreb, Croatia.

By the time Loncaric was finally arrested in 2000 he owned airlines in Albania and Macedonia and was involved in moving thousands of people destined for work not only in prostitution but in any menial task requiring cheap labor in the prosperous world of the European Union. His Chinese wife, who was also his business partner, provided a link to criminal Chinese triads with which Loncaric did profitable business smuggling Chinese as well as Kurds, Iraqis, Iranians, and any other afflicted people willing to mortgage themselves in hopes of a better future. Many of Loncaric’s Chinese victims found themselves locked up and forced to work 18 hours a day in restaurants or in the famous Italian leather workshops.

Trafficking mafias and smugglers, in the last decade of the 20th century, brought 35,000 people a year into Western Europe through the Trieste area, guiding them at night through the rugged mountains and forests straddling the border with Slovenia. But this is only one of many funnels between poor worlds and rich ones. Thousands of miles away I found another flood of migrants fleeing Central America on their way to El Norte, the United States, where they could ultimately become slaves.

These migrants’ homes were ravaged by the wars of the 1980s and ’90s and reduced to further ruin by a succession of natural and manmade disasters. Hurricane Mitch pounded Honduras and Nicaragua in 1998; afterward the number of homeless street children in Central America jumped by 20 percent. El Salvador was hit by a 7.6 earthquake in 2001. Large parts of the region have been without rain for the past three years, and the world price of coffee has crashed, ruining the Central American coffee industry and leaving 600,000 workers unemployed. In Guatemala more than half a million coffee workers face starvation.

Many economists argue that the North American Free Trade Agreement has made its own contribution to the flood of people trying to move north, maintaining that cheap U.S. corn imported into Mexico has effectively driven millions of Mexican peasant corn farmers out of business and off the land. They suggest that for every ton of corn imported into Mexico, two Mexicans migrate to the U.S.

The tiny Guatemalan town of Tecún Umán lies on the bank of the Suchiate River. Here migrants from Central America gather to cross into Mexico on their way north. Those with valid travel documents for Mexico cross the bridge over the river; those without them pay a few cents to be ferried across on rafts made from tractor inner tubes.

No matter where they come from, a great majority of migrants arrive in Tecún Umán penniless, easy prey for the local hoteliers, bar owners, and people smugglers—known as coyotes—who live off the flow of humanity. It is a town where, in the words of one former resident, “everything and everyone is for sale.”

Some of the luckier migrants find a temporary safe haven at Casa del Migrante, a walled compound just a few yards from the muddy riverbank. “Every day, morning and night, I give a speech here,” says the Casa’s director, Father Ademar Barilli, a Brazilian Jesuit who remains surprisingly buoyant despite the surrounding misery. “I talk about the dangers of the trip north and urge them to go back. It’s a bad choice to go home, but a worse one to try to go on to the U.S.”

Barilli warns migrants about the bosses in Mexico who may take their precious documents and force them into slavery on remote plantations. He tells them about the brothels in Tapachula, the Mexican town across the river, where girls are forced into prostitution. Most, remembering the misery they have left behind, disregard his warnings. As Adriana, a 14-year-old prostitute in a Tapachula bar, exclaimed when asked if she would consider going home to Honduras: "No, there you die of hunger!"

Despite Barilli and Casa del Migrante, Tecún Umán itself is hardly safe. The week before I arrived, a dead coyote had been dumped just outside the gates of the compound with a hundred bullets in his body. "People are killed here because of the traffic in people and babies. There are many mafias involved in the business of this town. Aquí uno no sale en la noche—Here you don't go out at night," Barilli said.

As I calculated the amount of daylight left, Barilli explained what local bar owners say to girls from the buses that roll in every day from the south. "They talk about a job working in a restaurant. But the job is in a bar. After the girl has worked for a while just serving drinks, the owner denounces her to the police and gets her arrested because she has no documents. She is jailed; he bails her out. Then he tells her she is in his debt and must work as a prostitute. The debt never ends, so the girl is a slave."

Barilli cited a recent case involving a bar named La Taverna on the highway out of town. The owner, a woman, had duped six girls in this fashion. "Some of them got pregnant, and she sold the babies," he said. Thanks partly to the efforts of a Casa del Migrante lay worker (who afterward went into hiding in response to a flood of very credible death threats), the bar owner was finally arrested and jailed.

Stepped-up security in the wake of 9/11 has made the major obstacle on the road from the south, the border between Mexico and the U.S., more difficult than ever to clear. With heightened control has come a commensurate increase in the price charged by smuggling gangs to take people across: up from an average of about \$1,000 a person to \$2,000. Survivors of the journey arrive deeply indebted and vulnerable to slavers.

In Immokalee, Florida, I sat in a room full of men and women with the same Maya features I had last seen on the faces of the people in Tecún Umán. Almost all of them were farm laborers, toiling on Florida's vast plantations to pick fruit and vegetables consumed all over the U.S. They were meeting at the headquarters of a farm-worker organization, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), to discuss ways of improving conditions

in their ill-paid occupation. When the rapid-fire Spanish conversation died away, an elderly man picked up a guitar and began to sing about Juan Munoz, who left Campeche, Mexico, "to seek his fortune in the U.S." but ended up in Lake Placid, Florida, working "as a slave" for a cruel boss who stole all his money.

Blues singers composed similar laments about the miseries of plantation life in the Old South, and we think of those songs as part of our heritage. But this song was not about the past. Juan Muñoz is a real person, a 32-year-old who left his small farm in Campeche because he couldn't earn enough money to feed his family. He made his way across the border to Marana, Arizona, where a coyote promised him a ride all the way to a job picking oranges in Florida. The ride cost \$1,000, which Muñoz was told he could pay off over time. On arrival he found he had in fact joined the modern slave economy.

Highway 27 runs through citrus country in the heart of Florida, which supplies 80 percent of U.S. orange juice. The pickers in the fields that line the highway are overwhelmingly immigrants, many undocumented and all poor. They earn an average \$7,500 a year for work that is hard and unhealthy, toiling for bosses who contract with growers to supply crews to pick crops. The law generally leaves these people alone so long as they stick to low-paid but necessary work in the fields.

Sweatshop conditions in the fields are almost inevitable, since the corporations that buy the crops have the power to keep the prices they pay low, thus ensuring that wages paid by harvesting companies to pickers stay low too. These conditions lead to a high turnover in the workforce, since anyone with a prospect of alternative work swiftly moves on. Hence the appeal to crew bosses of debt-slave crews, whose stability and docility are assured. That is how Juan Muñoz found himself held captive along with at least 700 others in the well-guarded camps operated by the Ramos family in and around the little town of Lake Placid.

"They had almost all been picked up in Arizona by coyotes who offered to take them to Florida and then sold them to the crew bosses," says Romeo Ramirez, a 21-year-old Guatemalan who went undercover to investigate the Ramoses' operation on behalf of the CIW.

Captives in eight camps in and around Lake Placid were living "four to a room, which stank, sleeping on box springs." Not surprisingly, the workers were terrified of their bosses. "People knew they would be beaten for trying to get away," said Ramirez, citing the rumor about one would-be escapee who "had his knees busted with a hammer and then was thrown out of a car moving 60 miles an hour."

“The workers were paid by the growers every Friday,” Ramirez continued, “but then they would all be herded to the Ramoses’ stores in Lake Placid and forced to sign over their checks. By the time they had paid for rent and food, their debt was as high as ever.” One such store, Natalie’s Boutique, is a block from the police station.

In April 2001 a team from the CIW helped four of the captive laborers, including Muñoz, to make a break. Spurred to action by the unequivocal testimony of the escapees, the FBI and INS mounted a raid—although the prominent “INS Deportation Service” sign on the side of the bus accompanying the raiding party gave the crew bosses enough warning to send the workers out into the orange groves around Lake Placid to hide. Nevertheless, the brothers Ramiro and Juan Ramos, along with their cousin José Luis Ramos, were eventually charged with trafficking in slaves, extortion, and possession of firearms. In June 2002 the three Ramoses were convicted on all counts and received prison sentences totaling 34 years and 9 months.

This 21st-century slave operation may have been ignored by the Ramoses’ corporate clients; and federal agencies may have been slow to react to prodding by the CIW. But the slave crews were hardly out of sight. The main camp in which the Ramoses confined their victims was just on the edge of town right beside a Ramada Inn. On the other side of the compound a gated community, Lakefront Estates, offered a restful environment for seniors.

“The slaves in Lake Placid were invisible, part of our economy that exists in a parallel universe,” points out Laura Germino of the CIW. “People were playing golf at the retirement community, and right behind them was a slave camp. Two worlds, speaking different languages.”

The Ramos case was in fact the fifth case of agricultural slavery exposed in Florida in the past six years. All came to light thanks to the CIW, which is currently promoting a boycott of fast-food giant Taco Bell on behalf of tomato pickers. The corporation boasts of its efforts to protect animal welfare in its suppliers’ operations. Corporate officials also say they demand compliance with labor laws, but point out that since they cannot monitor suppliers’ labor practices continually they rely on law enforcement to ensure compliance.

Slavery and slave trafficking in the U.S. today extend far beyond farm country into almost every area of the economy where cheap labor is at a premium. In 1995 more than 70 Thai women were rescued after laboring for years behind barbed wire in the Los Angeles suburb of El Monte, making clothes for major retailers while federal and state law enforcement repeatedly failed to obtain a proper warrant to search the premises. In June 2001

federal agents in Yakima, Washington, arrested the owners of an ice-cream vending company and charged them with using Mexican slaves, working to pay off transportation debts, to sell ice cream on city streets. According to Kevin Bales, there are between 100,000 and 150,000 slaves in the U.S. today.

The Department of State puts the number of people trafficked into the U.S. every year at close to 20,000. Many end up as prostitutes or farm laborers. Some work in nursing homes. Others suffer their servitude alone, domestic slaves confined to private homes.

The passage by Congress in 2000 of the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act, which protects such slaves against deportation if they testify against their former owners, perhaps has helped dispel some fearfulness. The growth of organizations ready to give help, like the CIW or the Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking, a southern California group that has assisted more than 200 trafficked people, means that victims are not alone. Public scrutiny in general is rising.

Still, such captives the world over are mostly helpless. They are threatened; they live in fear of deportation; they are cut off from any source of advice or support because they cannot communicate with the outside world. And the harsh fact remains that this parallel universe, as Laura Germino called it, can be a very profitable place to do business. Before sentencing the Ramoses, U.S. District Court Judge K. Michael Moore ordered the confiscation of three million dollars the brothers had earned from their operation, as well as extensive real estate and other property.

Moore also pointed a finger at the agribusiness corporations that hired the Ramoses’ picking crews. “It seems,” he said, “that there are others at another level in this system of fruit picking—at a higher level—that to some extent are complicit in one way or another in how these activities occur.”

A former slave named Julia Gabriel, now a landscape gardener in Florida and a member of CIW, remembers her arrival in the U.S. from Guatemala at the age of 19. She picked cucumbers under armed guard in South Carolina for 12 to 14 hours a day; she saw fellow captives pistol-whipped into unconsciousness. “Maybe this is normal in the U.S.,” she thought. Then a friend told her, “no, this is not normal here,” so Gabriel found the courage to escape.

“This is meant to be the country to which people come fleeing servitude, not to be cast into servitude when they are here,” says Attorney General John Ashcroft. But some historians argue that the infamous trans-Atlantic slave trade that shipped millions of Africans to

the New World was abolished only when it had outlived its economic usefulness. Now slave traders from Sherwood Castle to sunny Florida—and at hundreds of

points in between—have rediscovered the profitability of buying and selling human beings. Which means that, in the 21st century, slavery is far from gone.