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Modern Slavery, Global Capitalism & Deproletarianisation in West Africa

Kate Manzo

This paper explores the concept of 'new' or modern slavery in the wake of media reports of widespread child slavery on cocoa plantations in Côte d'Ivoire (the RCI). The first part defines slavery as unpaid forced labour, identifies the defining feature of modern slavery as the shift in the master-slave relation from legal ownership to illegal control, and then draws on a range of secondary sources to show that child slavery does exist in the Côte d'Ivoire even if numbers are contested. The many thousands of child slaves apparently trafficked from Mali make this a West African (and not simply Ivorian) phenomenon. The aspects of global capitalist development used in part two to explain the Ivorian situation, namely deproletarianisation and the costs of adjustment are also wider processes not unique to one country. The focus on the RCI as a case study is therefore intended as a stimulus to further questions and broader research into the relationship between capitalism and modern slavery in Africa.

> *Young men and boys are trafficked between countries in West Africa and used as forced labour on plantations producing goods for export such as cotton and cocoa … It is not clear how widespread slavery on cocoa plantations in the Côte d'Ivoire is* (Anti-Slavery International, undated:2).

> *A common question is why these practices should be called slavery rather than just another form of superexploitation* (Bales, 2002:2).

Inspired initially (as the above quotes suggest) by child slavery investigations and the work of academic and anti-slavery activist Kevin Bales, this paper addresses two related questions. First, what exactly is modern or 'new' slavery (Bales, 1999) and how does it differ from both the superexploitation of proletarian labour and the 'old' slavery exemplified in earlier centuries by the Atlantic slave trade and the system in the American South? And second, does modern slavery currently exist in Côte d'Ivoire and if so, why?

Answers are found in part in the writings of theorists of modern slavery (including Bales), in the publications of a range of anti-slavery and human rights organisations (such as Anti-Slavery International) and in media reports of child slavery in the RCI; they are also found in theories of global capitalist development. The basic premise of the paper is that modern slavery is not just a social-psychological condition (Bales, 2002). It is also a political-economic relation of power. This means that child slavery in the RCI is best understood in wider context – in relation to the effects of global capitalist development on the West African region and with reference to Marxian understandings and concepts.

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With that in mind the paper proceeds as follows. In part one, slavery per se is defined as unpaid forced labour. The constituent elements of *modern* slavery are identified as control without ownership: violence (or the threat of violence); coercion (loss of freedom and choice); and exploitation (of labour power through unpaid work). The basic argument here is that the absence of payment for work differentiates the slave from other categories of worker (either the 'free' proletarian or the forced wage labourer), while the absence of legal ownership in the master-slave relation is the principal feature distinguishing the new slavery from the old.

The existence of child slavery in conditions of commodity production on Ivorian cocoa farms is then demonstrated in those terms. Support for the argument is found in a range of secondary sources that draw heavily on the testimonies of young people – many of whom wear evidence of violence in the scars on their backs. Sufficient for current purposes, this empirical material will admittedly not settle ongoing questions about how many children (or what percentage of workers) are actually enslaved in the RCI. But then neither will the simple addition of new findings (however interesting in their own right). That is because the very features of contemporary slavery that flow from its illegality (such as fraudulent labour contracts, secrecy and denial) turn any form of data into political arithmetic. Numbers, in other words, are bound to be disputed as long as slavery remains illegal and its meaning contested.

In part two, child slavery is analysed with reference to the other side of the power relationship, namely the wider relations that enmesh the owner of the means of production (the master) as well as the dispossessed labourer (the slave). It is in asking *why* modern slavery exists (as opposed to *what* modern slavery *is*) that the paper departs fully from conventional Balesian wisdom. The second part begins by questioning whether modern slavery can be explained in all cases by reference to the same two factors, namely population growth and modernisation (Bales, 1999:12). The Marxian concept of deproletarianisation is then presented instead and applied to analysis of the costs of structural adjustment to a specific category of West African producer, namely smallholders dependent for their livelihood on an unstable commodity and fluctuating world prices of cocoa.

Within a global context of human rights law and the illegality of slavery, questions about practices that violate children's rights are inevitably legal and moral. But as the conclusion reiterates, the questions raised here are also broadly about the relationship between capitalism and slavery and the continued relevance of Marxian and neo-Marxian approaches to international political economy. These questions focus attention not only on the exploitation of child labour but also on the workings of the world economy and its consequences for Africa as a whole.

Slavery as Unpaid Forced Labour

Slavery vs. Other Forms of Superexploitation

> *Wage labour, unlike bona fide forms of servitude, is uncoerced, even if the working class en masse is forced by dint of circumstance to sign the labour contract* (Laycock, 1999:126).

> *Throughout history, slavery has meant a loss of free will and choice backed up by violence, sometimes exercised by the slaveholder, sometimes by elements of the state … These workers are unable to walk away* (Bales, 2002:2).

The exploitation of labour is hardly a novel phenomenon, even in nominally developed societies. Labour exploitation is arguably inherent in all three of what Frederich Engels called the 'great forms of servitude', namely slavery, serfdom and wage labour (quoted in Laycock, 1999:125). Contemporary Marxists thus consider modern capitalism to be no less an institution and relation of exploitation than either medieval feudalism (with its institution of serfdom) or the more antiquated social orders that involved the system of slavery (Laycock, 1999:125).

The very normality of labour exploitation under capitalism may explain why the more extreme and therefore newsworthy examples are often equated with slavery. That term has appeared in British newspapers, for example, to describe the unpaid domestic service of trafficked (mostly female) West African children (Hinsliff, 2003:13; see also Gillan, 2003). A category of undocumented adults, furthermore, has been classified as 'migrant slave labourers' by virtue of the 'slave wages' (as little as £1 a day) that are being paid to them by 'gangmasters'. These victims of so-called modern-day slavery are apparently beaten or incarcerated if they try to escape and exposed to high levels of 'violence, exploitation and lack of concern for health and safety' (Thompson, 2004:4).

Such media coverage begs the question of whether there is scholarly gain (as well as political hay) to be made from classifying as slavery the practices, conditions and power relations described in those reports. The position taken here is that the answer depends on whether payment for work is considered a defining element of proletarian labour. In Marxian theory, slavery is equated with a particular form of labour exploitation, namely unpaid work. Though the difference between capitalism and slavery in this regard may sometimes be an illusion (the old Soviet joke, for example, that factory workers pretended to work while factory owners pretended to pay them), under slavery 'all the slave's labour "appears" to be unpaid' whereas under capitalism 'all the proletarian's labour 'appears' to be paid' (Laycock, 1999:123). In these terms then, the notion of *slave wages* is an oxymoron and the adult migrant labourers paid a pittance for their labour in Britain are not equivalent to the trafficked children who are paid nothing at all.

If the issue is defined more broadly as *forced labour* – of which slavery is but one 'face' according to the International Labour Organisation (see ILO, 2001:48) – then parallels between slavery and other forms of superexploitation are more readily apparent. Theorists of slavery all tend to include forced labour or 'coercive labour regimes' as a central element (Blackburn, 1988:273; see also Bales, 1999; Patterson, 1982). Quoting Marx, Patterson (1982:2) suggests that slavery operates on the basis of *direct* forced labour whereas with wage labour the force is *indirect.* Be that as it may, the issue with slavery is clearly forced *labour* and not simply forced *removal*. Although force may well occur at the point of departure (as in traditional images of chained Africans dragged kicking and screaming across continents), explicit linkages to labour suggest that force (or the threat of force) is 'the basis of the master-slave relationship' (Patterson, 1982:3) and not simply a method of capture and removal.

As a central element of slavery, force (or coercion) entails a double loss of freedom and choice. First is the proletarian's loss of 'the freedom of wage labour in the relationship between labour and capital' (Brass, 1999:151). In Marxian theory, this form of freedom is defined by 'the ability of workers to enter *and withdraw* from particular labour markets and labour processes' (Brass, 1999:151, emphasis in the original; see also Bales and Robbins, 2001:30). Any worker (migrant or otherwise) who cannot vote with the feet and walk away is therefore closer to a slave in this respect than to a true proletarian.

The second, related form of loss under slavery is that of freedom of movement. In the language of rights, slavery violates the human right to freedom of movement by coercing labourers to remain where they are. In this sense, slavery is the antithesis of trafficking across national and international borders. Movement stops not only because a destination has been reached but also because movement is restricted by the slaveholder.

Coercion to work and remain may operate in slavery through forms of control that stop short of physical violence. But violence (or the threat of violence) and the imperative to escape tend to be two sides of the same coin. Horrific abuses and cruelties are typically present in master-slave relations as a back-up if nothing else – to either assert or maintain control when disaffection sets in (De Ste. Croix, 1988; see also Bales, 1999). In the words of Patterson (1982:4), 'there is no known slaveholding society where the whip was not considered an indispensable instrument.'

In sum, various strands of academic theory point to a definition of slavery as unpaid forced labour. Media reporting in Britain along with investigations by the ILO (2001) suggest that force remains a powerful element of control and mechanism for the reproduction of capital. But regularly paid workers (however meagre their pay) are not technically slaves.

'New' Slavery vs. 'Old' Slavery

The new slavery appropriates the economic value of individuals while keeping them under complete coercive control – but without asserting ownership or accepting responsibility for their survival (Bales, 1999:25).

Violence toward children is a common theme in the writings of anti-slavery organisations. In a short piece on 'traditional' slavery in West Africa, for example, the Anti-Slavery Society (2003a:1) claims that existing 'hierodulic' slaves (some as young as five) are 'beaten with canes or with specially-made wire whips'. A companion overview of the 'modern' West African slave trade similarly emphasises the use of the whip, calling it 'part of the essential equipment of the professional slaver' (Anti-Slavery Society, 2003b:1).

Such cross-cutting references to violence in general and whips in particular only beg the question of how various forms of the new slavery – such as chattel slavery, debt bondage and contract slavery (Bales, 1999:19-20) – differ from the earlier forms exemplified by the bondage of the Atlantic slave trade and the plantation slavery of the American South.

As once standard methods of procuring slave labour – such as violent capture and chained removal – become less apparent, it can be tempting to view evocative signifiers like chains and handcuffs as definitive features of an outmoded system. For Bales (1999:5), however, the key distinction is a legal one. Modern slavery is defined, not by changing methods of procurement but by an absence of legal ownership in the master-slave relationship.

The key to that definition (and therefore its value) is the author's contextual analysis. The changing character of slavery is rooted (paradoxically) in its formal abolition. From the Slavery Convention of 1926 to the Rome Final Act of 1998, freedom from enslavement in the twentieth century has been codified as a human rights principle in many international conventions (see Bales and Robbins, 2001). Betwixt and between are international commitments to the elimination of forced and compulsory labour (such as the Forced Labour Convention of 1930 and the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention of 1957) to which the RCI, among other states, is a signatory (UNDP, 2004:245).

The upshot of international legal change is that slavery is everywhere illegal even as it persists in various forms. In a context where ownership cannot be openly asserted, debt bondage and contract slavery are now more common forms than chattel (or hereditary) servitude. Fraudulent labour contracts 'have two main uses for the slaveholder – entrapment and concealment' (Bales, 1999:26). Their increasing issue to chattel and bonded slaves shows how secrecy and denial can hide behind modern labour practices (Bales, 1999:20).

In terms of global economics, absence of ownership is arguably efficient. As responsibility for the survival of individuals and a sense of permanence in the master-slave relationship are eliminated, so the slave becomes but another 'consumable item' in the world economy, to be disposed of when no longer useful (Bales, 1999:25).

The problem with the concept of global efficiency is that it doesn't really answer the question for part two, namely why contemporary slaveholders are willing to run the risks that they do. Illegality is doubly costly. Financially, the slaveholder loses money and cannot claim compensation if the slave escapes or is liberated by officials (see Raghavan, 2001:3). Legally, slaveholders are at risk of criminal prosecution if caught. A handful of them are already serving time in Ivorian prisons while others are on the run from police (Raghavan and Chatterjee, 2001:2).

Illegality is also costly in a political sense. Negative publicity is no guarantee of abolition, in part because the 'new abolitionists' themselves are relatively weak and divided (Bales, 1999:258-60). But as the following section now shows, no country (like the RCI) that has signed international agreements and outlawed slavery wants to be seen to be a place in which the practice persists.

Child Slavery in Conditions of Commodity Production

> *These [slaves] are people held against their will, coerced to work with the threat of violence, and paid nothing at all* (Morris, 2000:3).

A British television documentary aired in 2000 claimed that ninety per cent of Ivorian farms employ slave labour (see Channel 4, 2000). That claim was rejected as 'nonsense' and 'wildly inaccurate' by Kouadio Adjoumani, the RCI's ambassador to the UK (quoted in BBC News, 2000:1). A fellow Ivorian – Agriculture Minister Alfonse Douaty – adopted a similar stance in a four-part American investigation for Knight Ridder Newspapers. While admitting to the pervasive presence of indentured child *labour*, Douaty dismissed suggestions of widespread child *slavery* (calling it a marginal 'clandestine phenomenon') on the grounds that the term itself 'conjures up images of chains and whips' (Raghavan and Chatterjee, 2001:4).

The introductory quote from Anti-Slavery International admits to a degree of uncertainty over the magnitude of enslavement on Ivorian cocoa farms. According to the Child Labour Coalition (CLC) as well, 'no extensive research findings are available on how many children are enslaved' (CLC, undated:1). Cocoa and coffee farms in the RCI number in excess of 600,000, so limited findings are partly a consequence of economic geography. The most extensive study to date (of child labour in the entire West African cocoa sector) employs only a random sample of 1,500 Ivorian farm households rather than a comprehensive survey of all farms (see IITA, 2002).

The important point here is that the very illegality of slavery – the feature that defines its modern version – ensures that numbers will always be contested however comprehensive the investigations. Slavery can be redefined as something else, such as indentured servitude. It can also be 'hidden, well hidden' (Douaty, quoted in Raghavan and Chatterjee, 2001:3) behind fraudulent labour contracts or false claims to kinship relations between adults and child labourers. But this means that even if figures *are* wildly inaccurate, they are as likely to be *under*-estimated as *over*-estimated. Conventional wisdom, in other words, is probably highly conservative.

It is in references to trafficked children from Mali that something akin to conventional wisdom exists. Following a UNICEF study, a US State Department report on human rights in Ivory Coast noted that 'approximately 15,000 Malian children were trafficked and sold into indentured servitude on Ivorian plantations in 1999' (US State Department, 2000:33). Plans by the Malian government to assist 'what they estimate to be 15,000 Malian children working without payment on Ivorian cocoa farms' have been reported in the British media (BBC News, 2000:2). A later, academic reference to the trafficking of children from Mali to the RCI by Chanthavong (2002:3) again places at 15,000 'the number of children forced to work as slaves on these farms.'

Whether the plight of such children should be termed *slavery* or *indentured labour* is a matter of interpretation. It depends on how slavery is conceived and not simply on numerical evidence of abuse. The remainder of this section therefore aims to show that if chains (as a signifier of forced removal) are taken out of the equation then there are plenty of sources of evidence of unpaid forced labour on Ivorian farms.

One such source is the final part of the aforementioned Knight Ridder report (entitled 'A Taste of Slavery'). Sub-titled 'Two Boys, Two Years, No Pay', part four chronicles the experiences of Malian youngsters named Brahima Male and Siaka Traure. At the ages of 12 and 14 respectively, they were enticed away to the RCI with promises of paid skilled apprenticeships. After two days of travel and payment to a 'slave trader' of $28, they were put to work on an Ivorian farm producing cocoa and coffee, cotton, yams, corn and rice. Two years on, the adequately fed boys (who were once given a small sum to celebrate Muslim holidays) were found sharing a windowless mud hut and dreaming of escape. They were held in check by a combination of violence (the beating of Siaka with a big stick after a failed attempt to flee), threats of violence (i.e. of further beatings) and the promise of eventual payment (Raghavan, 2001).

The value of a report featuring only two cases is that it captures succinctly the constituent elements of modern slavery identified earlier. It also presents in microcosm the findings of other reports by academics and human rights activists, who have found further examples of migrant children in the RCI being overworked, unpaid, prevented from leaving and beaten after attempts to escape (Chanthavong, 2002; ISHR, 2002:5; see also Blunt, 2000:2).

Illegality brings other actors into the master-slave relationship. Secrecy and denial in the face of human rights investigations are one manifestation of this, as emphasised previously. The other side of the coin, however, is liberation and repatriation of slaves by government officials (Blunt, 2000:2; Raghavan and Chatterjee, 2001: 3). Law enforcement is important to state actors wishing to send a strong political message that slavery won't be tolerated. Its added value is in providing an additional source of evidence that modern slavery exists.

The oral testimonies of emancipated child slaves further illustrate the variety of means by which West African children have been kept in conditions of slavery. Lost in a foreign country, they cannot find their way home (Frenkiel, 2001). They haven't been paid and have no means to travel; they require the permission of adults – either parents or otherwise (IITA, 2002:13). They have been enticed into signing the fraudulent labour contracts mentioned earlier (Savoor, 2001:1). They have been locked up at night to prevent their escape (Chanthavong, 2002:4; Savoor, 2001). They have been warned of physically punishment if they try to escape (Raghavan, 2001; Savoor, 2001). And last but not least, they have been subjected to violence. Returned escapees have been beaten in front of other children to teach them a lesson (Blunt, 2000:3; Chanthavong, 2002:4; Savoor, 2001:1-2). They have also been beaten with 'chains, whips and switches' and, 'when they tried to leave, they were beaten and sometimes killed' (Shelby Biggs, 2002:2).

So modern slavery, in a nutshell, exists in West Africa. It is to the second question – of *why* it exists there, in the RCI in particular – that the paper now turns.

Global Capitalism & Modern Slavery

Even in areas where the demand for labour is either met or exceeded by the existing supply…employers may still be faced with rising labour costs…because overproduction and the tendency of the rate of profit to fall in the course of capitalist competition generally requires individual producers to cut the price of labour-power (Brass, 1999:158).

It wasn't until the bottom dropped out of the cocoa market that the promises of jobs turned into the reality of slavery (Shelby Biggs, 2002:4).

The work of Bales (1999) is the starting point for this investigation into the causes of modern slavery in the sense that he locates it firmly within the context of the global economy. The uneven effects of modernisation and globalisation – produced in part by the shift from subsistence agriculture to cash-crop production and export-led growth – are linked to the rise of the new slavery (Bales, 1999:13). Furthermore, Bales (1999:25) argues that 'the new slavery mimics the world economy by shifting away from ownership and fixed asset management, concentrating instead on control and use of resources or processes.'

The theoretical departure from Bales in what follows is driven by three considerations. Firstly, Bales' global theory is broad but not deep. Only two pages of *Disposable People* are devoted to both categories of explanation (or variables), namely population growth and modernisation (see Bales, 1999:12-13). What Bales offers is arguably more of a general framework than a detailed mode of explanation applicable without amendment to all situations.

Second, there are problems with both of those variables. The 'population growth' factor attributes slavery to an over-supply of children. Where 'countries are flooded with children' then, according to Bales (1999:12), the 'supply of potential slaves' increases and the price of slaves is driven down. In what follows, this emphasis on labour *supply* is replaced (in regard to the RCI) with an emphasis on labour *cost*.

As for the 'modernisation' factor, the main problem is the lack of historical perspective in an analysis beginning only after World War Two. In the RCI as elsewhere, the relationship between cash-crop production and forced labour is certainly robust but it began under colonialism (Amin, 1973:50) and not in the era of formal independence. Here again, it is more useful to consider variation in the costs (and conditions) of capitalist production rather than rely on broad explanatory categories like modernisation.

Thirdly, the relationship between modern slavery and the world economy is more complex than Bales suggests if the issue is framed more broadly (in Marxian terms) as the relationship between global capitalism and modern slavery.

Semi-feudalism vs. Deproletarianisation

According to Marxian theorist Tom Brass, forced or 'unfree' labour is regarded as inconsistent with the development of capitalism by neoclassical economists and also by Marxian exponents of the 'semi-feudal' thesis. The common ground on which the two camps meet is the view of forced labour as both anachronistic and inefficient; a 'pre-/non-capitalist relation that constitutes an obstacle to accumulation' (Brass, 1999:163).

The semi-feudal thesis has already been discredited within Marxism by various exponents of an alternative 'deproletarianisation' thesis. One line of attack is a global 'development of underdevelopment' approach, which views free labour in the core of the world economy and unfree labour in the periphery as contradictory elements of an international division of labour and opposite sides of the same capitalist development coin (see for example Amin, 1973).

A complimentary approach emphasises (like Marx) the varied, uneven and contradictory character of capitalism as it expands on a world scale. At whatever level of analysis, capitalism entails 'typically uneven waves of commodification, decommodification and recommodification' in regard to land, labour and goods (Jessop, 1997:562). The effects of capitalist expansion (via means such as market liberalisation or structural adjustment more generally) are thus necessarily uneven given the logic of capital. The dark side of progress – like the impoverishment and 'over-work' of rural African producers or the economic and political crises of the West African region – is therefore a consequence of capitalist development itself and not exogenous to it (Gruffydd Jones, 2003; Robson, 2005).

Yet another relevant Marxian approach is one that views forced labour as 'a crucial aspect of class conflict in particular agrarian situations' (Brass, 1999:153). It is Brass who suggests that population growth is irrelevant to the rise of modern slavery when he cites labour *costs* rather than labour *availability* as the key contributory factor. He argues that capitalist producers may incline toward forced labour when it 'enables them to segment the labour market, and also to cheapen and/or discipline their workers' (Brass, 1999:164).

Turning now to West Africa, the semi-feudal thesis is itself anachronistic if it cannot recognise the capitalist forces – what Robson (2005:77) calls 'peripheral capitalism' –

at work in the region. Cocoa production is a telling example, with producers subject to global capitalism via an international division of labour and the forces of commodity production and exchange. Approximately two-thirds of the cocoa destined for the world market is produced on West African farms measuring six hectares or less (IITA, 2002: 4, 17). In the RCI, an estimated eleven million smallholders have helped cocoa to supplant coffee as a major export commodity thanks to the government price incentives that encouraged cultivation in the era of independence (Chanthavong, 2002:5, 14; Crook, 1990). The upshot is that many small farmers have become dependent for their livelihood on cocoa, and it is this smallholder production that accounts for 'most of the large increase in production and export from the Ivory Coast in the 1990s' (Tiffen, 2002:393).

Smallholders must be counted among those to suffer from the varied and uneven effects of the structural adjustment programmes implemented after the International Monetary Fund (IMF) reached a stand-by agreement with the Ivorian government in 1989. Structural adjustment was designed to restore economic growth (and indirectly assist farmers) after a period of decline occasioned by a world drop in coffee and cocoa prices in the early 1980s. Fiscal constraints at a time of declining global terms of trade were followed (in the mid- 1990s) by economic liberalisation, i.e. 'labour market deregulation, price decontrol, trade reform, reductions in civil service employment, and faster privatisation' (Naiman and Watkins, 1999:10).

The social impact of economic liberalisation (its subjection of government-controlled economies to market forces) has been 'severe' in the sense that the 'incidence and intensity of poverty' doubled between 1988 and 1995 (Naiman and Watkins, 1999:10). As well as impoverishment, however, liberalisation has produced what Tiffen (2002:385) calls a 'social development paradox', whereby smallholders in remote areas suffer while bigger farmers and those near the cities prosper (see also Cheru, 1992). Small farmers suffer by no longer receiving much support through state agricultural policies, 'even though 70 per cent of the world's poorest people live in rural areas' (Tiffen, 2002:383). These farmers suffer when commodity markets are weak and there is 'simply no market for all the extra supply or production being urged on these already skewed economies' (Tiffen, 2002:388; see also IITA, 2002). And last but not least, small farmers suffer when the price of their commodity plummets.

Cocoa Prices, Uneven Development & Unequal Exchange

Rural livelihoods depend on both the quantity and the price of their produce. Under pressure from both the IMF and World Bank, the RCI 'freed up its cocoa market in 1999, abandoning fixed prices in favour of those set by the market' (Cowell, 2002:2). In this newly-liberalised market, 'farm-gate price is now determined by market forces, government taxes, and marketing margins, with the latter varying spatially as a function of distance-to-port and quality of road infrastructure' (IITA, 2002:17).

When looked at globally, cocoa prices are an indication of the combined and uneven effects of capitalist expansion, for at a time when the *retail* prices of tropical commodities such as coffee, cotton and cocoa are high, farm-gate prices 'are now falling well below the cost of production for even the most efficient farmer' (Tiffen, 2002:391). The power of retailers (or distributors) may be growing, along with that of dominant brand-owners like Cadbury and Mars (Tiffen, 2002). And yet the retailer (like the producer) is but one component of the international division of labour.

A host of profit-making intermediaries stand between the retailer and the producer of commodities. These intermediaries include (but are not limited to) a group referred to by the International Cocoa Organisation (ICA) as 'hard-bargaining commodity buyers,' i.e. merchants and middlemen who 'have systematically shortchanged the growers, buying their beans cheaply and selling at big profits in the rising market' (Cowell, 2002). In this situation, even a European cocoa industry executive finds it 'somewhat ironic that while European and American agriculture is protected, we should argue to developing countries that they should be fully exposed to the vagaries of the market' (quoted in Cowell, 2002:3).

Cocoa prices, furthermore, are an illustration of the long-term, structural inequalities or unequal exchange within the world economy that liberalisation has arguably exacerbated (Barratt Brown and Tiffen, 1990; Emmanuel, 1972; Hoogvelt, 1997:171). Without acknowledging the impact of their own policies on declining commodity prices and terms of trade, even the IMF and World Bank admit the rather obvious economic point that 'expansions of production may induce price falls in the cases of bananas, cocoa, coffee, cotton, tea and tobacco' (Sapsford and Singer, 1998:1655).

More significant is the Fund and the Bank's recent acceptance of the 1950 'Prebisch-Singer declining trend hypothesis'. This is the idea of a declining trend in real commodity prices because of a long-term tendency for terms of trade to deteriorate (Sapsford and Singer, 1998). In this situation, if all commodity producers are asked to diversify and switch to other exports (as they have been), 'there arises the possibility of the occurrence of what might be seen as a *second-order adding up problem* in the sense that the alternative lines of activity… may themselves be subject to falling prices!' (Sapsford and Singer, 1998:1655, emphasis in the original).

It is precisely in order to cut labour costs and reduce expenditures that impoverished farmers have turned to two main methods of deproletarianisation. On the one hand, farmers have increased their reliance on unpaid family labour. According to the IITA (2002:17), 'the open interviews with community leaders indicated that the greater employment of family labor was a common response to the recent drop in cocoa prices and the crisis in cocoa incomes.' On the other hand, farmers have increased their reliance on slaves 'in order to lower costs in an increasingly competitive global market' (American Anti-slavery Group, undated:1).

When Ivorian officials blame child labour on 'immigrant farmers from Mali' as well as on 'world cocoa prices that have fallen almost 24 percent since 1996' (Raghavan and Chatterjee, 2001:3), their explanations are clearly double-edged. But emphasis on the negative consequences of low cocoa prices for farmers is a reasonable response to concerns about child slavery. Any salary paid to a farm worker is dependent on the price the farmer receives for the cocoa (Bass, 2004:158). Cocoa farmers (like the producers of other primary commodities) 'have been squeezed by the "double-whammy" of a falling trend in real price coupled with an increase in its volatility' (Sapsford and Singer, 1998:1657). When prices of cocoa drop, farmers must therefore 'look for ways to cut costs by using cheap labor, driving them to even resort to use slave labor' (Chanthavong, 2002:5).

Anecdotal evidence suggests that when prices rise – as they have done since the record low recorded in 2000 – the use of slave labour declines (Anti-Slavery Society, 2003c:2; Bass, 2004:158; Krishnan, 2001:1). Higher cocoa prices would therefore seem to be a viable solution to the problem of child slavery. But unfortunately, they are not – at least not in the long-term – for reasons both political and economic.

The Political Economy of Rising Prices

The first factor to consider is the reasons why prices have risen. Price increases are not simply due to what John Newman, the Chairman of the UK-based Biscuit, Cake, Chocolate and Confectionary Alliance, has called 'the economic fundamentals of supply and demand' (quoted in Dadson, 2001:1). Recent increases in world cocoa prices are due to a combination of rising demand (driven by growing markets for cocoa in Asia and Europe) and declining output thanks to civil war in the RCI and bad weather and pest problems throughout West Africa (BBC News, 2001; Peltola, 2003:1). So even as prices have risen 'the fighting has killed hundreds in cocoa-growing regions, destroyed crops and kept farmers from harvesting what remains – and sharing in the higher prices' (Cowell, 2002:1).

The second factor relates to the 'trend and cycle' character of global commodity markets. As Sapsford and Singer (1998:1654) caution, 'commodity booms are temporary and invariably followed by bust.' When bust follows boom, commodity prices are often even lower than before, so the World Bank 'sensibly and rightly admonishes countries to behave prudently during commodity booms, not to make rash expenditure commitments' (Sapsford and Singer, 1998:1654). Commitment to worker pay might be considered 'rash' in this context.

Finally, a third factor to consider is international responses to (as opposed to reasons for) price increases. Such responses can be contradictory and conflicting. On the one hand, there is the World Bank, which is 'most emphatic in recommending trade liberalisation' when prices boom but fails to entertain the prospect that controls might be reintroduced when prices invariably fall (Sapsford and Singer, 1998:1656). Indeed (as already seen), liberalisation was recommended in the first place as an antidote to the economic decline occasioned by depressed commodity prices.

On the other hand, there are conflicts of interest between producers seeking permanently higher prices for their output and importers (or consumers) wanting to keep costs under control. Conflicts of this sort surfaced, for example, during a meeting in Geneva held in 2001. Although the conference did agree to monitor market forces as a way to control imbalances between supply and demand, it failed to resolve a number of outstanding issues between global producers and users of cocoa (BBC News, 2001:3).

Strategic manipulation of market forces by various actors suggests that 'the low level of return on labour and investment by farmers is being extracted because of how the market is controlled, not just as a result of supply and demand' (Tiffen, 2002:391). It also suggests that the world market is no more 'free' than the children who produce for it in West Africa. Power is being exercised, and not just by slaveholding farmers.

Conclusion

This paper set out to address the causes (rather than the consequences) of modern slavery. While drawing to some extent on the classic study of the phenomenon by Bales (1999), the paper departed from Bales in two related respects. First, the scope of this investigation was limited to the situation of one category of slave (children) in one part of the world (West Africa) and in one particular situation (cocoa production on Ivorian farms). Second, child slavery was explained in terms of deproletarianisation rather than population growth and modernisation.

Academic theory (as well as a variety of more topical writings) was drawn upon to illustrate and support the approach and arguments of the paper. Much of the theory suggested in part two as an alternative to Bales can be classified as Marxian or neo-Marxian political economy. The key themes were: commodity production and trade (Ivorian cocoa being the traded commodity in question); labour costs within a hierarchical international division of labour; unequal exchange or terms of trade (signified by the declining and volatile price of primary commodities like cocoa); capitalist expansion (via commodification and, more recently, economic liberalisation); and last but not least, the varied and uneven effects of the world-wide expansion of capitalism. Other than deproletarianisation, then, the over-arching theme of part two was global capitalism.

Marxian and neo-Marxian thought remains varied and eclectic, and no single theoretical framework or theorist was presented here as having the final word on the subject of the modern enslavement of children. Whether or not the international political economy approach adopted here makes sense is ultimately for the reader to decide. The broadly Marxian framework is arguably defensible, however, on two grounds.

First, Marxian thought – particularly in its more global applications – makes sense not only of the condition of slaves but also of the behaviour of slaveholders. Slavery is a relation of power; it needs to be explained in ways that capture all aspects of the relationship and not simply the treatment or condition of one element.

Second, the resort to Marxian thought begs further questions about the continued 'relevance and power of marxism' as a theoretical approach to understanding 'essentially *capitalist* societies' (Jessop, 1997:566, emphasis in the original). Those who view West African agriculture as semi-feudal may well question the utility of such an approach. What the paper has tried to show, however, is that West African agriculture is indeed embedded within an essentially capitalist world economy (be it thanks to colonialism, modernisation, structural adjustment or something else).

Overall, the paper has tried to demonstrate the importance of asking varied questions about slavery. Rights are being violated and laws are being broken. Imperatives to ask questions about (and find solutions to) these problems are inevitably legal and moral. But the ways in which markets are currently controlled and power is currently exercised raise much bigger questions about the workings of the world economy and its consequences for Africa as a whole.

Kate Manzo, International Development, School of Geography, Politics and Sociology at the University of Newcastle, UK. She is also co-curator of *Imaging Famine*, a collaborative web-based project investigating images of Africa in Western media (see www.imaging-famine.org); e-mail: kate.manzo@newcastle.ac.uk.

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