

Slave Labor in the Modern American Economy

John Bowe, *Nobodies: Modern American Slave Labor and the Dark Side of the New Global Economy*. New York: Random House, 2008.

reviewed by Russell Harrison

In 1966, the British socioeconomist Robert Theobald published a collection of essays titled, *The Guaranteed Income: Next Step in Socioeconomic Evolution?* He suggested the establishment of a “guaranteed income proposal” (233). He proposed that:

“Basic Economic security can best be regarded as an extension of the present Social Security system to a world in which conventional job availability will steadily decline.

We will need to adopt the concept of an absolute constitutional right to an income. This would guarantee to every citizen of the United States, and to every person who has resided within the United States for a period of five consecutive years, the right to an income from the federal government sufficient to enable him to live with dignity. No government agency, judicial body, or other organization whatsoever should have the power to suspend or limit any payments assured by these guarantees.” (233)

Even Milton Friedman and Richard Nixon had generally accepted the idea as a good one. Who then would have thought that the subsequent decades would have trended in quite the opposite direction, i.e., towards slave labor; from money for no work to work for no money. What happened?

Obviously many things happened. But, based on a reading of John Bowe’s book on the topic, one cannot, I think, deny that the phenomenon of globalization has had much to do with the diminution of workers’ power and status. Rather than just having to compete with the worker’s native “reserve army of the unemployed,” s/he now has to compete with a global reserve army.

Nobodies treats three quite different instances of exploited/enslaved workers: Latino agricultural workers in Florida, Indian welders in Oklahoma and Asian textile workers in Saipan in the Northern Marianas in the South Pacific. While U.S. agriculture has often relied on importing workers, as in the *bracero* program of the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s, the availability of labor world wide has increased tremendously: as a result of the opening up of the former Communist block; the dispossession of peasants from their subsistence plots in Mexico as a result of NAFTA; and in India and elsewhere in Asia, where increasing industrialization and the concomitant dam building for hydroelectric power has also resulted in dispossession.

Nobodies is structured around Bowe’s investigative reporting on specific cases in the places where they occurred. While there is a fair amount of anecdotal evidence, Bowe also provides important historical contextualization. But the theme that runs through the book is a question: Does this particular case rise to the level of slavery? As with the controversial discussions on what constitutes torture in the “War on Terror,” there is a disturbingly post-modern moment to Bowe’s reflections, the idea that with so many parameters, so many slippery signifiers, so many different points of view, can we really come to a justifiable conclusion that, yes, here was a case of slavery.

Take, for example, the Indian welders who were lured to JPC, a Tulsa, Oklahoma steel-cutting company that serviced the oil industry. They were paid far less than they had been promised, on arrival, their passports were taken away from them; they were poorly housed and fed; they were locked in their horrible dorms at night;

there was a guard with a gun. Was this slavery? In the end we come to the conclusion that it was. But it is a little disturbing, as I said, that there is a good deal of hemming-and-hawing before we do. This case was clinched, at least for this reader, by testimony from the subsequent trial. There, Dr. Kevin Bales, head of a human rights group, Free the Slaves, testified that according to The Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000, this was slavery. That act proscribes:

“the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery.” What was so tricky to understand? The men had been forced to work in a situation they had not freely consented to and had been made to feel unfree to leave” (137).

“What happened at JPC, Bales felt, was a matter of subtle coercion” (137). Examples of such “subtle coercion” are, for example, “threats of force or future harm” (137).

When Americans think of slavery, they almost inevitably associate it with the antebellum American South and have difficulty thinking outside that particular box. This became clear to me when I used Bowe’s book in an English Composition class at my University in Fall 2008. While some students saw the situation as an example of slave labor, others did not. One sticking point for those was the fact that the workers at JPC got paid, paltry as that wage might have been; so how can it be slavery?

JPC was able to get the Indian welders visas by contending that they were working as trainees. But the Indians were already welders. As Bales said: “Pickle [the owner of JPC] had probably just wanted to “pull a fast one on immigration and get some cheap welders”” (137-38). To me, this desire to make a buck—indeed, as many bucks as possible—seems to have been the obvious motivator behind all the cases presented in *Nobodies*. But oddly, after presenting a wealth of evidence to that effect, Bowes reverses field and almost scores a goal for the other side.

In the middle of the book, in a chapter titled, “Ants,” Bowes writes that when he started writing about slavery, people would ask him why wealthy corporations would engage in slavery, he didn’t know the answer. Later, however, he “came to believe . . . that slavery and labor abuse in general have far less to do with economics than with emotions” (151). “What motivates human behavior more than simple greed or the desire for mere money is the desire for power—that is, power over other human beings” (151). Bowe cites gruesome treatment of slaves from both past and present and then suggests, “Surely, such imaginative efforts [particularly gruesome treatment of slaves] go beyond the simple motion of making a tidy return on investment” (155). But the vast majority of such cases are from pre-capitalist societies where slavery might well indeed have had a different function. Surely the large Florida orange growers who subcontract out the harvesting of their crops and who maintain an arms-length relationship with the labor factors who supply the workers who harvest the oranges are not motivated by a desire for power over other human beings. To ignore the economic incentives is to miss much of the dynamics of modern-day slavery.

Thankfully, little of Bowe’s book supports his power thesis. The core of the book is a detailed presentation, using a variety of techniques and sources, of instances of modern-day slavery and labor abuses generally that just might cause readers to question a system that tolerates and even encourages such horrible degradation of its workers. But one is upset by how far we haven’t come – indeed have reversed course – when we look back at the ambitious plans of the early 1960s as presented by Theobald and others.

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