

How Slavery Still Exists Today – By Cory Edmund Endrulat

When Americans traditionally think of slavery, they think of chattel slavery, the ball and chain slavery that took place, particularly involving the ownership of African Americans. However, slavery has existed for thousands of years, spanning nearly every part of the world. When chattel slavery existed, it was seen as natural and essential to society, a world unimaginable without it due to its long history and great contribution to the economy. Let us explore the origins of slavery and the nature of slavery. Today, chattel slavery still exists but in certain locations or occupations, and among other forms of slavery.

The “birthplace of slavery” is considered to have taken place in Sumeria, or Ancient Mesopotamia, the world’s first and “oldest civilization” with also the “oldest known law code” called the “Code of Ur-Nammu.” Since the creation of Sumeria, every civilization practiced slavery thereafter, and it was known as an “established institution”. The laws would be put in place for “equity and truth” as it says in the law Code of Ur-Nammu, or “to prevent the strong from oppressing the weak” as it says in the law Code of Hammurabi. However these claims would be made whilst the same civilizations practiced slavery, deciding for the slaves what their rights are and deciding upon their own whims, what their punishments are to be. The rulers of these civilizations were seen as having the “divine right to rule”, as they were often head by a priest class. If at anytime, a slave tried to escape, there would be rewards for freer peoples by law to recapture the slave. In the 19th century, the people given this specific task by their rulers were called the “slave patrol”, and they are considered among the origins of “modern day policing.” The king or ruler of these different civilizations would be in ultimate control over those considered “free” or those considered “slaves.” They would have the imagined-power to be the ones to grant other’s their freedom, this was called “manumission” or “enfranchisement.” Historically, people have become slaves as result of government war or government jailing systems, if not born into a slave family or endured unpaid labor. In the 19th century, chattel slavery in the aggregate of society was “abolished”, primarily by the cause of “abolitionism.” However, if somebody in today’s world becomes imprisoned by their rulers or government, slavery can be used as the punishment for crime. Statistically, about 80 percent of all modern imprisoned peoples are from victimless crimes. 19th century abolitionist and lawyer Lysander Spooner would differentiate a crime, that which causes harm to another person’s life or property, from a vice, a victimless act which does potential harm to one’s own life or property in his writing “Vices Are Not Crimes: A Vindication of Moral Liberty” from 1875. If it weren’t for the many abolitionists in the 19th century like Lysander Spooner sounding the alarms about chattel slavery, it could’ve continued in mass to this day, but these same abolitionists also warned of other forms.

With insight into the origins of slavery, we may also define the very nature of slavery. 19th century abolitionist Henry Clarke Wright states that slavery is “submission or subjection to control by the will of another being.” Professor Kevin Bales states that “slavery is theft, theft of a life, theft of work, theft of any property or produce, theft even of the children a slave might have borne.” The 19th century abolitionist Ezra Heywood states that “slavery is voluntary or involuntary; voluntary when one sells or yields his or her own person to the irresponsible will of another; involuntary when placed under the absolute power of another without one’s own consent.” One of the greatest writers of all time and late-abolitionist philosopher Leo Tolstoy wrote “the necessity to do what other people wish against your own will is slavery. And, therefore, as long as any violence, designed to compel some people to do the will of others, exists there will be slavery.” Another 19th century abolitionist Salmon Chase states “slavery is the complete and absolute subjection of one person to the control and disposal of another person, by legalized force. We need not argue that no person can be, rightfully, compelled to submit to such control and disposal. All such subjection must originate in force; and, private force not being strong enough to accomplish the purpose, public force, in the form of law, must lend its aid. The government comes to the help of the individual slaveholder, and punishes resistance to his will, and compels submission. The government, therefore, in the case of every individual slave, is the real enslaver, depriving each person enslaved of all liberty and all property, and all that makes life dear... For slavery cannot subsist a moment after the support of the public force has been withdrawn.” Lysander Spooner when talking about the U.S Civil War, stated “the pretense that the ‘abolition of slavery’ was either a motive or justification for the war, is a fraud of the same character with that of ‘maintaining the national honor.’ Who, but such usurpers, robbers, and murderers as they, ever established slavery? Or what government, except one resting upon the sword, like the one we now have, was ever capable of maintaining slavery? And why did these men abolish slavery? Not from any love of liberty in general—not as an act of justice to the black man himself, but only ‘as a war measure,’ and because they wanted his assistance, and that of his friends, in carrying on the war they had undertaken for maintaining and intensifying that political, commercial, and industrial slavery, to which they have subjected the great body of the people, both white and black. And yet these imposters now cry out that they have abolished the chattel slavery of the black man—although that was not the motive of the war—as if they thought they could thereby conceal, atone for, or justify that other slavery which they were fighting to perpetuate, and to render more rigorous and inexorable than it ever was before. There was no difference of principle—but only of degree—between the slavery they boast they have abolished, and the slavery they were fighting to preserve; for all restraints upon men’s natural liberty, not necessary for the simple maintenance of justice, are of the nature of slavery, and differ from each other only in degree.” From etymology, the word “slave” comes from the late 13th century as a “person who is the chattel or property of another,” from Old French esclave, from Medieval Latin Sclavus “slave” (source also of Italian schiavo, French esclave, Spanish esclavo) and originally “slav” due to the many slavs sold into slavery by conquering peoples. The word “slavery” based upon this, comes from the 16th century referring to “severe toil, hard work, drudgery” also meaning a “state of servitude.”

Therefore, we must ask ourselves, if claiming 100% ownership of someone’s property is slavery, what percentage isn’t? If taking 100% of someone’s property is theft, what percentage isn’t? Is there any means by which any number of individuals can delegate to someone else the moral right to do something which none of the individuals have the moral right to do themselves? Do those who wield political power (presidents, legislators, etc.) have the moral right to do things which other people do not have the moral right to do? If so, from whom and how did they acquire such a right? Is there any process (e.g., constitutions, elections, legislation) by which human beings can transform an immoral act into a moral act (without changing the act itself)? When law-makers and law-enforcers use coercion and force in the name of law and government, do they bear the same responsibility for their actions that any-one else would who did the same thing on his own? When there is a conflict between an individual’s own moral conscience, and the commands of a political authority, is the individual morally obligated to do what he personally views as wrong in order to “obey the law”? Can slavery be limited if it’s seen as legitimate? Perhaps the world needs to take another look at slavery, think for yourself, as you should.