Trafficking in Human Beings: Slaves in Contemporary Europe

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The interpretation of slavery in relation to economic development is highly controversial. Historians such as Hobsbawm, for example, tend to focus on the strong link between industrialization, forced labour and the slave trade. The economic development of early capitalism, in his view, was accompanied by a correspondent increase in the number of Africans being transferred to the Americas (Hobsbawm 1968). In a similar vein, the analysis of Polanyi (1966) suggests that the slave trade was instrumental in the collapse of African non-market, archaic economies and their relentless inclusion in global commerce as providers of labour and raw materials. However, these interpretations, which are presumably inspired by a Marxist perspective, appear to contradict their very source of theoretical inspiration. In effect, Marx analyses early capitalism as an “encounter” between capital and “labour as a commodity”. In order for this encounter to take place, those endowed with the “commodity labour” must have control over it, so that they can exchange it for money. Slavery does not entail such control over one’s labour, a circumstance which leads Marx to conclude that capitalism may only establish itself when slavery is abolished (Marx 1970). In this sense, the very definition of work as opposed to slavery is associated with the notion of being hired.

The study of contemporary slavery does not resolve these controversies. Whether forced labour and the trafficking in humans are anchored to archaic economies or are part of broader processes of economic advancement is hard to establish, especially when archaism and advancement are regarded as mutually exclusive. This article will attempt to analyse this form of illicit trafficking against the background characterized by the growth of hidden sectors within European economies. These sectors of the economy include a variety of legal, semi-legal and outright illegal activities which, as we shall see, require the entrepreneurial efforts of a wide range of actors, including some forms of organized crime. Recent efforts by the EU to tackle this issue seem to clash with economic interests which are
beyond EU control. On the one hand, the contrast between official action and economic behaviour reveals the institutional difficulties in both promoting and harnessing the principles of free entrepreneurship. On the other hand, given the productivity of illegal immigrants, one could question whether the official rhetoric is part of what organizational theory would term as ‘manifest goals’, namely goals which are destined to be ignored because they are inoperative (Perrow 1970).

In the following pages, a number of European case studies will be presented with a view to identifying the major actors involved in such trafficking. In the concluding part of the article, the information and the case studies provided will form the basis for a brief discussion of the relationships between such actors. Sources for this article include interviews with investigators, prosecuting judges and voluntary organizations operating in a number of European countries.

A Third-World Phenomenon?

Reports published by statutory or voluntary agencies indicate that there are today around 200,000,000 slaves in the world. Such reports, which mainly focus on developing countries, are often echoed by news items released by the European media. Thus, for example, Libération of 21 July 1992 reported that: “The Bangladeshi police has intercepted a ferry carrying 74 persons destined to be sold”. Two-thirds of these persons were under 15 years of age; some were chained, and had not eaten for several days. The women were to be delivered to Indian and Pakistani entrepreneurs who owned workshops or brothels, while the children were to be sent to countries in the Persian Gulf, where they would be used as jockeys in camel races. One NGO report issued in 1990 concluded that the official figure of 15,000 people made slaves in Bangladesh every year was an underestimate (Anti-Slavery Society 1990).

In China the process of market liberalization is said to accelerate the traffic in women, who are sold as slaves. In 1993 the Chinese police set free dozens of women who had been sold as slave-wives to wealthy peasants in a number of small villages across the country (L’événement du Jeudi, 5 August 1993). Young people are being sold as domestic servants in some oil-producing countries, or are bought by entrepreneurs of the rug industry operating in India, Nepal and Morocco (Anti-Slavery International 1978, Bouhdiba 1982, Cross 1991, Sattaur 1993, Torrès 1996). Human rights organizations based in France, Germany and the U.K. are trying to persuade traders to check the origin of the rugs they sell, and to adopt a mark stating that such rugs are “not made by children held in slavery” (Torrès 1996).
However, such reports seem to imply that the trade in human beings and contemporary forms of slave labour are confined to developing countries, where they constitute important tools for these countries to compete with their developed counterparts. Slavery, therefore, comes to be associated with primitive forms of accumulation which are likely to trigger the economic ‘miracles’ observed in countries adopting a so-called Asian model of development. Some forms of slavery, in effect, seem to be compatible with this model, as they constitute an extension of the flexibility, precariousness and over-exploitation of the work force characterizing it. But to what extent are these forms of work relation also compatible with the economic models prevailing in the developed countries? As we shall see, these forms of work relation are not only important for the economies of developing countries, but also play a role in Western economies, where transnational companies may contract abroad parts of their production.

Heavens Abroad

When describing the advantages enjoyed by developed economies from the trafficking in human beings, one has to consider that this type of trafficking would be redundant if Western enterprises could employ slave labour in loco, namely in countries where human beings can be bought and sold. This practice is only viable for larger enterprises which are endowed with a complex structure and a number of diversified subunits. These enterprises, for example, might adopt different industrial practices depending on the area in which their subunits operate. Thus, advanced marketing techniques and even forms of labour participation may be in operation at home, while labour-intensive, or slave-type exploitation may be applied abroad.

Many European companies operate in South-East Asia, where they establish workshops in particularly advantageous conditions. Along with the fiscal benefits they enjoy from local governments, these companies rely on both cheap and forced labour. Examples were given by investigating judges in France, who were collecting evidence for the prosecution of some entrepreneurs operating in Malaysia and Burma. These entrepreneurs had appointed intermediaries who hired labour locally in both the illegal workshops scattered in rural areas and in prison institutions. Forced labour carried out in overseas penitentiaries was also exposed by German investigators, who were hampered in their attempts to bring the cases to court because of the international nature of the offence they were facing.
A public prosecutor explained:

Legally speaking, the companies we identified could not be prosecuted, because they were dealing with intermediaries based in Hong Kong. These intermediaries were registered businessmen, and the suspicion that their businesses were only fronts could not be proved. Our conviction is that these businessmen have access to the Republic of China, where they transfer commissions both to illegal workshops where slave labour is used and to prison institutions where the payment of a salary for the work done is out of the question.

As mentioned above, these practices entail a degree of diversification that only larger enterprises can afford. Moreover, they require large availability of resources to be invested in the transportation of semi-finished and finished goods to and from developing countries. Smaller companies, which are unable to traffic in goods internationally, resort to trafficking in humans instead. In this way, they also meet the needs of the work force from developing countries, whose responses to the North-South divide include ‘individual resistance by physical relocation’.

In a world of increasing North-South polarization, with Northern demographic decline and Southern demographic expansion, how will it be politically possible to stem massive unauthorized South-to-North migration? (Wallerstein 1995: 132).

This high demand for physical relocation is in itself a source of profits, which should be added to the profits brought by illegal immigrants to the hidden sectors of European economies.

In the following pages a typology is presented of such hidden sectors benefiting from the trafficking in human beings. First, individuals who find occupation in workshops and other conventional economic activities will be considered. Second, those who work in the criminal economy proper, in particular in prostitution, will be dealt with. Finally, the discussion will focus on individuals who work as servants. When necessary, attention will be drawn to the overlaps between these occupations.

**Unregistered Work**

In France, unregistered workshops are regularly raided and large groups of immigrants without a permit to stay or to work are arrested. A group of Vietnamese arrested in 1990 revealed that they had paid large sums to be smuggled into Europe and to work in the hidden sector of the economy (France Soir, 4 August 1990). Other groups of Vietnamese are sometimes
arrested in the Place du Trocadéro in Paris, where they are dumped after the journey, and left there to provide for themselves.

Investigators, in France and elsewhere in Europe, distinguish between traffickers who limit themselves to the provision of smuggling services and traffickers who provide addresses of prospective employers along with smuggling services. The second type of traffickers act as intermediaries between migrants and small businesses, and according to prosecutors their popularity is increasing.

Examples are found across Europe, where the textile industry and the building trade benefit from the trafficking of human beings. Entrepreneurs are not charged for the smuggling service provided to them by traffickers, as it is usually those smuggled who pay (Myers 1995, Silvestri 1996). Refugees from Iran, Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan often land on the island of Gotland in Sweden, and the trip costs them more than US$1000. They board boats from Estonia or Latvia, where traffickers act as sorting agents on behalf of entrepreneurs.

A Chinese group operating in Turin (Italy) also belonged to the second type of traffickers. The investigation started after a Chinese, who turned out to be an illegal immigrant, was found shot dead. One of his colleagues helped in the investigation, which unravelled an organization engaged in both trafficking and the employment of immigrants. These were housed under quasi-military surveillance, and worked under similar coercion in order to pay the sum due for their transportation into Europe. The murdered immigrant had failed to keep up with payments. Similar cases occurred in Milan, where a large clandestine Chinese community has established itself thanks to the trafficking services provided by the group known to the Italian police as the “Wenzhou Gang”. Dozens of immigrants are ‘housed’ in damp basements and cellars where they eat, sleep and work at the same time. The handbags, belts and clothes they manufacture under slave conditions are bought by leading companies operating in the international trade of renowned Italian fashion (La Stampa, 22 September 1994).

A barrister I interviewed in London recounted many cases in which he had acted as the defence lawyer of illegal immigrants arrested on farms. Their clients had paid money to get to England, where they were illegally employed. Some had been reported to the immigration authority because they were unhappy with the £4-a-day wage they were receiving and had threatened to change employment.

The trafficking in Albanians is rife in the South of Italy. There is only a narrow strait separating Albania from the coast of the region of Puglia. Here the coastguard patrol is particularly severe, as dozens of small boats illegally carry Albanians into the Italian territory. Investigators estimate that 5000 individuals per month cross the sea in such small boats. This is
the new strategy adopted by those who dream of a new beginning in Italy, after the previous biblical exodus failed. Consortia of groups operating in Puglia and their associates based in Albania are under investigation for such cases of trafficking in humans. Some of these groups establish joint ventures with ‘clean’ entrepreneurs operating in this area. These commit themselves to hiring those who are delivered and employ them in the small businesses they run. Some of these businesses are part of the parallel, unofficial economy, and are subsidiaries to larger industrial companies operating in the manufacturing sector. Others are part of the farming sector, which is in need of seasonal unregistered workers. Among the owners of such businesses there are groups affiliated to the local alliance of organized crime, the Sacra Corona Unita (Maritati 1992, Occhiogrosso 1993). Albanians who wish to reside in Italy are therefore offered ‘packages’, which may include trafficking services together with a variety of job opportunities. Migrants who are serviced by organized crime may either be employed in the businesses described above, or may be offered work in the illicit drug economy. Women may be diverted to striptease clubs or brothels.

**Competing Agencies**

It should be noted that conventional criminal groups are not the only actors offering trafficking services. Similar services are provided by agencies specializing in the recruitment of men and women from developing countries who officially seek work in the developed countries. Members of Anti-Slavery International based in London suggested that no matter the skills and experience of individuals contacting such agencies, they almost invariably become servants, especially women. These women are usually deceived, as they are promised the work of their choice only to find that on arrival the employer “gives them no choice — or rather the non-choice of returning home immediately at their own expense” (Anderson 1993: 24). Although legally registered, these recruitment agencies apply what amounts to a debt bondage to those seeking a job in developed countries. The illegality of their business also lies in the level of the recruitment fee, which is far higher than the one officially stated. According to Anti-Slavery International, many of the women fall into debt by borrowing at exorbitant interest rates to pay recruitment fees, or by taking an advance payment from the recruiter. Before they can even begin to send money to their families, which is the prime purpose of their working overseas, they have to redeem these debts. In Britain, the slave condition of these domestic workers is also apparent in the ruling indicating that, on their entry into the country, the name of the employer must be stamped on their passports. A leaflet issued by the British Home
Office reads: “The stamp placed in your passport by the Immigration Officer will record the name of your employer. You cannot work for anyone else.”

Similar agencies, operating in many European countries, trade in Asian women destined for marriage. An exotic wife costs between 5000 and 10,000 German marks (La Stampa, 27 October 1994).

The illegality of this type of human trafficking resides in the level of fees applied by such agencies. However, some engage in other forms of illegality when the official ways of securing entry visas for their customers are precluded. After cases investigated in Britain, for example, a black market of visas was discovered which saw the participation of agencies based in developing countries and officials employed by the Foreign Office. In France, a high-ranking police officer in service at the airport of Roissy was arrested on the charge of acting as the ‘visa dispenser’ for an organization specializing in human trafficking from Algeria (Le Monde, 29 March 1996).

Other agencies, though regularly registered, may find it difficult to obtain visas for their customers, and therefore resort to illegal traffickers with whom they form temporary or long-term partnerships. Interviews with prosecuting judges conducted across Europe revealed that such joint ventures specialize in both the procurement of work in the hidden economy and the provision of unregistered jobs as servants (Ruggiero 1996). In Spain, an import–export firm was prosecuted for trafficking in human beings after a man who was using its services arrived dead at his destination. The prosecuting judge for this case revealed that the people smuggled by this firm were crammed in vans, one of which was a refrigerator officially transporting meat, and that none of the defendants had a criminal record. A similar tragedy occurred in Hungary, where 18 Sri-Lankans were found suffocated in a refrigerated truck, which was locked from the outside. They had paid $800 each to a Bulgarian trucker to bring them to Germany and Italy. The tragedy struck when the ventilation system of the vehicle broke down (del Mundo 1995).

The trafficking of servants may also involve the voluntary or inadvertent participation of foreign embassy officials in countries such as Switzerland and France. In Geneva, for example, about 34,000 individuals work in activities related to the local network of foreign embassies. Chauffeurs, personal servants, gardeners, cooks, cleaners and so on are employed by diplomats or delegates of the UN and other international institutions. A charitable organization operating in the city, the “Syndicat sans Frontières”, set up by a refugee who fled Chile under Pinochet, has brought more than 50 cases to court for slavery over the last 2 years. Some of these slaves had entered the country illegally, after payment of a fee to traffickers, and had been employed by diplomats for lower wages than officially
established. Others had become ‘enslaved’ after their employers had confiscated their passports or work permits. This had automatically made them illegal, and put them at the complete disposal of their owners, who could also relinquish the commitment of paying them a wage.

Servants who do not bring their case to similar organizations (because they are too scared to do so) escape from their owners and end up in the hidden economy described above, where lacking a work permit or a permit to stay is a guarantee rather than an obstacle to employment. Others do not only escape from unbearable work conditions, but also from abuses which include physical violence and rape. A recent case occurring in France gained symbolic significance during the celebration of International Women’s Day in 1996. An African woman, who had worked as a servant for an industrialist, had been raped by the man and his son before attempting to kill both (Le Monde, 8 March 1996).

As we have seen, it is not easy to draw precise boundaries between the activities performed by those who are smuggled into Europe, whether they are provided such smuggling service by organized criminal groups or by officially registered agencies. Men and women may move from the semi-legal economy to the criminal economy and vice versa. Furthermore, servants may escape their employers to find an occupation in both these economies. Incidentally, one may even claim that the prime beneficiaries of the trafficking in servants are indeed the semi-legal and the criminal economies, the conditions of work experienced by servants being such that they are forced to escape and try to find other available occupations. Research conducted in Germany, for example, proves that many servants escaping their employer-owner often become prostitutes. This leads to the third field of activities fed by contemporary slavery and the trafficking in humans in Europe.

**Trafficking in Women**

In 1990, about 20,000 Filipino women were officially resident in Germany. Most of them were ‘mail-order brides’ who had entered the country illegally but had then legalized their condition through marriage (Barry 1979, Xappeler 1990, Council of Europe 1991, see also Brussa 1994, Tatafiore 1994). Completely dependent on their husbands, many reported to the researchers of the Council of Europe interviewing them that they were subject to the constant threat of being ‘dumped’, and therefore repatriated, by their violent and demanding husbands/benefactors. In Switzerland, women from developing countries mainly work as go-go dancers, and are dissuaded from working as prostitutes by both the immigration authorities and Eastern European organized groups who are attempting to monopolize the market. According to the “Foundation
Against the Trafficking in Women”, with offices scattered across Europe, women can enter Switzerland in three different ways. The official way entails the signing of a contract with an agency operating in their country of origin. Such agencies do provide the visas, and the women cannot leave for Switzerland until they have received them. In such cases, applications for a work permit are not submitted until the women arrive in the country of destination, and therefore they enter the country on a tourist visa. It is this way of entering the country which is exploited by traffickers, who provide the visa but not the work permit. Once arrived in Switzerland, and presumably while waiting for their work permit, these women are taken out of the country and forced to work as prostitutes in Germany, Austria or Italy. They have no choice because they incur considerable debts with the agencies. Women from Brazil, the Dominican Republic and Thailand form the majority of these cases.

In Germany, women working as prostitutes include Latin Americans, Poles, Czechs and Hungarians, who tend to replace their predecessors from Thailand. Data provided by the “International Organization for Migration” indicate that the trafficking in women from Central and Eastern European countries is increasing dramatically (International Organization for Migration 1995, Squadroni 1996). A member of the Organization explained:

Victims of trafficking are brought to Western Europe and either forced into prostitution or trapped there by traffickers who take away their passports, threaten, abuse, and deprive them of most, if not all, of their earnings. Few women are prepared or able to report what happens to them to the police, also because they are regarded and treated as ordinary illegal migrants, who can be deported immediately as soon as they come forward.

In Hungary, women are recruited quite openly by means of advertisements. A paper called “Expressz” publishes a dozen or so advertisements every day, and contains job offers in the West for women as dancers, waitresses or bar girls in night clubs. Some women are knowingly recruited as prostitutes, while others are offered what they think are jobs outside the sex industry. This is the case with those who believe they will be working as waitresses, to find afterwards that they are expected to perform in ‘shows’ whose nature is initially unknown to them. In the testimony of a Polish woman contacted by the Foundation Against Trafficking in Women (1995):

We were introduced to the bosses of the bar and had to sign a contract. The contract said that we had to give ‘shows’, but it didn’t say striptease or anything like that. This we only discovered when we arrived at the
bar: they made us look at the shows and told us we had to do the same. And then one of the bosses said we must have sex with the customers. I was asked to give them my passport, but I didn’t want to. Then other Polish women, who had already worked there, said I better do, because otherwise it would be dangerous for me. There had been other girls who had refused to hand in their passports and had just disappeared.

According to the same Organization, there are German–Polish-Russian trafficking networks which deal with women from the Ukraine, Lithuania, Russia and Moldavia. Poland functions as a staging post; from there the women are smuggled to brothels in Western Europe.

Many women are customers of agencies or illegal go-betweens which provide them with a tourist visa and help them work in prostitution when their visa expires. Women from Ghana are bought from their families by German-Ghanian groups and are smuggled into Germany to work in brothels. Threat of reporting their illegal status is permanent, thus binding the women to their owners. These groups can also organize marriages for women who want a permanent permit to stay. Such marriages are expensive and result in women being owned by both the criminal group and the man they marry.

As elsewhere, in Germany women are reluctant to expose their exploiters because they are immediately deported before being given a chance to appear as witnesses in court. For example, in 1991 the Frankfurt police raided six brothels, arresting 125 non-German prostitutes.

They were told to pack their things together and leave with the police immediately, many still wearing only their working clothes [...]. Though the police did interview each of the women individually on the rings which had brought them to Germany, it is doubtful how much useful information would be elicited in a single sitting, after such a traumatic experience for the women, and before their imminent deportation. Should information leading to a prosecution have come up even in the following weeks, the witnesses would already have been deported (Davies 1994: 56).

The final case I would like to highlight regards two clerks working in the Italian consultate in Nigeria, who were arrested in 1996 for selling visas to intermediaries operating in Lagos (La Stampa, 10 February 1996). The two received money on a piece-rate basis from the organization that investigators term “La Grande Maman”. One of the Italian investigators in charge of the case said:

We are trying to prove that this organization has important links and agents in Italy. They have someone who recruits the women in Nigeria,
someone else who provides the visas at the Italian consulate, and obviously others who control the women once they are in Italy. Finally, they have a financial agent who is in charge of depositing the proceeds in Italian banks before transferring them to Nigeria.

Discussion

Returning to the initial description of contemporary slavery in relation to Western European economies, the material presented above prompts a number of tentative observations. First, as we have seen, the trafficking in human beings generates profits in its own right, regardless of the firms and industries which eventually employ such human beings. In this case, profits are reaped by official or semi-official agencies, by organized criminal groups, and at times by joint ventures of these.

Second, when the trafficking services are geared to the provision of jobs, the beneficiaries of such services are to be found within the hidden economies which commission the smuggling operations and employ those smuggled. Among such economies one should include a variety of businesses ranging from quasi-legal to overtly criminal businesses. The former are far from constituting vestigial forms of work organization and productive activity, as quasi-legal businesses are usually connected to major industries which they service. Examples are found in the building, textile, and clothes industries in many European countries. These industries subcontract a number of operations to small subsidiaries, which may either be independently run or may actually be controlled by the mother industry for which they work. Many subcontractors, though located outside the main factory walls, should in fact be regarded as in-house suppliers, in that they are often financially supported by the main industries, which also provide them with fixed capital in the form of machinery. Therefore, the illegal work condition of migrants who are employed in these hidden sectors, and the trafficking services which make their employment possible, ends up benefiting important sectors of Western European economies.

Third, these quasi-legal productive sectors border with overtly criminal economies, which are also beneficiaries of illegal work and the trafficking in human beings. In some cases, organized criminal groups have a stake both in the semi-legal economy described above and in the criminal economy proper, and offer a variety of job opportunities to individuals smuggled into Europe. Leaving aside the classical Marxist notion that criminal activity is productive for the number of occupations it creates in the legal profession, one has to consider the grey area which embraces semi-legal, hidden, and criminal activities and which characterizes the labour market in many European countries. Those employed within this grey area shift from one activity to the other because of the proximity of
the semi-legal, hidden and criminal sectors. In other words, their ‘employment in crime’ does not rule out the possibility of finding occasional occupation in the semi-legal productive sector, and vice versa. This is due to the fact that the different sectors constituting the hidden economy cannot be sharply distinguished, as they display overlaps, points of contact, common interests and strategies which form what can be described as contemporary ‘bad’ economies (Centorrino 1990, Hobbs 1995, Ruggiero 1996).

The controversy sketched in the opening of this article is destined to remain unsolved. In effect, it is hard to establish whether slave labour and trafficking in humans are instrumental for economic development, or whether it is their abolition which permits capitalist economies to prosper. If the latter proposition is true, as suggested by orthodox Marxist analysis, only the encounter between entrepreneurs and individuals who have some control over their ‘labour as a commodity’ can generate economic development. However, as we have seen, it is not easy to determine the extent to which the victims of contemporary slavery hold some form of control over their lives, the context in which they live being characterized by a somewhat coercive freedom to sell their labour.

We have seen that the actors involved in the trafficking in human beings vary considerably, and include ‘clean’ entrepreneurs who lack a criminal background, officials devoid of illegal apprenticeship, agencies striding legal and illegal ventures, and conventional organized crime. A final consideration should now be devoted to the relationships between these actors and the definitional issues related to ‘criminal enterprise’ of which they all constitute a variant.

There is a link between conventional organized crime and a wide range of activities being carried out within a market economy. These activities, along with the illegal fashion in which they are performed, display a distinctive entrepreneurial character. When viewed outside traditional assumptions based on lower class, officially defined mafia and professional crime gangs, the ventures exclusively attributed to organized crime are part of the options available to other, less ‘glamorous’ actors (Smith & Alba 1979, Andreano & Siegfried 1980, Smith 1980, Block & Chambliss 1981, Albanese 1982, Shapiro 1984, Santino & La Fiura 1990, Block 1991, Zamagni 1993, Becchi & Rey 1994). This emerges if white-collar, corporate and organized crime are examined in a single conceptual perspective, and particularly if the techniques utilized, rather than the individuals utilizing them, are focused upon. In other words, this becomes apparent if acts are not confused with actors, norms with norm-breakers, and the modus operandi with the operator (Shapiro 1990). By focusing on criminal techniques, as this article has attempted to do, one senses that such techniques can be socialized, as they may be transmitted by white-collar
and official actors to organized crime, and vice versa. Future work on
organized crime should take these aspects into account, and describe in
detail who learns from whom; conventional criminal groups from official
actors or these from the former.

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