

1.2 Modern slavery and the politics of exception

Welcome to week one of our course on forced and precarious labour in the global economy. One of the main goals of this week is to take you through some of the consequences and effects of different schemes for classifying labour exploitation and vulnerability.

In this week we want to think about how the ways in which we classify different practices has various effects in terms of politics, in terms of what gets defined as a problem, and in terms of what gets defined as normal and unremarkable and perhaps even desirable.

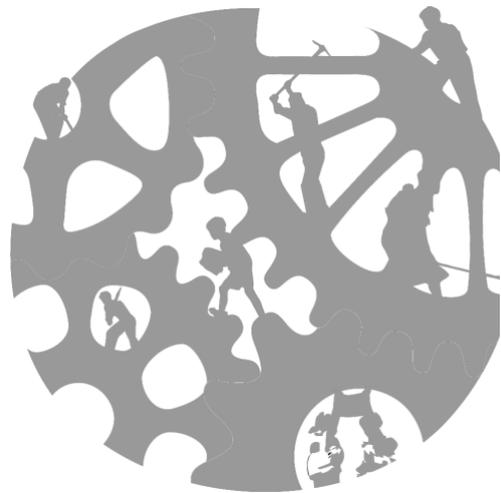
In this session I'm really interested in thinking through the limitations and complications associated with the most popular way of describing labour exploitation in the world today, and that is the categories and campaigns associated with human trafficking and modern slavery. These are extremely popular and they're very difficult to avoid, yet their popularity isn't necessarily a good sign of whether they're useful or effective.

The main thing I want to emphasise is the problems which arise when you try and draw a hard and fast and firm distinction between exceptional cases, which are commonly classified in terms of modern-day slavery in human trafficking, and everyday and unremarkable patterns of work and labour and mobility.

Modern slavery, in terms of how it defines and classifies problems, invites us to think about a small number of exceptional and deviant cases most commonly attributed to criminals. In doing so it tends to draw a hard line between the exceptional and the everyday, and both analytically and politically there are real problems with seeking to uphold this distinction.

To give you a sense of what some of these problems are, I want to take you through two recent examples which I hope will underscore some of the limitations of seeking to draw this hard and fast distinction between the exceptional and the everyday. The first comes in the form of Ivanka Trump, who recently gave a speech at the United Nations where she denounced modern slavery and human trafficking as splintering families, distorting global markets, undermining the rule of law, and strengthening transnational organised criminal networks.

I'm sure it was a good speech and I have no reason to question whether the sentiments expressed were genuine. What is important for the purposes of this course is the fact that Ivanka Trump and people like her don't understand the cause of modern slavery and human trafficking as something that directly affects them. This is important, because Ivanka Trump sits at the head of an elaborate system of supply chains and networks that produce all kinds of goods with the Trump name on them. The production of these goods, which most commonly takes place in sweatshops in places like China and Indonesia, is not understood to be part of the problem that campaigns against modern-day slavery and human trafficking are supposed to combat. So in campaigning against modern slavery and trafficking, you



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construct a problem which pushes the systems that produce goods and services, as well as the way those systems produce patterns of vulnerability, to the edges of the conversation.

These patterns of vulnerability and labour exploitation more generally are baked into the global economy. They're not exceptions, they're not deviations, they're part of the smooth and regular operations of the system. There's a real problem when someone like Ivanka Trump can declare her opposition to human trafficking without having to grapple with the broader processes whereby goods bearing her name are produced. So this problem, this diagnosis between the exceptional and everyday, creates all kinds of issues both politically and analytically.

A second example along similar lines but with a slightly different conclusion involves a recent campaign put together by the British government which invites citizens to spot the signs of modern slavery. This public awareness campaign is designed to get concerned citizens to look out for examples of abuse and exploitation. As part of this campaign, the government identifies the following signs of slavery: physical or psychological abuse, isolation, poor living conditions, limited or no personal effects, restricted freedom of movement, unusual travel times and a reluctance to seek help. All of these, according to the campaign, are signs of slavery.

The problem, however, is that they're not so much signs of an exceptional problem as symptoms of larger patterns of vulnerability and precarious living and working conditions. All of these signs can well be signs of problems. They can illustrate vulnerability. They can point to problems and exploitation. But it's really hard to draw a clear and consistent line between the exceptional category of modern slavery and all of the everyday and unremarkable, or ostensibly unremarkable, problems that are associated with migrant workers and poor and vulnerable workers throughout the globe.

It's really hard to say these are signs of slavery rather than symptoms of precarity. Physical and psychological abuse are common in communities throughout the globe. Illegal migrants, whatever their working or living conditions, are going to be reluctant to seek help. This is because help too often translates into them being deported or threatened with deportation. They're also going to work according to unusual travel times, since precarious and irregular migration rarely works on a clock. If they don't speak local languages or have local families and friends they're likely to be isolated. If they move long distances they're likely to have few or no personal effects. And if you're poor you are likely to endure poor living conditions.

So in all of these cases the signs of slavery aren't easily separated out from people at the bottom ends of labour markets – migrants seeking a better life and being exploited as a consequence of their status or visa conditions. Yet the campaign against modern slavery seeks to carve out an exception rather than focus upon the everyday and unremarkable forms of exploitation and vulnerability that are a characteristic feature of labour markets throughout the globe. In this context modern-day slavery and human trafficking are unlikely to be the best frame of reference. This is because they exclude too many issues and problems from the analysis, and because they seek to focus interventions upon an exceptional subset of cases.

What's really at issue here are the underlying reasons why people are vulnerable, exploited, and poor. As a consequence, a much better starting point is to contemplate the working conditions and experiences of all workers rather than try to focus upon an isolated subset which is assumed to rise to the threshold of exceptionality associated with modern slavery and human trafficking.

This transcript was prepared for the online course [Forced and Precarious Labour in the Global Economy](#) by [Beyond Trafficking and Slavery](#) (openDemocracy). It has been lightly edited for clarity. This course was originally released on the [edX.org](#) platform in 2018, where it has now been archived. As of 2021 it is available on [opendemocracy.net](#).