Fighting Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking

Over the last two decades, fighting modern slavery and human trafficking has become a cause célèbre. Yet large numbers of researchers, non-governmental organizations, trade unions, workers, and others who would seem like natural allies in the fight against modern slavery and trafficking are hugely skeptical of these movements. They object to how the problems are framed, and are skeptical of the “new abolitionist” movement. Why? This book tackles key controversies surrounding the anti-slavery and anti-trafficking movements head on. Champions and skeptics explore the fissures and fault lines that surround efforts to fight modern slavery and human trafficking today. These include: whether efforts to fight modern slavery displace or crowd out support for labor and migrant rights; whether and to what extent efforts to fight modern slavery mask, naturalize, and distract from racial, gendered, and economic inequality; and whether contemporary anti-slavery and anti-trafficking crusaders’ use of history are accurate and appropriate.

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David W. Blight is Sterling Professor of American History at Yale University. He is the author of Pulitzer Prize-winning Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom (2018, Simon & Schuster), among other books, book chapters, and articles. He was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2012.
Slaveries since Emancipation

General Editors
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Zoe Trodd, University of Nottingham

Slaveries since Emancipation publishes scholarship that links slavery’s past to its present, consciously scanning history for lessons of relevance to contemporary abolitionism and that directly engages current issues of interest to activists by contextualizing them historically.

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Fighting Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking

History and Contemporary Policy

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recently completed a second book which explores the complex relationship between human trafficking and white supremacy and the twined historical resistance to both. Entitled Race Traffic: Radical Antislavery and the Long Resistance to White Supremacy, 1660–1860, the book is forthcoming from the Omohundro Institute with the University of North Carolina Press.

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Preface

David W. Blight

Men tilled the soil long before they wrote books, and would never have written books if they had not tilled the soil. All the present rests upon all the past.¹

How humbling it is to contemplate the weight of what Frederick Douglass called “all the past” in any present. The past is indeed infinite and no matter how hard we try we can only know parts of it. But search and know we must. Such a quest is among the highest of human callings. In its storehouses of human folly and tragedy as well as human imagination and progress, history itself can be overwhelming, what James Baldwin once called a “terrifying deity . . . to which no sacrifice in human suffering is too great.”²

This depends of course on our essential conceptions of the nature of history. If we seek only evidence for a triumphal narrative in order to bolster the present and win power in contemporary affairs, then history may be only a loving and delivering deity, and easily satisfied or manipulated. We please the gods and they please us back. But those gods will prove false in the end. Trained, serious approaches to the past that help us cope with the darknesses that history unfolds about human character need clearer-eyed vision and moral backbone. All witnesses and scribes of the story of slavery and other forms of human exploitation and their


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abolitions understand that knowledge of these experiences of inhumanity across time is painful in its truths, while liberating and inspiring in its realization. This book of cutting-edge essays on what research and strategies have had the most efficacy in the struggle against modern slavery is a tribute to that dual inheritance of all social scientific and historical inquiry. Telling the story is our way through the darkness. History may or may not be a god at all. But we surely learn not to test and abuse it with our petty needs, our unchecked prejudices, or our powers of denial.\(^3\)

In the same 1873 oration to an agricultural convention of African American freedmen when Douglass spoke of the apparent infinity of the connection of past and present, he also left this caution: “I shall attempt no solution of the origins of evil in the world. Whether it came by the fall of Adam or the fall of anybody else, I neither know or care . . . It is enough to know that we have it and it is in abundance, and that the best use we can make of it is to resist and destroy it as far as we can.”\(^4\) Such might be the charge for scholars and activists alike who seek to abolish forms of modern slavery from our contemporary world. It is surely the aim of the scholar-activists in this volume. We have a challenge equally as daunting as that faced by the abolitionists of the nineteenth century who set standards of moral and political activism which are difficult to match.

In Eric Hobsbaum’s *The Age of Extremes*, his history of the “Short Twentieth Century,” (1914–1991), published in 1994, he opens with epigraphs from twelve eminent thinkers, artists, or scientists. Each was asked what they believed was the most compelling or lasting legacy of the twentieth century through which they had lived. The most prevalent answer in the group was the scale of violence, war, massacre, or genocide. Others named the emancipation of women, astonishing advances in science, electronics, the destruction of ideals, and one said that however

\(^3\) Among the growing works on the links between historical and contemporary forms of slavery and abolition, see especially Elizabeth Swanson and James Brewer Stewart, eds., *Human Bondage and Abolition: New Histories of Past and Present Slaveries* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018). I have personally found the introductory essay, as well as essays by David Richardson, James Sidbury, Allison Gorsuch, Kerry Ward, Anna Mae Duane, and Jessica R. Pliley, extremely helpful in my own evolving understanding, as a nineteenth-century historian, of the complex phenomenon of modern slavery. All of these scholars have been fellows and conference participants at the Gilder Lehrman Center as well. The leadership of Randall Miller and Zoe Trodd as general editors of this Cambridge series has been pivotal for the growth of this field.

devastating the results of history, humankind had learned that it can always “start all over again.” Primo Levi said that too many “survivors” did not return or “returned wordless.” One, anthropologist, Julio Caro Baroja, worried about the “contradiction” of having experienced a full life cycle despite the “terrible events” of the century. Survivors’ guilt, or better a sense of humane responsibility, has been a deep source of many reforms and social movements.

Hobsbaum wrote just after the end of the Cold War and the Soviet era. He named “globalization” as one of the three most significant transformations the world had realized by the 1990s, with its heretofore “unimaginable acceleration of communication and transport,” and its identification of the “globe” as the “primary operational unit” of capital and labor. His other two most salient transformations were that the world was no longer “Eurocentric” because of changing geopolitics and mass consumer culture, and that, in his view most disturbing of all, the ties between past and present in world cultures were steadily disintegrating in the face of the “a-social individualism” at the heart of world capitalism. Capitalism, Hobsbaum believed, had become a “permanent and continuous revolutionizing force” that severed social bonds between tradition and modern growth, opening whole new realms of exploitation and wealth. Hobsbaum’s criteria and conclusions are all debatable, but they serve as a poignant starting point to understand why and how human trafficking and modern slavery emerged by the twenty-first century as a major world crisis.

As the twenty-first century arrived, and now after its first two decades, the world Hobsbaum surveyed has transformed again. Today’s world faces at the very least a series of new challenges it has only begun to collectively fight: rising ethnic and religious terrorism; the fragmentation of post-World War II alliances; a resurgent nationalism in forms some thought the end of the Cold War had thwarted; a growing global crisis of refugees from famine and civil wars; an emergent authoritarianism in all parts of the earth, including the United States; a widely recognized but as yet dangerously unaddressed existential problem of climate change; huge chasms of economic inequality between the global North and South; and now a once-in-a-century viral pandemic that may kill millions and throw our economies into a spiraling depression of unpredictable dimensions.

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6 Ibid., 14–17.
Preface

This list of twenty-first century rolling crises are, of course, all interrelated. In late April 2020, the International Labour Organization announced that an estimated 1.6 billion workers in the world were newly vulnerable to exploitation and potential enslavement due to collapsing economies in the Covid-19 pandemic. A week later, on May 1, 2020, the New York Times reported in a front-page story that such a number may be closer to 2 billion workers. Two million garment workers in the already fragile economy of Bangladesh were among the recently fired and newly vulnerable to extreme poverty. The significant traction gained in the quest to intercept and stop sex trafficking and to create ethical supply chains in the even larger labor trafficking across the world faces a new scale of challenge as this book goes to press.

In the past two decades billions of dollars have been spent, hundreds of NGOs have launched crusades, foundations have created task forces, governments have tried to act, and many academics in universities and lawyers in political institutions have devoted their careers to the fight against the systems of human trafficking and labor slavery tied to production supply lines that have emerged in this new world order. Indeed, a new abolition movement has appeared in this century; its participants are a motley assortment of litigators, prime ministers, researchers and field workers, big data scientists, activist nuns and entrepreneurs, religious and secular reformers, scholars in many disciplines, filmmakers, journalists, and many slavery survivors telling their own stories.

At the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition at Yale University (GLC) we assembled an international working group on modern slavery in 2016–2019, with generous funding from the Robina Foundation. That group’s two co-chairs, Genevieve LeBaron and Jessica R. Pliley, are also the intrepid organizers and architects of this book. Each of them has held one of our full-year fellowships in modern slavery and written books at Yale during their residence. They mingle the instincts and methods of a political scientist and a historian. Further, over the past eight years or so the GLC has also hosted two major international conferences on modern slavery, including one in 2018 built around this working group of writers and scholars. This book is a product of that conference as well as of the energy and intellectual sizzle of our long weekend meetings of the working group.

The essays in this volume contain and enrich all the tensions and divisions in this field. These authors do not all agree on the best methods.

for fighting modern forms of slavery, but they have respectfully assembled together in New Haven, Connecticut, at least five times and in a literary sense in this book of original pieces. The work is a tribute to the best traditions in scholarship. The volume contains a good deal of ambivalence and certainty, passion and activism, and at its heart rests some of the most important research and field work ever done on the vast story of twenty-first century enslavement of vulnerable and disposable people. This is scholarship with great moral consequences.

As the editors’ Introduction carefully indicates, the authors include both “sceptics” and “champions” of today’s antislavery crusade, and they represent many disciplines: history, political science, sociology, law, business management, and anthropology. All of them are among the new era’s abolitionists, and they have all walked the walk of archival, participant observation, court room, or field work engagement in order to talk the talk. But as was the case in the nineteenth century in British and American abolitionism, they differ in strategy, in vision, and in methodology. They sometimes argue fruitfully about how best to use and understand history as a guide to this new era. Disagreements endure over the numbers debate about modern slavery. They do not differ, however, on the overall goal, as painfully difficult as it is, of ridding the world of the scourge of modern slavery in this century if not in our lifetimes. They all seek solutions to this global dilemma through what we scholars know how to do best – create knowledge and teach it to the world in our demonstrations of evidence and in our stories.

The greatest story ever told by a former slave sings psalm-like in Frederick Douglass’s autobiographies. His story has much to inform today’s new abolition movement. In My Bondage and My Freedom (1855), Douglass wrote of his time under many kinds of owners and overseers. He experienced savage brutality from some, but even while rented out to a good master, Douglass said he learned that “the kindness of the slavemaster only gilds the chain of slavery, and detracts nothing from its weight and power.” Brutality could benumb his desires at times for liberation. But even while only a teenager, he said, he had “ascertained ... the natural and inborn right of every member of the human family” to personal freedom. Even when losing hope the desire to breathe free “only needed a favorable breeze to fan it into a flame.” Such might be said of countless entrapped fishermen on shrimp boats in the South China Sea, or on tea or cocoa plantations in India and Africa, in garment factories or brick kilns on several continents, in mica mines or...
brothels in South Asia, or in various stops on supply chains for making surgical gloves or various kinds of electronic devices. They lack what Douglass so lyrically described in remembering his own enslavement. “The thought of only being a creature of the present and the past troubled me,” he wrote, “and I longed to have a future – a future with hope in it. To be shut up entirely to the past and present is abhorrent to the human mind; it is to the soul – whose life and happiness is unceasing progress – what the prison is to the body . . . a hell of horrors.”

The natural rights tradition is not dead in the twenty-first century unless we allow it to die. Today’s millions of enslaved people across the globe need their own favorable breezes to fan their hope of release from conditions that bind them down economically and physically. They too need futures. The authors in this book are devoting themselves to the intellectual, organizational, legal, and moral work to bring that about.

Acknowledgments

This book comes from the Gilder Lehrman Center’s Modern Slavery Working Group at Yale University, initiated and hosted by the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition (GLC), which is a unit of The Whitney and Betty MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies at Yale University.

Founded in 2016 by the Center’s Director David W. Blight, and Working Group Co-Chairs Genevieve LeBaron and Jessica R. Pliley, the Gilder Lehrman Center’s Modern Slavery Working Group at Yale University provides a platform for interaction for a diverse group of top scholars researching Modern Slavery and Trafficking to come together and explore opportunities of intellectual exchange and collaboration. Group members are experts on different dimensions of contemporary slavery and trafficking who share a commitment to big-picture thinking, rigorous scholarship, public engagement, and to carving out the policy relevance of their work. The group is multidisciplinary and includes historians, social scientists, lawyers, and scholars of the arts and humanities. Support for the Working Group came from a generous grant from the Robina Foundation to the GLC.

The Group’s members are David W. Blight, Genevieve LeBaron, Jessica R. Pliley, Kevin Bales, Andrew Crane, Janie Chuang, Anna Mae Duane, Gunther Peck, Grace Peña Delgado, Joel Quirk, J. J. Rosenbaum, Elena Shih, and Zoe Trodd. We are grateful to all of the Group members for their participation, collaboration, and contributions, for being willing to challenge and encourage each other, and for continuing to work together across intellectual and political differences.

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Acknowledgments

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Not only has the GLC provided a home for our Working Group, but several of us have also been fortunate enough to hold funded fellowships at the GLC, which helped to make our individual scholarship and publications possible. The GLC has long been a hugely important hub and support for scholarship on slavery, and in recent years, has been influential in shaping and nurturing scholarship on contemporary slavery, forced labor, and human trafficking.

Beyond the GLC, other departments and colleagues at Yale have also supported and collaborated with our group. Colleagues at the Yale Law School, Yale School of Management, and Yale’s Program of Ethnicity, Race, and Migration have been wonderful collaborators and cosponsors of Group events and activities. As well, librarians and staff within several of Yale’s libraries and the Yale Digital Humanities Lab have assisted us along the way.

We are profoundly grateful to David W. Blight, who leads the GLC and whose vision and ambition have propelled this volume and our Group.
from the start. David is a mentor and friend to many in our group. He is a public intellectual, meticulous and ambitious scholar, accessible writer, and brilliant storyteller; in other words, a powerful model of the scholar and activist that many of us would like to be. This Group and book simply wouldn’t have happened without him. And without his encouragement and generosity, we wouldn’t be the scholars we are today.

Genevieve LeBaron and Jessica R. Piley

Acknowledgments
### Abbreviations

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<td>CIW</td>
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<td>GEMS</td>
<td>Global Estimates of Modern Slavery</td>
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<tr>
<td>GLC</td>
<td>Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition at Yale University</td>
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