Environmental Destruction and Modern Forced Labor Practices: A Review of Kevin Bales "Blood and Earth"

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Bales, Kevin. 2016. *Blood and Earth: Modern Slavery, Ecocide, and the Secret to Saving the World*. New York: Spiegel & Grau. 304 pp. $ 28.00 ISBN 978-0812995763

Slavery is perceived by most as a horror of the past, secure in our collective unconscious as a savagery of bygone days. Kevin Bales, however, in this 2016 publication, dispels the comfort of those assumptions and demonstrates – through painstaking research and first-hand witness accounts – that the evils of slavery still reside among us today. Indeed, despite a persistent assumption that the ongoing modernization of the global economy occurs alongside a simultaneous modernizing of our energy infrastructure towards increased technological advancement and "efficient" exploitation, Bales demonstrates that this is far from the full story. As he notes, for example, it is still the labor of human hands and human (and animal) bodies, occurring in conditions of coercion, poverty, and violence, which supply much of the raw energy for even the most advanced economies in the West and elsewhere. This kind of labor is not only destructive to the humans and human communities that it occurs in but also has devastating impacts on animals, plants, and wider ecological communities. In short, slavery is bad for people, and nature, too.

Co-founder and former president of the organization Free the Slaves and Professor of Contemporary Slavery at the Wilberforce Institute for the Study of Slavery and Emancipation, Bales has dedicated his life and career to eradicate the practice of modern-day slavery. For his latest book, he travelled around the globe in an attempt to expose the effects of enslavement on those who suffer it and the communities in which they live. His research, spanning over seven years, took him to coltan mines in Eastern

Congo, Mangrove forests in Bangladesh, the Brazilian Amazon, and gold mining operations in protected forests in Southern Ghana. The end result is an exceedingly well-researched book that utilizes external data, direct experience, and personal interviews to shed light on some of the most uncomfortable truths about the ethical and ecological consequences of contemporary forced labor practices.

Early in the book, Bales acknowledges that the slavery of today has both differences and similarities to that of the past. Unlike the slavery of the American south in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for example, where the slaveholder owned the slaves legally and buying and trading between slaveholders occurred openly, the slavery of today is a more conspicuous affair, operating illegally, behind the scenes, and with the word "slavery" rarely being uttered. However, there are also similarities. As Bales recounts, a dominant way that contemporary enslavement occurs, in addition to a crude "rounding up" of workers, is through a system of debt peonage remarkably alike to that which operated in Alabama and other southern states in the 1800's. The process is simple. First, a person gets arrested for some minor and petty offense such as loitering or cursing in public and is subsequently arrested. Then, if s/he is not sentenced to work immediately, s/he is charged as guilty and fined. Unable to pay the often extortionate amount for the fine, the debt can be sold on to someone else, usually a business person or mine operator in need of labor, and the arrested person is then shipped off to pay off their debt. Now, through a system of debt augmentation, violence, and corruption, the person becomes enslaved; the debt, instead of gradually diminishing, merely grows and grows until the businessperson owns their labor. As one former slave who worked in mines in the Eastern Congo explains – "once you're at the mine, in that situation, you are the boss's slave. Many people are taken that way and then die there from disease or cave-ins, and your family never knows you've died … Miners can start with this false debt and then spent ten to fifteen years as a slave to the boss".

Practices of debt peonage and enslavement flourish best in corrupt and impoverished systems. They also flourish, as Bales claims, in situations of great material demand, exacerbated and encouraged by unrelenting consumer desire and an abundance of economic wealth. Indeed, Bales' exposition of slavery does not end at the first or second rung of the supply chain with criminal gangs and corrupt politicians, but rather he successfully demonstrates the interlinkages between modern manifestations of "progress", the consumer societies of the western world, and the means by which contemporary slavery operates. As he notes, for example, many of the resources involved in contemporary slave labor are materials in great

demand in rich countries, such as gold, diamonds, granite and shrimp. Coltan, in particular, a dull black metallic ore of which the element tantalum is extracted, is vital in the production of cell phones, of which there are 237 million users in the United States alone. Coltan, however, is not found everywhere. As a result, the supply that feeds the mostly Western market is contingent upon resource extraction far from the point of consumption, including, and most notably, the Eastern Congo, one of the world's leading suppliers. Much of the coltan extraction in the Eastern Congo occurs under conditions of injustice, propped up by systems of criminality, violence, and child and slave labor, and exacerbated by growing demand spurred on by technological revolutions happening on the other side of the world. Thus, although the ideas might come from Silicon Valley, the resources do not. As Bales writes, "it turns out the foundation of our ingenious new economy rests on the forceful extraction of mineral in places where laws do not work and criminals control everything".

The injustice involved in enslaved labor and high material demand is not only limited to the human sphere. Indeed, to extract and produce large amounts of granite, coltan and tin, you need to tear down forests, strip mountaintops and alter waterways. And contrary to many of our assumptions about large-scale ecological destruction, much of this work is not being done by heavy industrial equipment, such as bulldozers and strip mining machines. Rather, it is slave hands and slave bodies, forced to destroy their own environments under threat of violence that is responsible for much current ecocide. This mutual destruction of human and non-human nature occurs in twofold manner, as noted by Bales. First, the emergence of slavery occurs alongside environmental destruction. As he writes, "slavery flourishes when old rules, old ways of life break down". Environmental destruction results in social chaos and fragmentation, leading to increased vulnerability and subsequent opportunities for human trafficking, enslavement, and violation. As Bales discusses, this is particularly apparent in parts of Brazil where the destruction of parts of the Amazon has led to the subsequent displacement and enslavement of local people, as in countless other parts of the world. Second, slavery and the work of slaves contributes substantially to global warming in a more direct manner. Brick kilns, mines, deforestation from shrimp farming, and charcoal camps add pollutants to the air at an alarming rate, and often, in situations involving slave labor are operated illegally and inefficiently with no or little adherence to environmental standards or regulations. From time spent at slave-operated brick kilns in Pakistan, for example, Bales observed that the techniques used to make bricks have not changed since Biblical times: men, women and children pack mud into molds, dry them, and then

place them in fifteen foot kilns to fire and harden them into bricks. These kilns, with a temperature of 1,500 degrees Fahrenheit on the inside and 130 degrees in the surrounding air, are a source of significant danger to the enslaved people working there, and are also alarmingly unsustainable from an ecological perspective. The slaveholders use large amounts of coal to keep the kilns burning and when the coal runs out or is too expensive, use anything they can find, including old tires and motor oil that release toxic black clouds of polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons and heavy metals into the atmosphere when burned.

From Bales' calculations, then, slave-based labor such as this is responsible for 40% of current rates of CO_2, and responsible for over one-third of total greenhouse gas emissions. This means that if slavery were a country, it would emit more greenhouse gases than any other country in the world with the exception of the USA and China, despite having a "population" of less than California (Bales estimate than there are 35 million people enslaved currently, a number that was also reported by the organization Walk Free Foundation in a 2014 report). Ironically, and tragically, the problem is exacerbated by recent environmental regulations and the growing amount of land set aside for national parks and protected areas. While more land under protection globally has led to less legal logging and deforestation, it has resulted in an increase in illegal smash and grab cutting. Put simply, slaveholders and profiteers have taken advantage of environmental treaties to rush into those areas and establish resource extraction operations. As a result, some of the most destructive slave-based operations currently take place in some of the world's most ecologically rich and important ecosystems, including Virunga National Park in the Congo, both the home to the critically endangered mountain gorilla and a hotbed of illegal deforestation and human enslavement due to mining, and southern Bangladesh, where the Mangrove forests, a crucial source of global carbon sequestration and one of the most threated ecosystems on the planet, rub up against an often illegal, slave-based, and exploitative shrimp trade.

Thus, for Bales, slavery and environmental destruction go hand in hand, intrinsically joined together in a morbid dance of sort, with lethal consequences for both humans and the planet. Although the connections between human and non-human injustice have long been discussed and demonstrated by members of indigenous communities, feminists, and other scholars and citizens, it remains a crucial point to illustrate, especially in the context of a persistent atomism in the ways in which we respond to social and ecological problems. The interlinkages between human and non-human destruction also point beyond the material reality of slavery and reflect a more general tendency towards instrumentalism in modern

practices and cultures. For slaveholders and the industries and people who support them, profit reins before all else, and both nature and human are reduced to that which can be transformed into capital and/or immediate gain. This objectification is exemplified most poignantly in the case of women in enslavement. As Bales discusses, women in slavery are subject to a kind of double injustice: while male slaves are perceived and used as sources of labor, females are perceived as sources of labor and as bodies that can be used for sexual gratification. Thus, women, he writes, become "sexual outlets, [used] for their reproductive potential, and, like diamond jewelry or expensive cars, as items of conspicuous consumption". The complete reduction of the female body in slavery to pure materiality, to mere object, mirrors the simultaneous reduction of nature to "resource", as something useful only for economic gain. In cycles of slavery, both human and non-human nature are transformed and made submissive to illegitimate power and the call of capital. In the end, as Bales notes, "slaves are used to destroy the environment", and while doing so, "annihilate [both] people and the earth".

Bales finds a silver lining, however, in these relations between slavery and ecocide. He states, for example, that while there has always been a moral incentive to end slavery, now there is an environmental one too, writing – "it is precisely the role slaves play in this ecological catastrophe that opens a new solution". For Bales, a new abolitionist movement, focused on the enforcement of already existing labor laws and a more stringent international community dedicated to the liberation of slaves and the eradication of slavery can lead to a classic win-win scenario: a large-scale reduction of ecocide and an end to the human injustice of slavery. An abolitionist movement would aid environmental health in two apparent ways. First, because slave labor – largely occurring in ecologically vulnerable areas and without environment standards – is particularly ecologically destructive, eradicating it would be ecologically beneficial by default. Second, Bales suggests that the labor of formally enslaved people could be redirected from ecological destruction to ecological restoration through the use of green economic principles. He suggests, for example, that freed slaves could be employed to plant trees with capital generated by cap and trade systems, frameworks by which countries and corporations who fail to cut their emission can purchase carbon credits from those who do so.

Bales solutions, although crucial in their own rights, are at risk of bordering on the incremental if adopted exclusively. Although he acknowledges the role of consumer demand in the construction of slave economies and ecocide, questions of reduction and limit, of the culpability and responsibility of consumer economies and consumers themselves,

are persistently avoided in place of a focus on more stringent legality. He writes, for example, "we don't have to give up our cool consumer electronics, the key is to reinstate the rule of law, and rebuild a society that accepts the law". However, this begs the question: how much demand is too much? With limited ecological capacity, a growing population, and an economic system devoted to endless growth, should questions of limit not also be raised? Further, the implication that a more robust legal system will effectively redirect us toward a sustainable economy and sustainable future seems to ignore, or be blind to, the various forms of legal environmental destruction that occurs. Indeed, you only have to look to the so-called "first world" countries to acknowledge that a deeply pervasive anthropocentrism, antithetical to basic ecological principles, persists in some way in almost all modern economies and societies, and is especially embedded in consumer economies dedicated to growth. After all, some of the worst ecological disasters of the modern age, including and most notably, contemporary climate change, are occurring because of decades of legal policies of exploitation that prioritize profit over life, both human and non-human.

Yes, much environmental and human injustice is illegal and that should be addressed. But we need to address the legal forms, too.