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Unlocking the Science of Slavery

by Kevin Bales, PhD

Professor of Contemporary Slavery at
the Wilberforce Institute
for the Study of Slavery and Emancipation,
co-founder of Free the Slaves

Inauguration of *Slavery Today* Unlocking the Science of Slavery

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After the Battle of Britain, in late 1942, Winston Churchill famously said, "Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end, but it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning." In the world of anti-slavery research and campaigning it can be argued that we are now approaching the "end of the beginning" of this the fourth great anti-slavery movement¹ in human history. From a simplistic, emotive, disparate, and disorganized minority cause, slavery is quickly becoming an issue of global concern, and is now generating global responses. This has occurred for a number of reasons: increased awareness, a recognition of the possibility of eradication, and a growing understanding of the economic and social cost of slavery are just a few of those reasons. There is history to be written of the opening stages of this anti-slavery movement, but as we clamber over this tipping point it is time to think hard about the future.

It is time to consider where we are going. To understand how we as scholars and activists make the transition from a simplistic, emotive, disparate, and disorganized global anti-slavery movement, to one that is **complex, logical, unified and organized**. It is clear that achieving that change requires scholarship and knowledge, "joined-up thinking" as the phrase goes. This new journal in reporting research, and creative anti-slavery actions and policies, is part of moving toward not just "the end of the beginning" but ultimately *the beginning of the end*.

There are clear gaps in both our understanding and practice as we bring the field of slavery studies into maturity. Not surprisingly, these gaps tend to appear in precisely those stages that reflect scientific processes, steps that all fields must take in order to achieve a foundation of conceptualization as well as application. All scientific disciplines, for example, operate within a conceptual paradigm that sets out the boundary of their field of inquiry. Rarely discussed and equally rarely altered, the dominant paradigm of a discipline states what is and what is not part of the field of study.

¹ The first anti-slavery movement began in 1787 in Great Britain, it was the first human rights campaign, and originated what we now call "NGOs". The second was the American anti-slavery movement of the first half of the 19th century. The third was the Congo Reform Movement that began in the late 1890s and culminated with the annexation of the Congo Free State by Belgium in 1908. All three achieved international support and became social movements.

So, what is the paradigm of the field of slavery studies?² On one hand this is perfectly clear – it is the relationship between two people that is marked by an extreme power differential, a very high likelihood of violence, and significant control of one person by the other, leading to a diminution in agency and freedom of movement, and exploitation, normally economic but often sexual as well. On the other hand, this relationship can be mediated by culture, gender, politics, religion, family ties, (and many other social filters) and through that mediation it is given very different sets of meanings. Consequently, agreement as to what, exactly, constitutes slavery is currently under debate.

It is worth noting that in most scientific disciplines paradigmatic and operational definitions tend toward clarity and precision over time, but the reverse has occurred with the study of slavery. From the time of the earliest human records slavery has been discussed and analysed, yet the definition of slavery was very rarely questioned. Indeed, most works concerned with slavery, including laws and treaties, from the dawn of writing right up to the early 20th century, do not offer a definition of slavery. Slavery was simply a fact of life so pervasive, so obvious, and so self-explanatory, that no definition was considered necessary. Like “death” it needed no further definition.

Today, as we reach a point in history when the eradication of slavery is possible, confusion has erupted as to what constitutes enslavement. On some levels agreement to disagree is possible, but in terms of operationally defining slavery, such disagreement leads to a field of study in chaos. As with all sciences, without an agreed definition of the object of study we are unable to achieve comparable findings and interpretations, doomed to forever argue the nuances of apples versus oranges.

One of the reasons for this confusion is the fact that slavery is both a social activity and a relationship, and so it exists: 1) as a state of being (what it means to the slave to be a slave); 2) as a form of human interaction (the nature of the unequal and normally violent relationship between slave and slaveholder); and 3) as the outcome of slavery as part of society at large (through, for example, the economic output of slaves). Each of these dimensions provides necessary and essential criteria for determining whether a particular activity or relationship is, or is not, slavery.³

Virtually all human activity, and certainly slavery, occurs in each of these three dimensions. For example, there are very few things any person might do that

² A good place to start in understanding social science paradigms is George Ritzer’s *Sociology: A Multiple Paradigm Science*, Allyn & Bacon, 1974.

³ These categories are developed more fully in: “The Paradox of Women, Children, and Slavery” in *Trafficking in Slavery’s Wake: Law and the Experience of Women and Children in Africa*, Benjamin N. Lawrence and Richard L. Roberts (eds), Ohio University Press, 2012, pp 241-253, with Jody Sarich.

occur in complete isolation or solitude, and yet we live within our own minds and are ultimately individuals and discrete organisms. One cannot understand any part of humanity or our history without reference to the individual. At the same time, all of us are also products of, and constantly involved in, interaction with others. We learn and are shaped by these relationships, and our lives, jobs, families, and so on, are the sum of these interactions with others. Furthermore, we all live within larger societies and currents and patterns in these societies shape us as well – gender, ethnicity, politics, economics, and on and on. Slavery exists at all these levels, in the lived experience of the slave, in the relationship of slave and slaveholder and the community where they live, and within the sweeping patterns of societies and economies.

There is a great deal more that might be said about the nature of enslavement, but the key point in terms of bringing the study of slavery into a state of intellectual and scientific readiness is that a generally accepted ***operational definition*** of slavery must be achieved before meaningful, comparable, research can be accomplished. One of the barriers to achieving this is an attempt to resolve this lack of a common operational definition by adopting one of the many existing ***legal definitions*** to guide research and analysis. For the most part such an attempt cannot but fail. The law is a relatively closed logical system using specific vocabulary in order to standardize the understanding and control of actions and outcomes within a framework of norms, governance, and control. That vocabulary and system are important, but they do not necessarily reflect the complexities and dynamic qualities of the social reality. For that reason international conventions or national laws make poor operational definitions - they are simply designed to meet a different conceptual need. Most importantly, a field's operational definition should be derived from the measurable reality of the object of study, not from the needs of legislators, litigators, or adjudicators (or the special interest groups that influence them).

How then do we find the measurable reality of slavery on which to build an operational definition? The first step is to strip away the social, cultural, and ideological packaging in which the fact of slavery is often wrapped. For example, no matter whether it is called “sex trafficking”, forced marriage, debt bondage, or child soldiers, our operational definition should be able to encompass any activity that demonstrates the key criteria that mark slavery. This is likely to lead to debates based on ideological or traditional views about slavery. Some groups have invested heavily, for example, in the premise that organ trafficking or most forms of child labour are slavery. But the term “slavery” must not be a catch-all, absorbing all exploitative activities, it must stand as a precise set of criteria which allows discrimination between potential objects of study.

I will not offer an operational definition here since operational definitions

should be constructed within the framework of specific research questions. I will, however, point to the Bellagio-Harvard Guidelines written by the Members of the Research Network on the Legal Parameters of Slavery in 2012 (a network of 20 scholars of international law, anti-slavery leaders and leading scholars of slavery), which use the legal definition of slavery found at Article 1(1) of the 1926 Slavery Convention. The 1926 definition reads: “Slavery is the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised.” This definition is reproduced in substance in Article 7(a) of the 1956 UN Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery, as well as in the Article 7(2)(c) of the 1998 Statute of the International Criminal Court.

As legal ownership rights are no longer asserted by slaveholders, the Bellagio–Harvard Guidelines state that today, the exercise of “the powers attaching to the right of ownership” should be understood as possession: “**control over a person by another such as a person might control a thing.**” Therefore, “slavery” may be defined as “controlling a person in such a way as to significantly deprive that person of individual liberty, with the intent of exploitation through the use, management, purchase, sale, profit, transfer or disposal of that person.” The exercise of any or all of these powers attaching to the right of ownership should provide evidence of slavery, insofar as they demonstrate control over a person tantamount to possession. This definition provides the type of legal certainty that is fundamental to any prosecution of contemporary slavery.⁴

Once an agreed definition has been achieved, and accepting that it may evolve over time, it can be used to generate the comparable information that makes the next steps of scientific endeavor possible. The first of these steps is *description*. Whether the object of study is new species of insect or the complex nature of human relationships, basic descriptive information is needed. Slavery is slavery, but every manifestation of slavery differs slightly from the next. Those differences are crucial to understanding the processes of enslavement as well as the potential points and forms of intervention. Certainly, a common challenge when

⁴ For the full Bellagio–Harvard Guidelines, see Jean Allain (ed.), *The Legal Understanding of Slavery: From the Historical to the Contemporary* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 375-380, also available here: www.qub.ac.uk/schools/SchoolofLaw/Research/HumanRightsCentre/Resources/Bellagio-HarvardGuidelinesontheLegalParametersofSlavery/. The Bellagio–Harvard Guidelines are similar to the definition put forward in the *Joint UN Commentary on the EU Directive* of 2011. Observing the 1926 definition (“the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the rights of ownership are exercised”) the UN Commentary adds: “The definition in the Slavery Convention may cause difficulties today, as there could be no rights of ownership for one person over another. In order to solve this difficulty, an alternative definition would be ‘the status or condition of a person over whom control is exercised to the extent that the person is treated like property,’ or ‘reducing a person to a status or condition in which any or all of the powers attaching to the right of property are exercised.’” See *Joint UN Commentary on the EU Directive – A Human Rights-Based Approach* (2011), 103. For further discussion of the definition of slavery, see most recently Jean Allain and Kevin Bales, “Slavery and Its Definition,” *Global Dialogue* 14.2 (2012): 1-15.

communicating information about slavery to a wider audience, even information that has been carefully gathered following the best social scientific practices, is a cultural insistence that slavery takes only a single form, and anything that deviates from that form is debatable and dubious. In North America, the cultural “norm” for slavery is the antebellum African slavery of the Deep South of the United States. That is considered “real” slavery. Other groups have invested heavily in the concept of “human trafficking” and seek to make (as in the legal definition in the Palermo Protocol⁵) “slavery” a sub-set of “trafficking.” Our challenge is to provide description that is as objective as possible, reached through a common operational definition. Only in that way can the breadth of slavery be recognized for what it is.

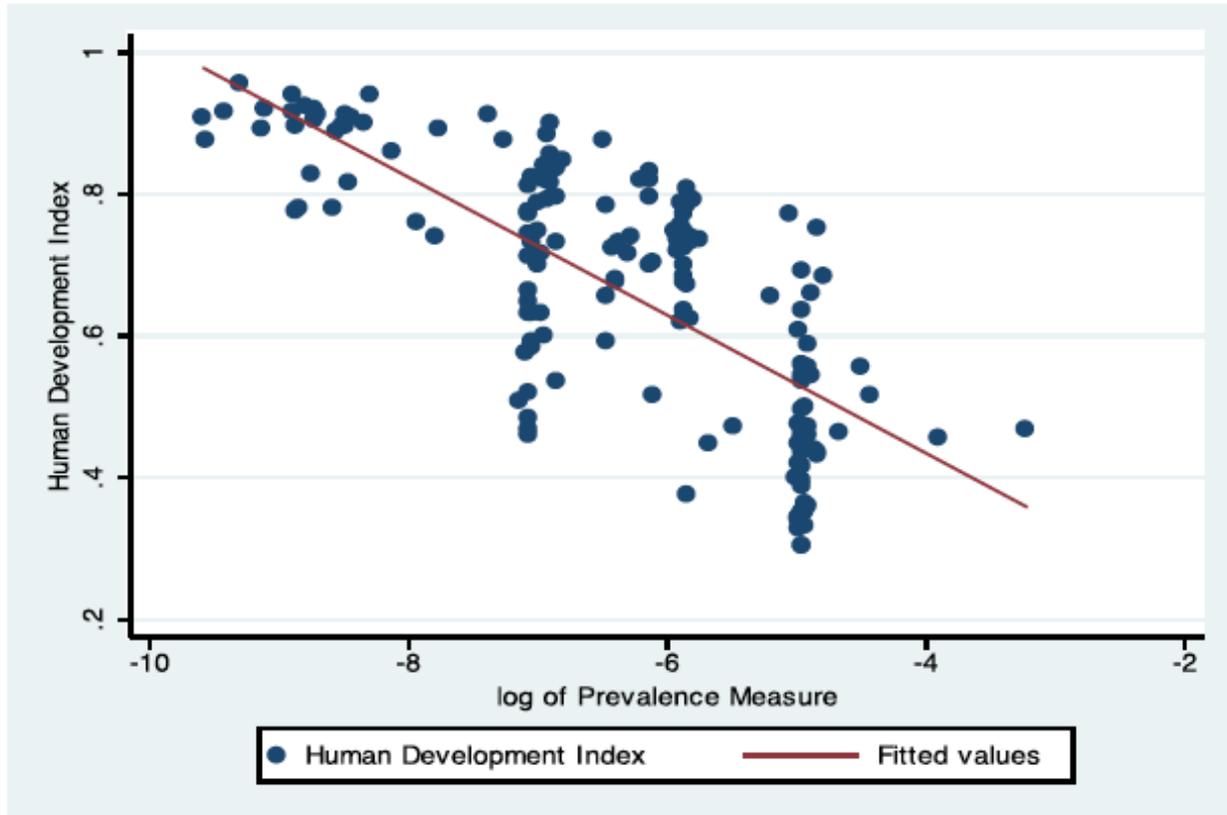
The field of archeology is famously divided into “splitters” and “lumpers” - those who interpret each new bone or pottery fragment as a new category of human or culture, and those who see commonality and continuity and assign new finds to existing categories. This is understandable when the objects under study are rare, are fragmentary, and are far removed in time from their original context. Those factors leave plenty of space for debate. Slavery, however, is far from rare, and we have millions of potential subjects of study. Nor are these slaves fragmentary records of people, they are complete human beings with the capacity to interpret their own lives. And they are embedded in the context of their enslavement, with immediate and recordable pasts. The science of slavery has no excuse to be ‘splitting’ and ‘lumping,’ it can derive a grounded operational definition from the reality of slavery. And once applied, it can begin the description of the variety that exists within that defined group.

This description might take many forms. Fundamental information such as: the prevalence (number enslaved) in a certain type of slavery, the nature of the mechanism leading to their enslavement (debt, kidnap, fraud), and the type of work required, all need careful compilation. Today we actually know little about our subject, to use a taxonomic analogy, we tend to agree that slavery falls within the *Order* of human exploitation, that there is a *Family* of behaviors that involve extreme levels of control and violence as a basis for that exploitation, that there is a *Genus* made up of categories such as “human trafficking,” debt bondage, and slavery, and there are a large number of specific *Species* of slavery that are expressed in ways that reflect local “ecosystems” of culture, economics,

⁵ "Trafficking in persons" shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs. (Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children supplementing the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime.)

discrimination, and so forth. What is also very clear is that we are nowhere near an exhaustive description of the variant *Species* of contemporary slavery around the world.

Fundamental description is only a first step, necessary but not nearly as useful as exploring the relationships between slavery and factors that might drive, support, or act to extinguish it. In a context of limited resources questions of *correlation* are important. It is a commonplace that slavery is linked to poverty, corruption, discrimination, and conflict. The question becomes which of these factors is more important in supporting slavery in different situations. For example, the following graph⁶ shows the correlation between slavery (the “log of prevalence measure”) and the UN Human Development Index (the HDI measures the availability of education, life expectancy, and standard of living) for 162 countries.

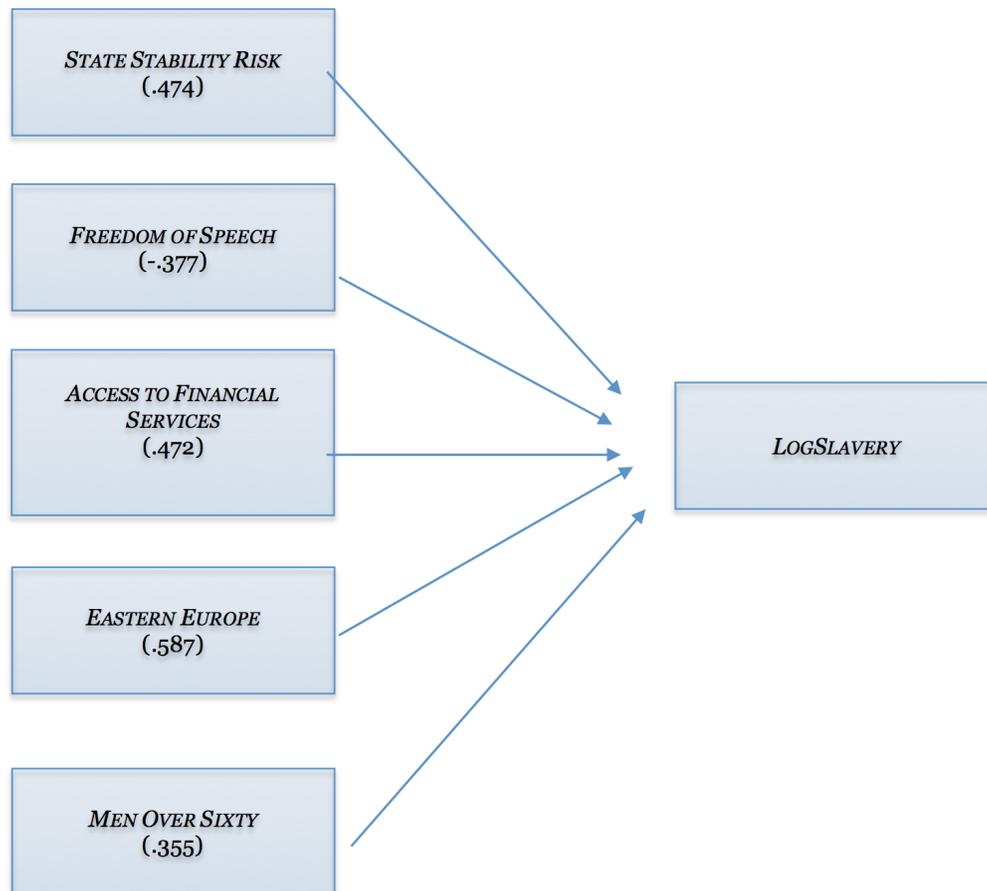


As the scatterplot suggests, and the statistics confirm, there is a significant (.001 level) and reasonably strong ($R^2 = 0.55$) relationship between the Human Development Index score and the prevalence of slavery in a country. Exploring

⁶ Drawn from the 2013 *Global Slavery Index*, Walk Free Foundation.

relationships like this gives us a measured and more precise estimation of our “common knowledge” - that globally slavery is related to human development and that when education, health, and the standard of living is low, slavery is more prevalent. But how far does that actually take us? As we take the first steps in bringing precision and scientific analysis to slavery, we will pile up a large amount of exactly such measured relationships. They will need to be sifted and tested and compared. They are not the “answer”. They are the ballast that allows further exploration, the foundation upon which more detailed research will be constructed.

That further research takes us into the third level of scientific explanation, beyond relationships and into *causation*. When we are able to measure over time, and to separate out the independent impact of one variable on another, we enter the realm of prediction. We are able to predict that changes in one measured variable will have a certain effect on another. When we reach that stage smarter and more efficient interventions against slavery become possible. At present, a lack of data on the extent and types of slavery makes this very difficult, but an example shows the way forward. The following diagram shows the independent effect of five variables in predicting the extent of slavery in 37 European countries.



The relationship between each of these variables and the prevalence of slavery in these countries is statistically significant, and the strength of that relationship, independent of the other variables, is measured and given in the standardized Beta Coefficients shown in parentheses. Clearly, the countries of the former Soviet Union and Soviet Block suffer from governmental instability, curtailments on basic human rights (like the freedom of speech), and a lack of credit that makes building up new enterprise very difficult, and as a result their citizens are more likely to take risky decisions about moving to areas of greater opportunity, and thus sometimes are drawn into slavery. Citizens of richer countries also have greater longevity, and this is reflected in the variable that measures the proportion of the population over aged 60. This variable reflects a demographic that tends to higher levels of demand for foreign workers, and potentially demand for enslaved workers as well.⁷

Again, there is a certain amount of information in this diagram that is no surprise, but taken together it might point to interventions that were not immediately envisaged. The strong and predictive relationship between access to financial services and slavery, for example, suggests corruption-free microcredit projects in Eastern Europe might help to stem the flow of trafficked people. Further research can go deeper, and field testing such findings can determine if the predicted influence can be translated into real change.

There are tough questions to answer about modern slavery and real methodological challenges along the way. Criminals are keen to conceal their crimes, and those in slavery are hard to find. But find them we must, both in order to count and measure, since many countries are in denial about the extent of the problem, and to open the door to liberation and reintegration.

One of the outcomes of building a social science of slavery is that greater specialism will occur. At present most practitioners are generalists, which is not unusual when only general knowledge is available. But as we move forward, as resources and the number of people involved in the field increase, we will have the opportunity to delve more deeply into the sub-sets and sub-categories of slavery. There is, for example, no basic work on the relationship between slavery and religion, or on women and slavery. The interaction between “low intensity” conflicts and the eruption of slavery is also relatively unexamined. This list could go on into specific areas such as trauma, needful curricula for public facing workers, computation of demand curves for different types of enslaved labor, and on and on.

⁷ See also: Monti Narayan Datta and Kevin Bales “Slavery in Europe: Part 2, Testing a Predictive Model,” *Human Rights Quarterly*, (May 2014).

The fact that these issues are being addressed, that these questions are being asked, indicates progress in our understanding. For my part I am very glad to be at the “end of the beginning”. For too long we have been both a movement and a proto-science enfeebled by being simplistic, emotive, disparate, and disorganized. Our internal conflicts have wasted our strength, and our unsophisticated analyses have done little toward our true goal – the end of slavery. That has to be our mindset now. It is time to put aside notions that slavery is a vast, incomprehensible, and unstoppable crime. Now is the time to imagine and then construct *the beginning of the end of slavery*.