

On Slavery



Forced labor in a Soviet gulag

The airwaves, the press and the internet are so saturated with stories centered on race – from recounting of George Floyd’s death to “the 1619 project” that, though race is not something that preoccupies me, my mind must have reacted on its own to those constant cries of “systemic racism;” hence, the present piece.

Like every animal, we humans are exploitative, rapacious, and selfish, seeking safety and comfort at all costs – including at the expense of others. Our ancestors set us on the exploitative track long ago by domesticating animals – horses to carry heavy loads and plow the land; cows and sheep to provide food and clothing, dogs for security and for guarding the herds. Nor did humans stop at owning and exploiting animals: land, forests, water, ores, fossils, anything and everything is used to satisfy human needs, if not to serve human greed. In our urge for physical security and creature comfort, we crave whatever can contribute to our well-being, whatever can shield us from want and misery. That’s normal, I

guess; only saints can resist the selfishness of human nature, and deliberately seek out suffering.

The animals, and the inanimate stuff we exploit, are termed "property." Cattle, poultry and land are routinely bought and sold; in legal terms they are just "assets" that belong to someone. As we all know, prior to Lincoln's Emancipation declaration such was the case with people, too. Yet, there is a huge difference between owning a cow and owning a human. A human is endowed with intrinsic self-awareness of agency which makes humans superior to animals, and equal to one another – and makes the idea of owning humans much more tenuous, morally and legally, and for that matter, much more dangerous. Unlike a cow, a human thinks and understands the predicament of servitude – and tries to regain the lost agency, seeking freedom. Neither cows, nor sheep rebel. Slaves do.

This feature of slavery – ownership of one's intrinsic equal – is what distinguishes it from other kinds of property ownership, and forms solid grounds to forbid it. And yet, slavery had been practiced throughout history – using different justifications. In the ancient Rome it was simply a matter of brute force: the defeated were part of the war booty, and that was that. So it was in Africa, too: when the Portuguese voyagers discovered the markets of West Africa, it was not just ivory and gold that was sold there, but people too.

Justifications for owning humans on the purchasers' part, when any were needed, were not hard to come up with: the story of biblical Noah cursing one of his sons to servitude was quite sufficient to allay the conscience of the more pious, while to the less sensitive it was just commerce – same as trade in cattle or real estate. Other justifications followed, like the inherent inferiority of the blacks (Benjamin Franklin was as proud of his discovery that the blacks could learn the same subjects that were taught to whites just as well as the whites did, as he was of his discoveries of the Gulfstream, and of

atmospheric electricity). Justifications differed of course from place to place. In Tsarist Russia, before it abolished serfdom in 1861, peasants were simply considered part of the landscape – like a lake or forest that are part of an estate – and were bought and sold along with the land by the aristocratic landowners. The serfs did not have identifying documents, and could not travel; they were inherent to the land (an arrangement that was resurrected by the Soviets who denied the peasantry (or rather, “collective farmers,” as they were called) the internal passports that were needed for identification and travel, literally turning peasants into serfs. While Soviet city dwellers had it a little easier – they were “written into” a particular city of domicile in their internal passports, and could travel, one could not simply say “let me move to Moscow,” and go live there – that was impossible.)

Our own age, replete with dictatorships that treat their populace as property by telling their subjects what can, and what cannot be thought, said, or done, found an altogether different reason to hold their populations under control and deny them agency and freedom. To them, the power rightly belongs to those who know and serve the higher Truth – Communism, Nazism, Islamism. That’s how the philosopher-rulers (or, as some call them, “ideologues”) in the mold of Lenin/Stalin/Hitler/Mao/Kim/Xi/Khomeini justify their power. Though the outright slavery practiced in the form of forced labor in Nazi concentration camps and Soviet Gulags are a thing of the past (though apparently not in China), slavery itself isn’t. Countries where the use of mind is limited to memorizing the leaders’ sayings, and the speech is restricted to parroting them – countries like China, North Korea, Iran, or places where ISIS, al-Qaeda and their ilk dominate, all practice slavery.

What is interesting about all this, is that it de-links the phenomenon of slavery from that of the race that is all the

rage nowadays. In today's discourse, race links the present (and presumably miserable) situation of American blacks to that of their enslaved ancestors, attainments of the emancipation and of the civil rights movement notwithstanding. We hear and read, day in and day out that today, racism is unconscious, all-pervading, endemic, ingrained, systemic – and that it infected the present generation of Americans via America's "original sin" of slavery. The problem with that linkage is that slavery – slavery *per se* – simply has nothing whatsoever to do with race. In Tsarist and Communist Russia, slaves were as white as were their owners (and for that matter, African slaves were as black as their African owners who sold them). Modern-day slaves in the Communist China and North Korea are as Asian as are Mr. Xi and Mr. Kim; they are as Persian as are Iran's ayatollahs. So what does slavery have to do with race? Africans' black skin did not cause slavery in America any more than Russian peasants' white skin caused serfdom in Russia. Rather, human tendency for exploitation (exhibited equally by Africa's black sellers and the white purchasers) was what caused it. The state of labor market of the time – availability for purchase of workers in Africa coupled with the labor shortage in America adequately explains American slavery; there is simply no need to mix the race into this. Blacks were purchased not because they were black – but because they were available for purchase.

As I went to school in the Soviet Union, the teachers kept reminding us of one of Lenin's great sayings (all his sayings were great, of course, but only so many could be repeatedly quoted to school children): "to live in a society and be free from it is impossible." Sure, Lenin was right – but what he did not mention that this social dependence comes in two opposite forms – that of a person in power who socially depends for his pleasures on the services offered the flunkies – and that of the flunkies, who depend for their living (and at certain times and in certain places, for their very lives) on the caprice of the person in power. Hence, humans try all

they can to get into the former group, and get out of the latter. We all want to be “haves” rather than “have nots,” be in the camp of “oppressors” rather than the “oppressed.” Even the self-effacing “servants of the people” like Lenin/Stalin/Mao/Xi/Kim (Khomenei of course serves God, not people) who ostensibly want nothing for themselves, but whose only goal is to serve the higher good – prefer to do so while living in palaces, being served by flunkies, and being protected by bodyguards and security services.

The same principle applies on a smaller scale, too. Everything that can be used to put a foot in the door, to tighten one’s grip on the career ladder, be it corporate, academic, or political, has to be exploited. If fashionable cries of “racism” can help in building a career, can be a step to a better position, why not? I think this is why we hear the cries of “racism” from the “elites” (racism clearly not preventing them from attaining the most cherished positions in media and academe, since they are sufficiently well-connected to have access to the prestigious and highly selective and restrictive media outlets like the *New York Times* or NPR – elitist media inaccessible to the regular folk) – though racism has nothing whatsoever to do with the slavery, and though slavery in America was abandoned a century and a half ago, and the civil rights movement of fifty years ago changed the attitudes to the point where Americans could elect a black man as the president of the country. Surprisingly (or perhaps, not), the fact that slavery is still being practiced in far too many places around the world seems unimportant to the race-crying, well-connected elites to whom it means nothing, the all-in-all race that could be exploited for promotion, not being a factor there. As to slavery itself – who really cares?