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### Comments from the board:

- Answer one: Could Julia both explain and demonstrate further how neoliberalism is implicated in new narratives of modern slavery. The opening answer would also benefit from concrete examples, which would help preface what follows.

- Overall: Would benefit from being shortened since the piece is rather long for a blog. An overall edit for clarity of argument would also help - making the arguments more straightforward.

In her latest book 'Modern Slavery: the Margins of Freedom', Julia O'Connell-Davidson provides a historically and theoretically-engaged critical analysis of what the New Abolitionists have been calling 'modern slavery'. According to New Abolitionists, there are currently 35 million people living as 'modern slaves'. However, for O'Connell-Davidson, such number is a result of using 'modern slavery' in discussions on anything, without providing a precise definition of the term. 'Modern slavery' would appear in a series of stock phrases in discussions on prostitution, child labour, "illegal" immigration, female circumcision, begging and organ-trading. By discussing what is described as 'forced labour', 'debt-bondage', 'forced marriage', 'trafficking' and 'sex trafficking', O'Connell-Davidson challenges how these numbers are produced and the ways in which the term 'modern slavery' is employed in the fight against 'slavery'. Her argument is not that the world is free of oppression, exploitation and suffering, but rather, that New Abolitionism offers a selective lens through which to view restraints on human freedom. Such a 'selective lens' would address 'situations of modern slavery' in isolation from the political and economic structures and inequalities in which they are embedded - since it tends to place the problem into the individuals hands and/or to their 'traditional cultures'. Moreover, O'Connell-Davidson also questions the politics of naming some current exploitative situations as 'modern slavery' and others not, highlighting many existing controversies on the ways in which the term 'modern slavery' has been used.

Even though such arguments are discussed in depth throughout the book, 'Modern Slavery: the Margins of Freedom' has been met with some provocative arguments on various media platforms, such as [BBC Radio 4 Thinking Allowed](#) and [Open democracy](#). In the latter, for instance, it has been argued that O'Connell-Davidson suggests the idea of 'modern slavery' is 'inane and clichéd', thus her argument is said to 'undermine anti-slavery activism and deny an appalling reality for thousands who are trafficked, sold and enslaved' (Gupta, 2016).

In this interview, with Angelo Martins Jr, O'Connell-Davidson discusses and outlines the main points of her book, and elaborates upon some of its most controversial arguments.

**Angelo Martins Jr:** Can we start by discussing how and why you came to undertake this project?

**Julia O'Connell Davidson:** I was involved in research on 'human trafficking' from 2001, and as the years went on, I noticed how 'anti-trafficking' talk increasingly employed the language of slavery and abolition. In fact, popular and political interest in 'trafficking' seemed to be helping fuel (and fund) a renewal of the anti-slavery movement, which in turn helped to keep 'trafficking' high on the media and political agenda. A whole series of new anti-slavery NGOs sprang up in the US, Australia and Western European countries between 2000 and 2012, including Free the Slaves; Stop the Traffik; Not For Sale; End Slavery Now; CNN Freedom Project; Alliance Against Modern Slavery; and Walk Free Foundation. These organisations (which I call 'new abolitionist') have been remarkably successful in popularising their vision of 'modern slavery' as a global social problem, so successful that as well as attracting a great deal of popular support, you also now find Western political and business leaders endorsing their project and mouthing their catchphrases. Now that might look like rather cheering news – surely it's good to know that the world's powerful elites want to eradicate slavery? But in a world where slavery is everywhere already outlawed, so that nobody, anywhere, is legally ascribed the status of 'slave', what exactly are these powerful actors promising to combat? What does the term 'modern slavery' mean? If you look more closely at how politicians use the term, their vow to eliminate it doesn't look quite so heartening. In fact, it's mostly

employed to legitimate new mechanisms of domination and discipline, as opposed to helping eradicate mechanisms of subordination, segregation, inequality and oppression.

So a key motivation for writing this book was to challenge the assumptions and claims about 'modern slavery' that have been so widely circulated as to become almost taken-for-granted by many journalists and activists as well as many politicians. But as you say, I wasn't trying to deconstruct the new abolitionist message because I believe that everything in the world is hunky dory. Quite the reverse. Nor did I want to say, "Forget slavery, that's over and we've nothing to learn by thinking about it". Again, quite the opposite. There's a really rich, nuanced and interdisciplinary body of scholarship on slavery historically which, though ignored by the new abolitionists, I think speaks incredibly powerfully to questions about domination and unfreedom in the contemporary world. So the other starting point for the project was to ask what we could potentially learn about contemporary social and political life by thinking more seriously about transatlantic slavery and its living legacies. Crucially, if we look behind the celebratory tale in which the rise of modern liberal society is a story of ever-growing freedom for everyone, and think seriously about the fact that transatlantic slavery emerged and flourished alongside the development of modern, liberal societies (which is to say if we recognize that transatlantic slavery *was* modern slavery), it opens up important questions about when and why profoundly *illiberal* practices and relations can be tolerated in modern liberal societies.

**AMJ:** By highlighting the complex relationship between 'structure' and 'agency' in the several themes discussed throughout the book, you confront the New Abolitionists' assertion that it is possible to lose or be robbed of 'free will' and agency, and that slavery is defined by its reduction of persons to things. Actually, through the whole book you try to break with a set of dichotomies - such as person/thing, object/subject -, which are present in both classical liberal theories as well as in the New Abolitionists' discourses. Can you further discuss this complex relationship and theories that have helped you to make sense of this?

**JOD:** There's a wealth of theory (Marxist, feminist, critical race and postcolonial) that helps us think critically about the liberal tendency to imagine the social and political order in terms of a series of oppositional binaries (e.g., subject/object, mind/body, freedom/slavery, modern/traditional, political/economic, public/private, persons/things). The difficulty is always how to marshal their insights simultaneously, as opposed to imposing a theoretical 'division of labour' along lines of: Marxist theory to reveal the fictional nature of the liberal separation between political and economic life; feminist theory to challenge the separation between public (political and economic) and private (domestic) life and the mind/body dualism; postcolonial theory to deconstruct traditional/modern, past/present binaries, and so on. As well as drawing inspiration from theorists who try to tackle this problem (the work of Angela Davis, 1981, Nirmal Puwar, 2004, Laura Brace, 2004, Gurminder Bhambra, 2007, Kathi Weeks, 2011, to name a few), I find recent critical scholarship on transatlantic slavery, along with the writings of freed and fugitive slaves, incredibly illuminating in this regard.

One thing this literature makes you realise is that although the singular horror of slavery is widely considered to be its reduction of human beings to property (it converts '*persons* into *things*' as one of the founders of the American Anti-Slavery Society put it), transatlantic slavery actually implied something still more terrible. The enslaved were given, in Saidiya Hartman's (1997) words, a 'bifurcated existence' or 'double character' as both things *and* persons. Yes, they were bought, sold, mortgaged, bequeathed, and gifted as property. But they were also acknowledged 'as moral, intellectual and responsible beings' in laws that deemed them criminally culpable human agents (Douglass, 2003: 275). Unlike the livestock to which they were routinely compared, they were arrested, tried, and barbarically and spectacularly punished when they transgressed the laws that criminalised their independent mobility, voice, and any effort to resist or defend themselves against the power of their masters and white people more generally.

Those laws were necessary in transatlantic slave societies precisely because you cannot literally turn a human being into a 'thing' or puppet-like object simply by constructing them as an object of property in law. The enslaved still retained agency in the sense that, except when physically held in chains or beaten to unconsciousness, they had to choose their course of action, to decide whether or not to resist commands, or to run away when the opportunity presented itself, and so on. The brutal body of law that constructed slaves as criminally responsible persons was designed to try to make compliance the most likely choice. So

without the state's intervention to create slaves as *persons* (of a particular, inferior, and rightless kind), slaveholders' property rights in them as *things* would have been empty. They could have fought back or run away. Here you have a very clear example of the fact that political life (state, law, civil society, the realm in which human beings are constituted as 'persons') is integrally bound to private economic life (the market realm in which persons act to produce and exchange commodities or 'things'), and vice-versa.

But slavery also cut across the public/private dichotomy that preoccupies feminist theorists, because whilst constructed as market-alienable property, transatlantic slaves were incorporated into the slaveholder's household as dependents, along with women, children, servants, and apprentices. And yet slaves very obviously occupied a different position in the social order to that of white wives, children and servants, which alerts you to the fact that race was absolutely central to the particular ways in which the enslaved were incorporated into both the private domestic and the private economic realm. In fact, the history of transatlantic slavery helps explain why race is so fundamental to the liberal social order, right down to the very terms and categories that are used to make sense of it. Because as Charles Mills (2008: 1394) puts it, 'the same developments of modernity that brought liberalism into existence as a supposedly general set of political norms also brought race into existence as a set of restrictions and entitlements governing the application of those norms'.

All of this is hugely relevant for structure/agency debates in relation both to the history of the enslaved, and to forms of oppression and exploitation in the contemporary moment. It allows you to work with Marx's basic insight that people make history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing, but 'thicken' it by recognising the multiplicity and complexity of the circumstances that constrain our choices. Think, for example, about the fact that the enslaved did forge affective ties to one another, even if those connections were not legally recognised or respected. Those ties to kin and community (which can get presented as astonishing evidence of slave 'agency' by those who imagine that human beings are *literally* dehumanized when legally constructed as subpersons) were often part of what had to be weighed up in decisions about compliance or resistance or escape. Could you choose to take advantage of an opportunity to flee if that meant leaving your children in the prison of slavery, for example?

The painful realities of being forced to make such decisions are documented in a number of slave narratives, and very powerfully elucidated by Edlie Wong (2009) in her book, *Neither Fugitive Nor Free*. In fact, Wong's work draws attention to the ways in which agency is constrained by affective, as well as economic and political structures, and really makes you see how even in the context of slavery, gender differentially constrained the possibilities for action open to individuals. It very brilliantly highlights the ambiguities of 'choice' and 'freedom'. And closer attention to these ambiguities makes it possible to recognise slavery's immense structural weight but also acknowledge and respect the political subjectivity of the enslaved, including its expression in what Stephanie Camp (2004) called the 'hidden culture of opposition' and 'rival geographies' created by bondwomen and children as well as men. These and other lessons about the complexity of the relationship between structure and agency can then be applied to contemporary contexts that are dubbed 'modern slavery' by the new abolitionists, which is basically what I've tried to do in the book.

**AMJ:** As you mention in your book, there are many anti-slavery movements nowadays, with an impressive broad appeal coming from the Western affluent world and from the privileged elites of the developing countries. Poverty actions in 'the non-modern/developing world', for instance, have become a key part of how 'the super-rich' creates a sense of global citizenship, since 'freeing slaves is joyous, cheap and 'we' can all be heroes'. However, this is based on the assumption that some groups and societies have still not yet fully joined 'the modern world'. In this sense, would you claim that 'their' fight against 'modern slavery' is based on a ('racial') neoliberal discourse that instead of putting an end to 'slavery', it actually helps to reproduce hierarchical relationships and socio-economic inequalities in the globe?

**JOD:** Well, maybe to legitimate rather than actively reproduce, but yes. However, I would want to qualify that by drawing a distinction between the new brand of NGOs, like Free the Slaves and Walk Free, whose *raison d'être* is to lead a popular movement against 'modern slavery', and the NGOs and activists involved in struggles to support particular groups of workers who sometimes use the language of 'modern slavery' and 'trafficking' to try to emphasise the injustice and oppression they face. The latter don't necessarily form part of

what Teju Cole calls 'the white saviour industrial complex' (though some may), but the former certainly do. In fact, they often very explicitly continue a colonial transition narrative, in which 'debt slavery', 'bonded labour' and 'WFCL' in the Indian sub-continent and in African countries are examples of people helplessly trapped by their 'traditional' cultures, and the solution is for white Westerners to help them on the road to economic development and modernization. But though the new abolitionists represent these forms of 'slavery' as vestiges of a benighted past, most serious analysis of the settings in which forced and bonded labour and WFCL are found suggests that they are very much an outcome of the contemporary twinning of neoliberal structural adjustment policies with export-oriented industrialization strategies in developing countries. This is a policy combination that has encouraged the expansion of an informal, non-unionised and unprotected economic sector, and that has intensified processes of land dispossession leading to increased internal, often seasonal, migration as well as international migration. So when we look at these groups of workers, we're seeing one of contemporary neoliberal capitalism's many faces, not the age-old visage of some traditional, slavery-like practice. And to the extent that the new abolitionism deflects attention from that fact, I see it as very much part of the problem, not the solution.

And there are other senses in which the new abolitionism works to reproduce what I'd describe as very dodgy race politics. Because while on the one hand it presents transatlantic slavery as the historical comparator for contemporary forms of oppression and violence that in fact bear little or no resemblance to it, on the other hand, the discourse of 'modern slavery' denies, conceals or ignores contemporary forms of injustice, exclusion, abuse and violence that *are* in fact direct products of transatlantic slavery. As a number of critical race scholars have argued, the 'afterlife' of transatlantic slavery is a present in which black lives continue to be devalued and imperilled, and whiteness continues to be valued and privileged. But the restraints on freedom engendered by anti-blackness are entirely absent from new abolitionist talk of 'modern slavery'. The millions of black victims of America's prison industrial complex, for example, are not present in the roll call of 'modern slaves' that organizations like Walk Free and Free the Slaves wish to emancipate.

**AMJ:** Within this neoliberal logic that 'buries alive' (Goldberg and Giroux, 2014) social, political and economic structures (by placing the problem into the individuals hands and to their 'traditional cultures'), I would like to ask you to further develop the relationship between 'modern slavery' and the State. How does the discourse on 'modern slavery' play an important role in justifying the extremely violent State actions on 'bordering and controlling', which has been resulting in thousands of deaths and immigration detentions in 'liberal democratic states'?

**JOD:** From the late 1990s, the concept of 'trafficking' has been worked by politicians in Europe, Australia and North America to frame their efforts to 'crack down on illegal immigration' as part of a noble struggle to protect human rights, as opposed to violating the right to freedom of movement and compromising the right to life itself. They continue to move from expressing horror about the supposed resurgence of a 'modern slave trade' in the form of 'human trafficking' to defending the state's use of ever more draconian measures to constrict and control human mobility. This includes the growing use of (often for profit) immigration detention and deportation, even deportation of unaccompanied child migrants, said to be necessary in order to 'send a message' to 'traffickers'. Of course it's true that many people's journeys to affluent and politically stable regions are horrific – long marches on foot across hostile terrain with inadequate protection against the elements, extraordinary perilous sea crossings in overcrowded, unseaworthy vessels, and the death toll on such journeys is appalling. It's also true that some (not all) of those who facilitate such movement do so for private profit, and amongst them, there are some unscrupulous, highly exploitative individuals. And it's true that very violent criminals sometimes prey on irregular migrants, kidnapping them and holding them to ransom, even torturing and murdering them. But even given all these facts, the frequently drawn parallel between the transatlantic slave trade and irregular migration today is frankly ludicrous.

The African victims of the transatlantic slave trade did not want to move to the New World, it required overwhelming force to transport them there. The people described as victims of a 'modern-day slave trade' urgently wish to migrate, invariably for compelling reasons. The transatlantic slave trade was legally sanctioned by states, insured and financed by legitimate companies, and fully integrated into the formal economy of slave trading nations. It made

entire cities as well as private individuals wealthy. What is today described as a 'modern-day slave trade' involves small scale, informal and criminalised activities. The transatlantic slave trade ripped its victims from their families. Many people described as victims of a 'modern day slave trade' are either travelling with their families, or attempting to join kin already abroad. And finally, where the transatlantic slave trade inevitably and invariably led to one appalling outcome – chattel slavery – the so called 'modern day slave trade' often serves to transport people into conditions that are safer and/or otherwise more desirable than the conditions they left. Hence people are willing to take the enormous risks associated with unauthorised migration.

And the fact is that all of the death and misery associated with unsanctioned migration today is very simply and easily avoidable. It's much cheaper to buy plane tickets from Morocco to Germany, or from Turkey to the UK, than it is to secure the services of smugglers to take you and your children across the Mediterranean or the Aegean in an overcrowded dinghy, for example. The only reason people take the infinitely more dangerous route is that EU immigration law prevents them from boarding the safe budget airline plane that EU citizens are at liberty to board. If we are looking for a parallel between what is happening today and the history of transatlantic slavery, then instead of looking at the forced movement of Africans *into* chattel slavery, we would do better to look at transatlantic slaves' efforts to *flee* slavery, and the techniques employed by slave states to prevent this. Here the similarities between past and present are marked. In fact, virtually all the techniques that are used by contemporary states to control and prevent the unwanted movement of particular populations (from passports, patrols, fences, walls, and checkpoints through to carrier sanctions) were trailed by slave states seeking to control the mobility of slaves.

From the perspective of anti-immigration politicians, the beauty of 'trafficking' and 'modern slavery' discourse is precisely that it allows them to bury the violence, and violent consequences, of immigration controls in a narrative about individual immorality and criminality. Again, I see the people at the forefront of the new abolitionist movement as complicit with this, even if sometimes only unwittingly, just as their failure to condemn the American prison industrial complex makes them complicit with the racist logic of black criminality that's used to 'make sense of' the massive and disproportionate rate of incarceration of black and Hispanic people (Muhammad, 2010).

**AMJ:** Would you say that the ways in which the media, politicians, academics and NGOs have been portraying 'the refugee crisis', in Europe, works in an analogous way to the discourse of 'modern slavery' and its functionality for State actions? Would the current fight on 'the refugee crisis' also be a 'double-speak that is seen as part of a fight to secure fundamental human rights, as opposed to implying a violation of those rights'?

**JOD:** Absolutely in the case of mainstream academics and NGOs, and right wing and social democratic media and politicians. Part of the discourse of 'modern slavery' is that Western liberal societies, which are supposedly defined by their love of human rights and freedom, are under threat from the pre-modern barbarians who would 'traffic' slavery onto their soil. That same preoccupation with 'our' vulnerability is there in talk of how Europe is in danger of being 'overwhelmed' by refugees and economic migrants. It's a paranoid tale about how liberal societies have undercut their very basis by being *too* liberal, allowing *too* much diversity, *too* much immigration, being *too* respectful of the rights of people who aren't actually qualified to exercise rights and freedoms. And yet in fact, even leaving aside the fact that the current situation is largely a product of the foreign, immigration and economic policies pursued by Western liberal states over the past two decades, there is no 'refugee crisis' for Europe. Though a crisis for the individuals trapped at borders, the EU with its wealth and advanced economy could readily accommodate the numbers of people attempting to enter via the Mediterranean and the Balkans - the crisis is not that 'Europe is full, yet people keep coming', but rather a crisis of European politics (Roth, 2015). Or more to the point, it is a crisis of liberalism. Images of drowned three year olds washing up on EU beaches, of parents struggling to care for new born babies in filthy, freezing, insanitary encampments in EU countries, of people on hunger strike at EU borders, lips sewn together, torsos emblazoned with the words "Save me or shoot me!", all work to graphically reveal the immense and violent illiberality of which liberal states are capable. But the only way to prevent these and other horrifying scenes would be to tear down the borders and de-territorialize rights that are now linked to citizenship and residency. And that would mean liberal states having to surrender

certain powers that are currently framed as integral to sovereignty, but that in fact lead to gross violations of what would in other contexts be understood as basic and universal human rights.

Both the discourse of the 'refugee crisis' and that of 'modern slavery' help to divert us from that conclusion, and so work to inhibit democratic debate about what surrendering those powers would actually mean. Would the economic and social fabric really collapse if every human being secured the right to freely enter as well as freely exit any territory, and if every human being standing on any given territory enjoyed full and equal rights with others on the same territory? Again, the history of transatlantic slavery might have something to teach us, because in the anxieties today expressed about immigration, there are strong echoes of nineteenth century concerns about the threat that the abolition of slavery would pose to the liberal social order. Even those who in principle opposed chattel slavery often feared that its abolition would have dire economic consequences (falling wages, the collapse of industries and even entire European economies), and many white people, including Great White Abolitionists like Wilberforce and Lincoln, believed that people of colour were culturally or biologically unready for the exercise of freedom and could never be assimilated as equal citizens of free white nations (hence Lincoln ideally favoured a policy of deporting emancipated slaves to Haiti, Panama, or Liberia). Certainly, the history of abolition doesn't provide a very hopeful model in the sense that it ultimately proved perfectly possible to sustain a system of racial domination in the absence of chattel slavery. But it does at least show us that change is possible. Even social structures and institutions that appear to the vast majority of the population as utterly inevitable and entirely unalterable – as slavery once did and borders now do - *can* be transformed. But to ensure such transformations translate into freedom always requires on-going, collective political struggle.

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