

Free-ish Since 1865

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Did slavery really ever end here? I trust most of us feel pretty certain about the answer to that question; it's just that some people feel certain it has, while others feel certain it hasn't. I suspect which of those two certainties rests most comfortably in your heart depends on how you understand the word "slavery."

Wikipedia offers a pretty good overview in its article "Slavery in the 21st Century," which describes the various ways people find themselves in situations that might reasonably be termed slavery... today. Specifically, they quote Kevin Bales, a British academic studying (and educating about) modern slavery, who says we have slavery "when a person is under the control of another person who applies violence and force to maintain that control, and the goal of that control is exploitation." This seems like a reasonable-enough definition.

But see, the thing is, officially, legally, slavery has been outlawed pretty much everywhere in the world. This means these kinds of arrangements—which definitely do exist—are often called by other names (when they're spoken of at all).

For example, there are the farm workers in Immokalee, Florida, to whom I was introduced in the prologue of Eric Liu's book, *You're More Powerful Than You Think: A Citizen's Guide to Making Change Happen*. I'll read a little:

Picture a ripe, red tomato.... Feel its heft. Consider its origins....

There's a fair chance it was picked in Florida.... a fair chance it was picked by someone who not that many years ago was, in essence, a slave....

By the hands of migrant workers... who were abused physically and verbally and sexually... whose meager wages were routinely stolen by their overseers, and who were pistol-whipped and chained in locked containers if they complained....

They had no recourse. No advocates. No fluency in the language of their own domination. They were socially dead to the rest of the United States.

And yet, starting in 1993, they came alive. A few of them began meeting in a local church. They resolved, together, to act.

Aside from migrant farm workers—don't we have some farms around here?—there's prison labor, which is the explicit carveout referenced in the 13th Amendment, commonly understood to have

"ended" slavery in the United States. In 2017 Federal Prison Industries paid inmates an average of \$.90 an hour. There's also prison labor in Australia, China, and North Korea.

But in North Korea you don't have to be in prison to be compelled to work. Young people are compelled to do construction work, women and girls are forced into sweatshops. The Global Slavery Index reported in 2018 that 2.6M people in North Korea were subject to forced labor.

Eritrea, along with 35 or 40 other countries, enforce mandatory military conscriptions. In Uzbekistan students, even as early as primary school, along with state workers, are coerced to abandon their regular responsibilities to attend to the cotton harvest.

There's the kafala system in the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab countries, wherein employers sponsor foreign workers to come into the country and, by various means, take advantage of their positions of relative power. Similar experiences can be found in the United Kingdom or the United States.

And let's not talk about the sex industry, which accounts for maybe 20% of all modern slavery, and which doesn't include forced and marriages, bride buying, or the more than 200,000 minors legally married between 2002 and 2017 in the US (not to mention all the rest of the world). They were mostly married to adults, of course, and the youngest of these were only 10 years old.

I could go on, but I think you get the point. Using the word "slavery" may have gone out of fashion, but using people against their will has not.

But why bring up all these global considerations as we're trying to celebrate an American holiday? It's obvious enough that Juneteenth isn't about celebrating the end of slavery across the globe—just across this country—isn't it? Well, is it?

It's not so obvious to me slavery really ended on June 19th, 1865, when Major General Gordon Granger, in his General Order No. 3, brought the news to Texas that things had changed:

The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes that between employer and hired labor. The freedmen are advised to remain quietly at their present homes and work for wages. They are informed that they will not be allowed to collect at military posts and that they will not be supported in idleness either there or elsewhere.

Maybe you hear that last bit as a justifiably prudent encouragement to the now "former" slaves to jump right on into the civic and economic communities that had restricted them to their margins for so long. To my ear it sounds more like, "Alright, y'all's free now. Get back to work."

Maybe it's just me.

At any rate, that announcement wasn't quite the end of it. As you can imagine, when that order was read to the folks in Galveston, they didn't all whip out their phones and start tweeting and sharing Juneteenth memes (#free4all). No, some folks had to run out to the fields and tell the people who were, alas, already goin' hard on yet another day's work that, "Hey! It's over. You ain't nobody's slave no more." I can imagine the news travelled through the town and the surrounding area that day, but not across the whole state.

The slave owners, too, had to work their own communication networks to let their people know, "Yep. The Union Army done made it this far. It's time for Plan B." A bitter pill they took their time swallowing. Understandably, many owners across the state did their best to sit on that news and not inform their slaves—at least until the harvest was in for that season.

But it wasn't just Texas. The Emancipation Proclamation, which was the authority under which Gen. Granger's order was issued, only applied to the rebel states. Delaware—which remained a part of the Union—along with Kentucky and even New Jersey, continued to allow slavery until the 13th Amendment legally abolished slavery at the federal level in December of 1865.

It's worth mentioning that the former confederate states did not all immediately ratify the 13th Amendment when it was presented in 1865. In fact, Mississippi finally became the fiftieth state to vote for ratification on March 16, 1995, 130 years later. Then—and I can't make this stuff up—state officials didn't file the necessary documentation with the federal register until 2013, so it hasn't been quite 10 years since we've had all fifty states officially all-the-way on board with the abolition of slavery in this country.

But then, you know... sharecropping, Jim Crow, Ku Klux Klan...

For me (and probably not just me), it feels like America has said, "Okay, we got a place for you; and you best stay in it."

How many people here saw the movie *The Matrix*? What did y'all think of it? Throw up a hand if you understood the analogy embedded in that story about our contemporary culture—whether immediately or eventually—and felt like it had a certain resonance.

Morpheus: The Matrix is everywhere. It is all around us. Even now, in this very room. You can see it when you look out your window or when you turn on your television. You can feel it when you go to work... when you go to church... when you pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth.

Neo: What truth?

Morpheus: ***That you are a slave, Neo.*** Like everyone else you were born into bondage. Into a prison that you cannot taste or see or touch. A prison for your mind.

It's what George Carlin talked about when he went on so famously about "the owners of this country," who own all the important land and the corporations and the politicians and don't want all the rest of us to be smart enough to think critically and share those critical thoughts in a broadly shared civil discourse.

I'm here today to suggest to you this question, which I hope you will take seriously: has slavery ended, or has it become more deeply, more subtly, more insidiously entrenched... and more broadly shared among us?

In the same way that the Emancipation Proclamation didn't end slavery, General Granger's announcement on the first Juneteenth didn't end slavery. The 13th Amendment didn't end slavery. The waning of sharecropping throughout the 20th century didn't end slavery. We have not yet seen the end of slavery—not in the US, and certainly not across the globe.

So what can we celebrate today?

Part of me wants to just spread my arms and welcome you all to the party.

But there's another part of me that wants to sigh, pause for a breath, and remember that though we've been at it for so long, and we still seem as indefinitely far as ever from the finish, the journey has been tremendous! And we have been blessed to share it together, not just with the pleasure of each other's company, but also with the various rigors to which we have subjected each other. As my lovely wife reminded us all last summer and fall as she was running for her seat on the city commission: "We are better together."