

**Pino Arlacchi, 2008**

*When I started to deal with this topic, at the beginning of the 90', most people thought about slavery assuming that it was eliminated during the nineteenth century. Unfortunately, this was far from the truth. Slavery and the global slave trade continue to thrive to this day; in fact, more people are being trafficked across borders against their will now than at any point in the past.*

*This human stain is a product of the same political, technological, and economic forces that have fueled globalization. The current system offers too many incentives to criminals and outlaw states to market humans and still promises too little in the way of sanctions.*

*Contemporary slavery typically involves young people, and many women and children, being forced into servitude through violence and deprivation. Disturbingly, most states have failed to take much action to address the issue.*

*The problem is one of political will, not capability, for the countries of the world have at their disposal numerous instruments that, if their leaders had the courage to use them, could greatly curtail – let's say abolish – the global slave trade.*

*Trafficking in people could be severely reduced because of the very nature of this trade. This is, actually, the most vulnerable of illegal markets. Because buying and selling human beings is not the same than trafficking in, for example, narcotic drugs.*

*For the organizers of the trade this distinction is not relevant. For them there is no difference between selling heroin or selling people. It's part of the same pattern of doing business. What matters most is the rate of profit and the risk involved in each set of transactions. Risk is a function of the police and socio-political pressure against the business. Since profits are high, slavers have plenty of money to pay off government officials and local police. Profits grow with the size of the market and with the increase of prices. Slave labor, like any kind of labor, can appear to many "operators" as a commodity like any other.*

*Let's go now more in depth about the issue of humans as commodities. I believe this is a crucial point. The point of departure, however is that, as Karl Polanyi once told us, labor is not obviously a commodity. . In other words, according to the empirical definition of a commodity, labor is not a commodity.*

*Human trafficking can be countered more easily than other criminal businesses because of the extreme artificiality of the trade, based on a "commodity fiction" that is very visible. A drug shipment can be stored, concealed, left unused, transported, dismembered, "cut" and even counterfeited without any significant consequence for the content and the modality of the transaction. (K. Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, 1944, Beacon Press, 2001, p. 75-76).*

*It was a long quotation, from a book written more than sixty years ago, in a different context. But I believe it contain a concept that is very helpful for those who are committed to fight human trafficking: the idea that we are combating not only the scourge of a couple of tens of million people entrapped into an intorelable situation, but also the nastiest, ultimate consequences of the market society.*

*At the same time, we are fighting a struggle that is winnable, as it was the first struggle against slavery, less than two centuries ago.*

*Even in this case, we are confronting powerful forces, rooted into greed, aggression and appetite for domination. These forces are this time truly universal, not limited to just three continents, and are involving a number of people much bigger than in the past.*

*But the resources at our disposal for the fight, too, are much bigger than before.*

*The causes of human trafficking are supply and demand of commodities that are not commodities, occurring in markets whose existence is strongly opposed by official laws and by the.*

*The supply of victims is encouraged by many factors, including poverty, the attraction of higher standards of living elsewhere, lack of employment opportunities, public and private corruption, organized crime, violence against women and children, discrimination against women, political instability, and armed conflict.*

*Traffickers often position themselves as employment agents, inducing parents to part with a child, but then traffic the child into prostitution, domestic servitude, or a commercial enterprise. In the end, the family receives few if any wage remittances, the child remains unschooled and untrained and separated from his or her family, and the hoped-for educational and economic opportunities never materialize.*

*Demand for cheap labor and for prostituted women, girls, and boys is the primary “pull” factor. Customers for the products of forced labor are often ignorant of their involvement with slavery. Sex buyers are far more complicit in the victimization of sex trafficking victims, and thus are logical targets for action on the link between prostitution and human trafficking.*

*Sex tourism and child pornography have become worldwide industries, facilitated by technologies such as the Internet, which vastly expand the choices available to pedophiles.*

*Trafficking is also driven by the global demand for cheap, vulnerable, and illegal labor. For example, there is great demand in some prosperous countries of Asia and the Middle East for domestic servants who sometimes fall victim to exploitation or involuntary servitude. After all, ending slavery is not simply a moral crusade, as compelling as the moral case may be. There are also important general reasons why international community should lead a charge to eliminate this practice. The fact of the matter is that the same people who engage in human trafficking also contribute to the deepening criminalization of the world economy overall, often operating in close association with corrupt officials around the world. By allowing slavery to go unpunished, states erode the foundations of the international system, which requires that governments be capable of enforcing bilateral and multilateral agreements and the rule of law.*

*Tragically, although the strongest states have the greatest capacity to suppress the slave trade, they have not done so, and key opportunities for action have been lost. The European Union and the United States, for example, may have made some bold pronouncements about eliminating slavery, but they are so focused on the war on terror that they rarely press matters such as slavery at meetings with relevant governments. It's too bad. Because when we deal with human trafficking we are dealing with a subject that is many times more dangerous to the people than terrorism. Victims of the trafficking – sexual or economic, doesn't matter – are a huge number, and are not therefore comparable with the 300-400 hundred yearly casualties for terrorist attacks. The total number of people estimated to be living in some form of forced servitude around the world (according to the International Labor Organization) grows to 12*

million.

*ILO found that an estimated 284,000 children on cocoa farms in West Africa were “either involved in hazardous work, unprotected or unfree, or have been trafficked.” West African cocoa farms produce 70 percent of the world’s and are located in Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Cameroon and Nigeria.*

*The conditions in which trafficked women are sexually exploited differ, as does the severity of the violation of their human rights. In extreme cases women may lose their lives – at the hands of traffickers who dump those they are transporting into the sea when police are active in the area, or dispose of them in other ways when they are sick or uncooperative.*

*A short sighted approach to the issue of global slave trade is dangerous not just for the people who end up as slaves around the world but for anyone with a stake in the future of human rights. The costs of inaction are rising; already, they are too high to bear.*

*Trafficking in persons has serious public health implications in addition to being a human rights and national security issue. By definition, human trafficking entails “force, fraud, or coercion” which typically includes confinement and, often, physical and psychological abuse.*

*Research demonstrates that violence and abuse are at the core of trafficking for prostitution. Most women trafficked for prostitution into the European Union had been violently assaulted or coerced into a sexual act, and many victims reported fatigue, neurological symptoms. Additional psychological consequences common among prostituted women include dissociative and personality disorders, anxiety, and depression.*

*As with sex trafficking, those who are trafficked for labor suffer physical and mental health problems, such as post-traumatic stress disorder due to physical assaults and beatings, and depression that elevates the risk of suicide. Victims of forced labor have limited ability to determine the conditions in which they work or to leave the workplace, which may increase their risk of physical and mental health damage.*

### **At the source**

*Many policymakers have suggested that promoting economic growth in developing countries should be an important step, since this would eliminate slavery by providing potential victims with an alternative. This is surely a very effective, long term measure. But economic growth alone will not stop this plague, at least not anytime soon.*

*A well focused approach is provided by a UN instrument. The most authoritative modern international agreement aimed at the slave trade is the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, which was approved by the UN General Assembly in 2000. This agreement, which supplemented the Palermo Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime, reflected a growing universal awareness on the new slavery. Unlike earlier slavery treaties, the protocol does not mention prostitution; instead, it aims to serve as the "universal instrument that addresses all aspects of trafficking in persons."*

*Within the framework of the Trafficking Protocol, several approaches have been developed ever since. I believe that the International Organization for Migration (IOM) approach, combining anti-crime and human rights objectives, is one of the most viable. Let me stress the issue of the abolition of modern slavery.*

*It is worth remembering that in the nineteenth century many people argued that slavery would end "naturally" once the practice was no longer economically profitable. But historians now agree that since slavery remained extremely profitable until the day it was abolished, such an end was unlikely ever to come.*

*If this was true in the past, it is even more true today, since the costs associated with the slave trade have shrunk so dramatically. As long as slavers continue to face only mild penalties from a handful of countries -- and none from the rest -- they can be expected to continue their work, undermining in the process the legal and ethical foundations of the global economy. If nations and societies wish to halt modern slavery, they will have to use their power to do so. There is no "natural" end to slavery in sight, and any productive policy must start by recognizing that fact.*

*Allow me now to articulate a bit this perspective.*

*Modern slavery must be eliminated, not just “fought” “reduced” “controlled”. We should learn the lesson of the first anti-slavery movement. Within this movement, two strategies were competing: a) the strategy of gradual elimination, which was in fact a strategy of coexistence with slavery, given its weight in the English and American economy; b) the strategy of abolition, based on a legal and moral discontinuity with the practice, regardless of its negative consequences on the economy.*

*The latter strategy won with the abolition of slavery in Brasil in 1888. My invitation to all international agencies concerned with the issue is to take more seriously the issue of abolition. Modern slavery must be treated like the other main global issue. Member states should elaborate national plans for abolition. Plans with timetables, resource mobilization figures and precise targets.*

*It is a doable goal, absolutely commensurate with the available resources of the international community.*