A Crime So Monstrous

Summary

“This is an act so unnatural,” the American abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison wrote, “a crime so monstrous, a sin so God-defying, that it throws into the shade all other distinctions known among mankind.”

The author (E. Benjamin Skinner) defines a slave as, “a human being who is forced to work through fraud or threat of violence for no pay beyond subsistence.” He then starts out by journaling his trip to Haiti. He argues that if we assume that the center of the moral universe is the UN Secretariat in Manhattan, one will need only 5 hours from there to the streets of Haiti where one can negotiate a sale of a child. Benavil is the word for courtier, a broker who holds an official real estate license and calls himself an employment agent. Two thirds of his sales are child slaves. “The average fifteen-year-old child slave is 1.5 inches shorter and 40 pounds lighter than the average free fifteen-year-old. They may have burns from cooking for their overseer’s family over an open fire; or scars from beatings, sometimes in public, with the martinet, electrical cables, or wood switches. They wear faded, outsized castoffs, and walk barefoot, in sandals or, if they are lucky, oversized shoes. If you arrive in the afternoon, you may see their tiny necks and delicate skulls straining as they tote five-gallon buckets of water on their heads while navigating broken glass and shattered roads. Or you might see them picking up their overseer’s smartly dressed children from school.” These children are called restavèks, the “stay-withs.” Most children Benavil sells are around twelve years old. The youngest, he (Benavil interviewed by Skinner) claims, are seven. After a client makes an order, Benavil’s colleague works on convincing poor rural families to give up their child. Normally, all it takes is to tell parents that the child will be well-nourished and educated. Most clients want rural rather than urban children because urban children are street smart and will run away and most want younger because older ones are willful. Most want girls. This one Benavil interviewed by Skinner says that what he does helps these children because they have nothing to eat when at home. He doesn’t sell them, he “places” them. Skinner follows one boy named Bill Nathan (his mother gave him an American name in honor of the boy’s father). He was 7 when he and his sister lost both of their parents. Two neighboring families separated them and one family, Wilton and Sealon Gil took Bill. The lady of the house was ruthless. The studies show that almost every child slave in Haiti is beaten daily. Most girls are sexually abused and many of the prostitutes are former child slaves thrown out after becoming pregnant or after turning 15 when, legally, they would have to be paid. When Bill turned 11, three years after he entered slavery, two men sent by Sister Caroline, an American nun working in Haiti and a good friend of Bill’s late mother, took him from Sealon Gil’s house and set him free.

Skinner then goes on to introduce John Miller, America’s antislavery czar as well as Michael Horowitz, who helped make global abolition a national foreign policy; John
Eibner, a Christian activist who mainly worked in Sudan and would pay intermediaries to free slaves through redemption, a buy-back program.

Skinner then moves onto Sudan and follows a boy named Muong Nyong Muong born in 1976 in Bahr el Ghazal (in the south of Sudan). When the civil war between predominantly Arab north and predominantly Dinka south restarted in the mid-1980s and took his father away from him, he and his brother, Garang became the male elders in the family. When the boys left their village with their mother to look for work in the north across the river Kirr, on the second day of their journey an Arab militiaman found them and enslaved them. The Arab’s name is Adamoussa and he took the tree of them to work in his home in southern Darfur. They tended crops and their only pay was leftovers. Throughout their first five years in slavery, Adamoussa raped their mother repeatedly. They tried to escape but Adamoussa found them and beat Garang mercilessly and trained his rifle on the other brother as well as their mother. Similar fate descended upon thousands of Sudanese slaves over the past two decades. They were being captured in violent raids and the argument goes that the idea behind it was to obliterate their cultural identity. Skinner goes on to journal the slave redemption program. “Eibner redeemed around 100 per trip. As their funding exploded, so did their numbers of slaves. Between 1998 and 1999, they redeemed over 15,000 slaves. Over the next two years, the organization paid for nearly 44,000.” On the trip followed by Skinner, Christian Solidarity International (CSI) of which Eibner is a member and which is the group that does the actual redeeming, redeemed 3,782 slaves. The unfortunate byproduct is the fact that it turned out that many of these “slaves” were “false slaves,” a scheme perpetrated by corrupt middle men who figured this would be a way to get easy money. Having spent years with Adamoussa, during which Muong’s mother bore Adamoussa 2 girls, she became increasingly worried about her two sons because it is not unusual that the slave masters either expel or kill older boys because they represent physical threat. She told them to run. Muong followed her advice and one day while tending to cattle, he started running and didn’t stop until the nightfall. He managed to reach Dinka settlement in neighboring Darfur. There he learned of the Committee for the Eradication of the Abduction of Women and Children (CEAWC) brought to bear by the Sudanese regime as a result of the international pressure. Muong petitioned it numerous times to help him free his mother and brother. They did nothing until, again, due to increased political pressure (pressure didn’t specifically have anything to do with Muong but just a general war politics), CEAWC gave Muong an armed police truck and he managed to save his mother, his brother and his two half sisters.

Skinner then introduces Michael Gerson, Bush’s senior speech writer who happened to be sympathetic to Miller’s cause. While Gerson did succeed in bringing the issue to Bush’s attention and getting the President to say a couple of things about it, in the long run, it was a lost cause as politically, it didn’t have a desired effect.
Skinner then moves on to Romania. He befriended Tatiana, a former sex slave who founded an organization called, Atalantas, "an organization that reached trafficked women by placing stickers on bathroom mirrors of brothels, slipping them contact information in lipstick containers, letting slaves know they were not alone.” What is different about what happened to Tatiana was that her parents really warned her more than once before she was to go to Amsterdam at her “boyfriend’s” suggestion where she was to work as an au pair. When she got to Amsterdam she was told by her new boss that she had to pay off a debt which also included all of the dinners and presents her “boyfriend” bought her back in Romania. Skinner went to one of the worst ghettos in Bucharest, Basarab, situated among the Roma population. Skinner went under the precept that he wanted to buy a girl. He wanted to see if he could “buy” a girls’ freedom by telling the pimp that he wanted a girl for good. The pimp wouldn’t allow it despite Skinner’s numerous attempts. When the pimp showed him one girl, Skinner asked if he could get anyone who is younger than that. He was then told of a blond girl who happened to not want to come down when prompted so Skinner and his translators went up to see the girl who was forcibly taken out of her room by another woman. “She had bleached, rust-colored hair. Her head was shrunken, her nose flattened against her face. Mascara ran from pools of tears around deep-set eyes, cast downward at her bare feet with widely spread toes. Her hastily applied makeup could not conceal the evidence of Down syndrome. Lipstick was smeared beyond the boundaries of her parted mouth. Her flesh rolled out of the tight yellow tank top and shorts. Her captor held her left arm so tightly as to hunch her shoulder. Below her right bicep were no less than ten deep, angry red slashes, raised, some freshly scabbed…..’Do you like her?’ one of the women asked…..Her captor asked if she would go with me. The girl mumbled something……about being hit. ’She said yes,’ the woman said.’ At this point Skinner reiterates that “fewer than half of all trafficking victims were forced into commercial sex work,” but that sex slavery dominated Washington’s antislavery efforts. Skinner then went to interview Florian Costache, who was in prison at the time after receiving a three-year sentence, the average sentence for traffickers. Florian was a top trafficker for Puţu Cămătaru. Skinner goes on to say that brothers Puţu and Sîle Cămătaru “were the most prolific Romanian slave traders since the Ottoman period.” Florian said that he had good instincts for the business. He was looking for girls that had family problems as well as many orphans. Most of the girls were 15 or 16. “At the time, three in four Romanian sex slaves were trafficked west through Timişoara, over the Transylvanian Alps, then west across the Danube at the Iron Gate gorge to Serbia, a country that the Canadian journalist Victor Malarek called ‘the breaking grounds’ for trafficked women. Costache blazed his own northwestern trail. He never had problems acquiring forged passports and visas for the women, and border police always facilitated the traffic for fee. ‘The business took off at the end of 1996,’ he said. ‘We expanded operations into Hungary, where I have relatives.’ In Budapest, a larger Russian organized crime (ROC) group purchased the women at wholesale, prices varying according to looks and experience. From there, the Russians sold the women to one of hundreds of ROC affiliates operating in nearly sixty countries. Often the girls would be sold five or six times. Slavery is the
dark side of commercial sex – a $100 billion global industry – and Costache’s women wound up in some far-flung corners. Some went to Amsterdam, others to Israel. ROC cells in Vladivostok channeled women to Japan and South Korea’s mammoth sex markets.”

Skinner then moves on to trace a new “Middle Passage,” a slave trail that begins in Moldova, a country that, he argues is Europe’s largest source of sex slaves. From there, he was to go through Transnistria to Ukraine and then across the Black Sea to Turkey. Once there he was going to act as an entrepreneur looking to buy a group of women at wholesale. In this chapter he addresses this peculiar situation of women who after having been freed return to prostitution because they say they have nothing else to go back to. But heroes like Dr. Gorceag who runs the only functional shelter for sex slaves in Moldova does everything she can to convince these women that they have something to go back to by reaching out to them and speaking to their families telling them that their daughters are not whores. She also helps them to start their own small businesses. Skinner visited a small village in Moldova called Carpești that traffickers almost completely drained of its women and he managed to speak to the mayor whose wife also left. The mayor said that this really wasn’t a problem economically because these women are sending money back to the village but that it is a big problem psychologically. He gives an example of a friend who shot himself leaving 6 children behind after his wife left him while abroad. The mayor kept denying the fact that these women, including his wife, entered the sex trade and he said that he did ask himself why only women but not men were leaving. The answer he gave himself was that it was easier for women to find jobs, “in the service sectors, in Italy taking care of old people, whatever.” Skinner then went to Transnistria, the main point for Moldovan women sold into Istanbul brothels via Odessa. It was a known fact that police officers here moonlighted as slave dealers. Skinner then went to Turkey and while at the airport, he randomly chose a tourist agency and openly told the individual there, Kerem, that he was looking for a woman. Kerem turned over his badge, took Skinner into the office and gave him a cup of coffee. He took Skinner to the pimp he knew and while Skinner was in the process of negotiating to buy 3 girls for good, Kerem, serving as a translator, became increasingly worried because that transaction would take them to Russians which he wanted to avoid at all costs. Skinner then introduces the “mongers,” the sex tourists as well as something called International Sex Guide, “the Internet site that is the world’s largest forum for mongers,” which, at the time this book was being written had 160,000 registered members.

In the next chapter, Skinner pays some more attention to Miller and describes his appointment to ambassadorship. Miller’s troops in the fight against slavery were mostly nongovernmental organizations and he fought hard to get them money fast. Skinner argues that most of $375 million allocated by the U.S. to combat trafficking went to these organizations around the world. Miller worked hard to get the first President Bush to tackle global poverty and did the same with the second President Bush believing that
poverty must be addressed before abolishing slavery can be addressed. At this point he also indicates that, "sex slavery might represent the greatest proportion of cross-border trafficking."

In the next chapter Skinner moves on to India and follows Gonoo Lal Kol in Lohagara Dhal in the corner of Uttar Pradesh, a North Indian state that contains 8% of the world’s poor. Every single person in this village, including children, was a slave and they were working off a debt that for most families spanned over two generations. Gonoo, his wife and all of his children are working in a quarry breaking rock to produce silica, a debt that began when his grandfather borrowed 62 cents from a Brahmin farmer. At this point, Skinner mentions that, “Every credible study has estimated that worldwide, the number of slaves in debt bondage dwarfs the number that has been trafficked into all other forms of slavery. Yet, in trafficking conferences and press campaigns of the so-called New Abolitionists, Gonoo is the invisible man; sex slaves like Tatiana take center stage.” Skinner then introduces Rampal, a journalist as well as an organizer of an NGO called Sankalp that ran an informal school to which one of Gonoo’s sons went (his first son, Vishnu who died when he was 8 from a disease not identified in this book). Sankalp was “in the revolution business” which together with Amar Saran, a lawyer managed to inspire the slaves and get them to fight their slave masters. This occurred on January 1, 2000. Over 4,000 slaves managed to hold on to 8 quarries out of 46 in that area and to begin to manage themselves by forming over 200 micro credit mitra mandals, a self-governing credit union. Gonoo’s quarry was not one of these 8. But Gonoo did say that slavery was so deeply ingrained in him and his family that he wouldn’t know what to do even if he did become free.

In the next chapter, Skinner goes back to Miller who at this point was thinking of resigning having pretty much lost faith in his own government. Another blow was the fact that Michael Gerson, Bush’s senior speech writer and a human rights advocate resigned. At this point Bush’s administration considered the issue of trafficking closed. Miller’s marriage disintegrated as did his relationship with his son, a clear testament to his own words that this thing consumes a person.

Next, Skinner ends with the issue of slavery in the U.S. and describes the bondage of a little 9-year-old girl, Williathe Narcisse also known as “Little Hope.” It was a nickname she received from the Haitian-American community after police had freed her. After her mother died back in Haiti, she was taken by a woman named Marie Pompee who was a sister of the woman for whom Williathe’s mother worked. After Marie brought the nine-year-old Williathe to Miami, she turned her into a domestic laborer. Naturally, to make matters beyond horrific, Williathe had been repeatedly raped by Marie’s 20-year-old son. After having spent 3 years with Pompees, Williathe was freed and her mistress got 6 months because the judge said that he believed her when she said that she didn’t know that Williathe had been raped despite the fact that Williathe told her. Her son as well as her husband fled to Haiti. Here Skinner goes on to say that “Annually,
traffickers now take more slaves into the United States than seventeenth-century slave traders transported to pre-independence America...But even cautious officials in the U.S. government estimate that traffickers turn up to 17,500 humans into slaves on American soil every year. With an average term of enslavement lasting at least three years, there are now some 50,000 slaves in the United States.

Finally, Skinner argues that the biggest flaws in American strategy to fend off slavery started with being unclear as to what slavery meant. The other major flaw was a lack of creative preventive strategies. He continues by saying that poverty alleviation must be part of any realistic global strategy of abolition. The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 included economic alternatives to prevent and deter trafficking through micro credits and grants to nongovernmental organizations. He continues by saying that, “The most common trigger of debt bondage is a health crisis,” and that the free markets can be the most effective tools when it comes to ending poverty.