



openDemocracy

oDR

oD-UK

oD 50.50

democraciaAbierta

Shine A Light

Transformation

More

[About](#) | [NorthAfricaWestAsia](#) | [openGlobalRights](#) | [Human rights and the internet](#) | [CanEuropeMakelt?](#) | [BeyondSlavery](#)

Shadows of Slavery

Shadows of slavery: refractions of the past, challenges of the present

ALICE BELLAGAMBA, MARCO GARDINI, and LAURA MENIN
University of Milan-Bicocca

This collection is an outcome of five years of collective research and discussion



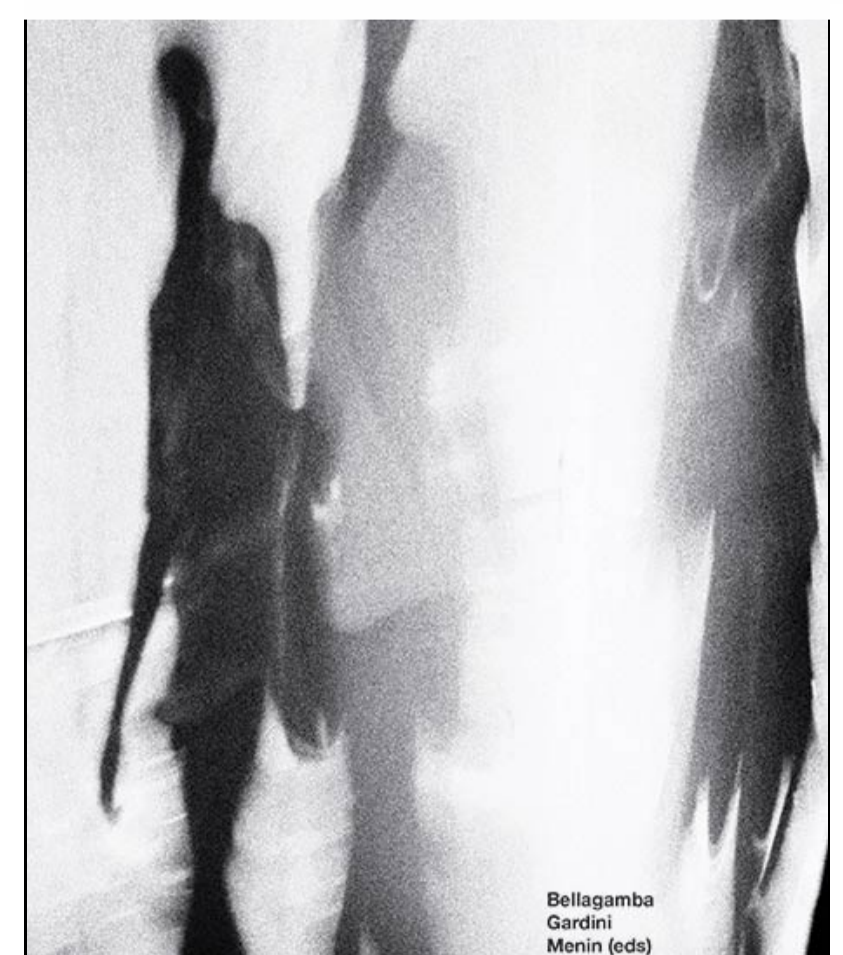
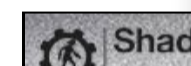
under the rubric of 'modern slavery'. It demonstrates one way of creating a contextually balanced understanding of how the past and present connect with each other, and do not. It interrogates, in the first place, which past matters in specific situations: is it the centuries-long past of the Atlantic slave trade, or the nineteenth century histories of regional and interregional enslavement?

Between 2014 and 2018, under the auspices of the ERC grant 'Shadows of Slavery in West Africa and Beyond (SWAB): a Historical Anthropology' (Grant Agreement: 313737), a group of anthropologists directed by Alice Bellagamba investigated the shadows of slavery, and their specific ethnographic manifestations, in Africa and beyond. All together, these contributions 'descend' into the everyday worlds of people who live the consequences of historical slave systems or who happen to find themselves 'trapped' in novel forms of socio-political inequality, racism, labour exploitation and sexual and moral violence. We seek to interrogate their stories in ways respectful of histories and contexts. [Read on...](#)

Part 1

We use cookies to make this site better. [Read more...](#)

Accept



[Download this collection as a PDF](#)

Introduction: lives and memories

ALICE BELLAGAMBA
University of Milan-Bicocca

In many parts of the African continent, the histories of late nineteenth century internal enslavement and the slave trade matter today. Putting an end to both, and freeing Africans from the grip of slavers and tyrants, was part of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century rhetoric of the 'civilising mission', which legitimised the European conquest of Africa.

The ground realities of colonialism were different however. The freedom that 'freed' slaves, achieved thanks to the colonisers, was always a colonial freedom; framed by the restrictions and abuses that affected the lives of all natives.

Besides, colonial administrations supported the interests of former slave owners against those of freed slaves whenever it served political and social stability. Emancipation was real but slow, and interlaced with a variety of unfreedoms. Forced labour, for example, was considered by colonial administrations as perfectly legitimate. Today, it is classified together with 'modern' slavery.

The agency of the slaves, rather than external intervention, was key to their liberation. They entered the ranks of the low skilled colonial labour force. They migrated where nobody cared about their social origins. Those who stayed close to their former masters strove to achieve honour and recognition according not to abstract notions of freedom but in the concrete terms set up by the historical trajectories of their communities.

Reading the traces of African late nineteenth and twentieth century processes of slave emancipation, and linking these processes to contemporary marginalities, is a difficult but important task. The first part of *Shadows of Slavery* reaches the conclusion that the legacies of slavery inform and structure current forms of social, political, and economic marginalisation and of racial discrimination in many post abolition contexts. There is no simple determinism however. Rather, these legacies intermingle with changing labour regimes and new historical opportunities of social and political emancipation to produce a variety of different outcomes. [Read on...](#)



The legacies of slavery in southern Senegal

ALICE BELLAGAMBA
University of Milan-Bicocca



The history of slavery and the slave trade shape contemporary patterns of vulnerability and exclusion in Southern Senegal, but continuity between past and present is not a straightforward process.

Living the legacies of slavery in Nouakchott, Mauritania

E. ANN MCDUGALL
University of Alberta



In Nouakchott, former slaves live invisible lives in 'niche settlements' between the villas of the rich and powerful. Their continued intimacy with their former masters makes their experiences of 'freedom' unique.

Emancipation and music: post-slavery among black Tunisians

MARTA SCAGLIONI
University of Bayreuth

In the south-eastern Tunisian region of Mednine, music represented a socially marginalised way for post-emancipation blacks to advance. Now younger generations want something different.

Madagascar domestic workers from slavery to exploitation and further emancipation?

ALESSANDRA BRIVIO
University of Milan Bicocca

On the marginalisation of kayaye street girls in Accra (Ghana), and the continuities between contemporary and historical forms of exploitation and slavery.



The life histories of slave descendants in Madagascar help us understand how legacies of slavery contribute to contemporary patterns of exploitation, and illuminate everyday struggles against socio-economic subordination.

Memories and legacies of enslavement in Chad

VALERIO COLOSIO
University of Sussex

Memories of slavery affect contemporary political life in many Sahelian countries, but how do stigmatised groups use those memories as a tool for integration?

The racialisation of marginality: sub-Saharan migrants stuck in Morocco

LAURA MENIN
University of Milano Bicocca



The everyday lives of sub-Saharan African migrants in Morocco are deeply affected by violent policies of border control. While existing laws create problems, the further burdens of history make things even worse.

Part 2

Introduction: race, colour and origins in North-West Africa and the Middle East

LAURA MENIN
University of Milan-Bicocca

Whereas societal debates on slavery and its contemporary legacies are far from new in a context like Mauritania, where former slaves and slave descendants have struggled for decades against enduring slavery and descent-based discrimination, in many other North African and Middle Eastern countries they have emerged only relatively recently or remain unspoken. This is perhaps because, as the Moroccan historian Chouki El Hamel notes, a “culture of silence” has long prevented these countries from engaging with, and discussing overtly, questions of race, slavery, and colour.



Contributors featured in this second section of *Shadows of slavery: refractions of the past, challenges of the present* seek to unpack the questions of race, colour, and origin in different post-slavery contexts in West Africa, North Africa, and the Middle East by interrogating their connections with local histories of slavery and their contemporary legacies. Drawing on fresh case studies from Mauritania, Yemen, Morocco, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Senegal, the contributors reflect on the complex intersections of historical and contemporary dynamics that shape present imaginations of 'blackness', black identities, and belonging. They also look at new forms of racial discrimination and activism based on specific constructions of race. The ambition is to offer a comparative reflection on the multiple ethnographic manifestations, and performative powers, of the racial legacies of slavery in contemporary northwest Africa and the Middle East. [Read on...](#)

Are Haratines black Moors or just black?

GIUSEPPE MAIMONE
University of Catania



The racialisation of the anti-slavery struggle in Mauritania has created a patchwork of identities and alliances.

On colour and origin: the case of the akhdam in Yemen

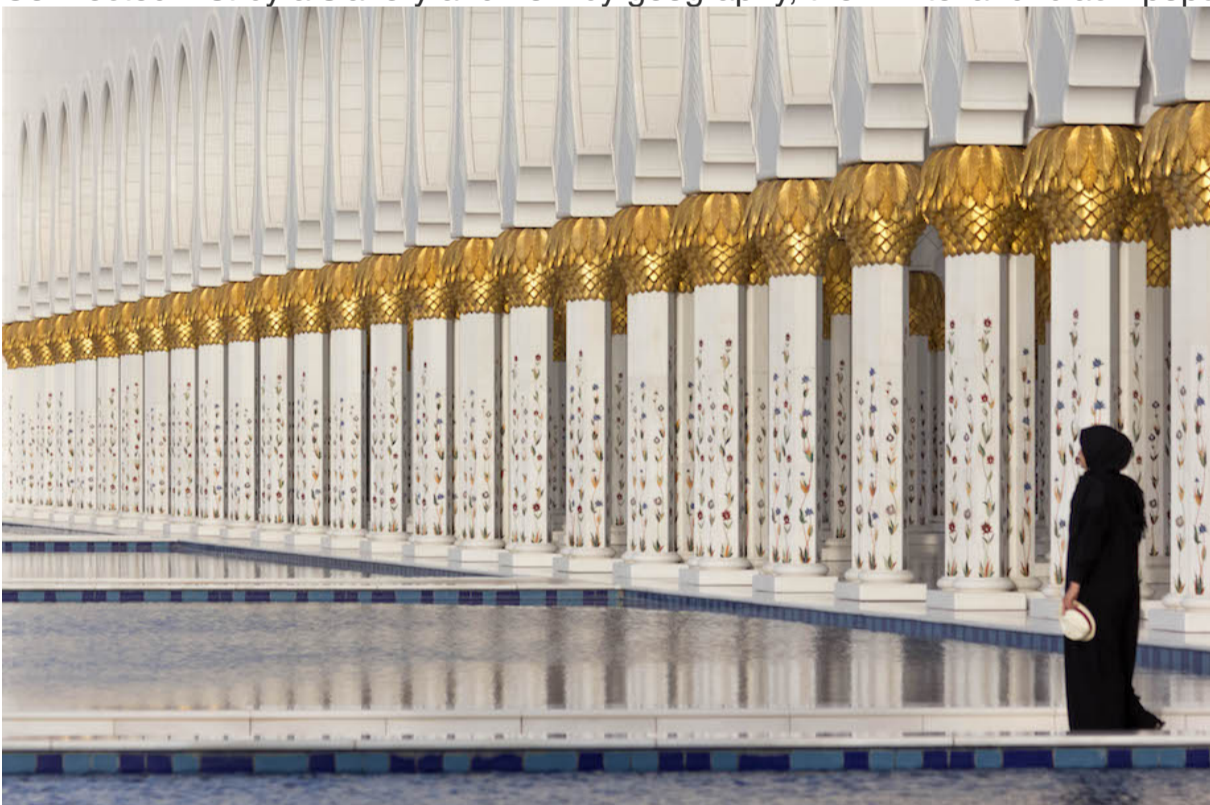
LUCA NEVOLA
Independent scholar

The shift towards a collective identity based on race has had major implications for Yemen's most marginalised people.

The multiple roots of Emiratis: the cosmopolitan history of Emirati society

MARTA SCAGLIONI
University of York

Connected first by a slavery and now by geography, the 'white' and 'black' populations of Ghbonton have a complex relationship.



The UAE, like many other Arabian Gulf States, claims to be home to a homogenous Arab population. In doing so it assimilates rather than acknowledges the region's slave past.

The politics of slavery and democracy in Mauritania

E. ANN MCDOUGALL
University of Alberta



The history of slavery is central to racism, activism and democracy in Mauritania. Many future decisions will be made by former slaves.

"In the skin of a black": Senegalese students and professionals in Rabat

LAURA MENIN
University of Milano Bicocca

Even student and young professional Senegalese migrants have to navigate the legacies of slavery in Morocco as 'Africans'.

Whom should I marry? Genealogical purity and the shadows of slavery in southern Senegal

ALICE BELLAGAMBA
University of Milano Bicocca



Hard choices are made when arranged marriages collide with a slave past.

Part 3

Introduction: labour exploitation in global agriculture

MARCO GARDINI
University of Milan-Bicocca

As often happens, the naming of a concept like 'agriculture value chain' carries with it unintended meanings and a certain degree of bitter irony. For those who have dedicated themselves to the study of old and new slaveries and forms



of labour exploitation in the agrarian sector, for example, the word ‘chain’ acquires obviously a very different connotation.

Of course, there are strong differences between the iron chains that trapped men and women during the Middle Passage and the ‘immaterial’ economic chains that oblige present-day, formally ‘free’ small farmers to sell their products, their labour, and often their land at miserable prices. The labour conditions of slaves in the American plantation system of the past and those of (migrant) agricultural labourers ‘freely’ choosing to work for landowners today are also different.



Yet, because slavery in the past was so often linked to agricultural work, the current expression ‘agricultural value chain’ evokes a number of questions about who today possesses the power to forge, enlarge, and hold these chains, to make huge profits out of them, and to trap others within them. Slavery has been formally abolished everywhere, but capitalism has found new ways to ensure a supply of cheap labour at its disposal.

Part three of *Shadows of slavery: refractions of the past, challenges of the present* seeks to provide answers for these questions as they relate to global agriculture – from Tanzania to the Dominican Republic, from Italy to Costa Rica, from Chad to Madagascar. Its contributors discuss the working conditions, the dynamics of exploitation, and the degree of unfreedom for all those trapped on the wrong side of local and global agriculture value chains. All contributions draw on extensive fieldwork, and explore individual and collective histories to shed light on the changes and continuities of labour exploitation in agrarian sectors around the world. [Read on...](#)

Agricultural investments in Tanzania: economic opportunities or new forms of exploitation?

JOANNY BÉLAIR
University of Ottawa

Many celebrate Tanzania's openness to private agricultural investors, but who really benefits?

Navigating unsafe workplaces in Costa Rica's banana industry

LAYLA ZAGLUL
University of Sussex

Deeply rooted gender and class hierarchies mean that gender-based violence does not end at home - women are also vulnerable to workplace abuse.

Extorted and exploited: Haitian labourers on Dominican sugar plantations

RAÚL ZECCA CASTEL
University of Milan-Bicocca

A slave rebellion formed Haiti, yet now many Haitians are subordinate to the sugar companies.

The problem of “working for someone”: debt in Chad

VALERIO COLOSIO
University of Sussex

Precolonial elites used to enslave the farmers of rural Chad, now they hold them in debt bondage. How much has changed, how much has not?

Containment, resistance, flight: Migrant labour in the agro-industrial district of Foggia, Italy

BENE PEANO
University of Lisbon

A ‘special economic zone’ exists in Italy where the rules and standards of work do not apply.

Introduction: global capitalism and modern slavery

Working for former masters in Madagascar: a ‘win-win’ game?

ALICE BELLAGAMBA, LAURA MENIN and MARCO GARDINI
University of Milan-Bicocca
MARCO GARDINI
University of Milan Bicocca

‘Modern slavery’ has become a catch-all and media attractive category that conflates together human trafficking, debt bondage, sex trafficking, and forced marriage, as well as various types of bounded labour that are perceived as comparable to slave systems of the past. This concept has become the core of a ‘new abolitionist’ agenda that is informing the activities and policies of governments, international agencies, and NGOs all over the world.

For its critics, the modern slavery framework falls far short of addressing the structural causes that produce labour exploitation and unfreedom under global neoliberal



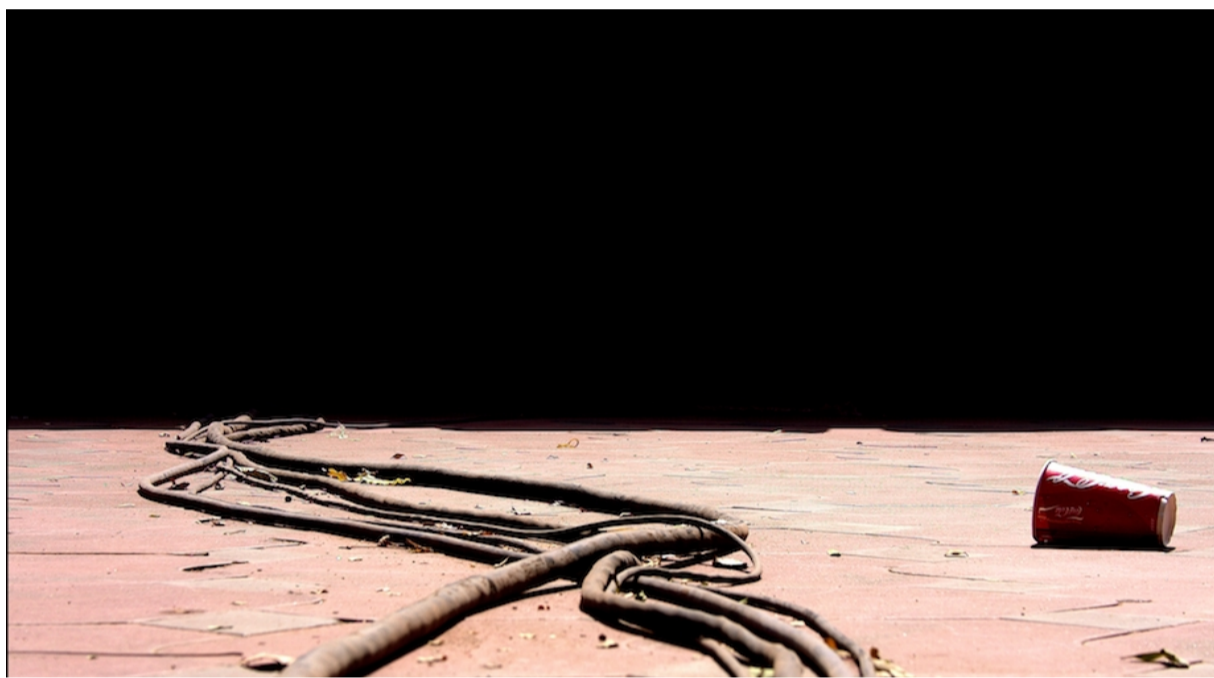
Workers and landowners in the Malagasy highlands see sharecropping as mutually beneficial, but only as long as the former masters come out on top.

capitalism. Activists and international organisations fighting against so-called ‘modern slavery’ generally limit their focus to ‘bad’ exploiters and exploited ‘victims’. These are considered exceptions in an allegedly ‘free’ capitalistic labour market, and it is to this market that ‘rescued victims’ should be returned in order to be ‘freed’. They tend to frame labour exploitation as a simple lack of law enforcement or as a juridical matter, ignoring its wider economic and political roots.

The ‘new abolitionist’ agenda pays very little attention to the fact that current forms of labour exploitation represent a constitutive part of a neoliberal capitalistic order. It is an order characterised by increasingly precarious labour conditions; reduced welfare, public services, and labour rights; the privatisation of public resources; spiralling debt; shrinking and tamed labour unions; and the legal and political marginalisation of large sectors of the (migrant and non-migrant) workforce. All these aspects are crucial to understanding how labour exploitation is structured in the neoliberal order that connects – and divides – the Global North and South. [Read on...](#)

Eight reasons why we shouldn't use ‘modern slavery’

MICHAEL DOTTRIDGE
Independent consultant



The imperialist and racist undertones of ‘modern slavery’ should be troubling for anybody seeking to advance human rights. [Español](#)

Modern slavery, child trafficking, and West African football academies

JAMES ESSON
Loughborough University

Ghanaian football academies are accused of exploiting talent and trafficking in search of profit, but what drives the industry in the first place?

Wasn't labour the backbone of global capitalism?

RENOAMPHELPS
University of Sheffield



Global supply chains are not benign spheres of opportunity, but tools for increasing the exploitation of labour in both the Global North and the Global South.

Brick kiln workers and the debt trap in Pakistani Punjab

ANTONIO DE LAURI
Independent scholar



Debt is everywhere a tool of social control, and no more so than in the brick kilns of Pakistani Punjab, where it travels across generations.

Ghetto Ghana workers and the new Italian ‘slaves’

GLORIA CARLINI
University of Milano Bicocca

Italy's public opinion calls migrant day-labourers in the agricultural sector ‘new slaves’, but where are the voices of these workers in the debate?

Capitalism's unfree global workforce

SUSAN FERGUSON and DAVID MCNALLY
Wilfrid Laurier University and York University (Toronto)



Neoliberal migration and border regimes instantiate a de facto forced labour regime. Migration is increasingly key to providing capital's precarious workforce, but unfree labour has long been central to global capitalism.

We encourage anyone to comment, please consult the [oD commenting guidelines](#) if you have any questions.

openDemocracy	Sections	Recent comments	Most popular
About Submit	openDemocracy Free thinking for the world	→ Could we force politicians to tell the truth? 9 comments · 3 hours ago	→ Trump's trap: leave vs remain PAUL ROGERS
Team Supporters	openDemocracy UK Investigating the crisis of democracy in Britain	→ Alt-Right Academia? 25 comments · 1 day ago	→ How do we ensure that Project Hope overcomes Project Fear? CAROLINE LUCAS
What they say Jobs	oDR Russia and beyond	→ Connecting to nature is a matter of environmental justice 1 comment · 22 hours ago	→ The Macedonian question and Greece's national solitude DIMITRIS CHRISTOPOULOS
Privacy notice Licensing & Syndication	50.50 Gender, sexuality, social justice	→ The unacknowledged fictions of Yuval Harari 11 comments · 3 days ago	→ The fateful issue in Sweden's autumn election was nuclear weapons PIERRE SCHORI
Advertise RSS Feed	DemocraciaAbierta Global platform for Latin American voices	→ The fateful issue in Sweden's autumn election was nuclear weapons 3 comments · 2 days ago	→ Labour's plan: climate, not Brexit PAUL ROGERS
	Transformation Where love meets social justice		

openDemocracy is an independent, non-profit global media outlet, covering world affairs, ideas and culture, which seeks to challenge power and encourage democratic debate across the world. We publish high-quality investigative reporting and analysis; we train and mentor journalists and wider civil society; we publish in Russian, Arabic, Spanish and Portuguese and English.