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We should not be ashamed of slavery we should understand this repulsive phenomenon

I am reminded of Dr. Myers’[[1]](#footnote-1) writings about psychology, theorizing that our emotional reactions form the most deeply rooted parts of our interaction with the world. Long before any knowledge of diseases, disgust of foul smells protected us from pathogens. When we want to study secretions, cadavers, or other revolting subjects we first have to learn to curb our autonomic reaction to them. We first have to overcome disgust, this evolutionary advantageous reaction that has protected us for ages, and then peruse scientific discoveries.

Similarly, the evil of slavery still festers in the cocoon of our collective shame. Our shame protects this wickedness against the therapeutic rays of the light of cold and subjective study. A continuous arc of progress connects us to the early human that harnessed a beast and lightened his/her load. We, the humanity as a whole, are the heirs of the totality of whatever this progress accumulated and should own the events that brought us here. Yoking an ox was a smart idea. Yoking one of our own was a stupid idea. I feel that this understanding is innate in anyone with a basic knowledge of history and a sense of fairness.

We feel shameful of humanity’s bad decisions just as naturally as we feel proud of its brilliance. Therefore, the shame and guilt associated with the bad decisions are very powerful motivations to want to recoil and abandon the examination necessary for learning and changing. Psychoanalyst, Gilda Graph[[2]](#footnote-2), who writes about the effects of slavery, points out the important distinction between our perception of shame and that of guilt. According to her, we relate guilt with something that we have done wrong. But we feel shameful when we think that there is something wrong with our own self. This points to a deeper and a more fundamental reaction; akin to murder perhaps.

Once we step beyond shame, we can analytically look at slavery, which in various temporary or permanent forms has existed throughout the times in all the cultures. Humanity used and still uses slavery to build monuments, deal with profit of wars, settle bankruptcies, demonstrate religious superiority, and establish large industries. Although race based slavery is one of the more appalling occurrences it is not the only one. This is to say if all humans looked alike slavery would not magically disappear. Not only slavery still exists around the world but also in the United States, according to Washington Post’s Max Fisher[[3]](#footnote-3). His maps illustrate that of the 30 million slaves around the world today, sixty-thousand live in a nation that fought a bloody civil war, at least in part, over abolishing slavery.

When one group of humans enslaves another group for economic or religious gains the entire humanity pays a price. When the moral, cultural, and financial costs of slavery are fully appreciated then a simple cost/benefit analyses renders the idea of slavery obsolete. Given such clear data points and with the power of personal responsibility it is conceivable that we can apply social science to the cancer that is slavery instead of having to live with its shameful abstraction.

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1. Dr. David G. Myers is the author of the textbook taught at NOVA’s PSY201 and PSY202 courses. See chapter 12, culture and emotional expression, for details. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Gilda Graph’s article in the Journal of Psychohistory contains a section titled “Difference Between Shame and Guilt” that details how shame influences us. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Max Fisher is the Washington Post's foreign affairs blogger. He has a master's degree in security studies from Johns Hopkins University. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)