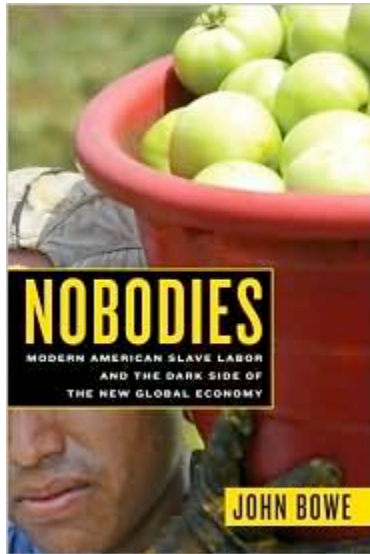




Nobodies: Modern American Slave Labor and the Dark Side of the New Global Economy

John Bowe , Joanne J. Myers

October 17, 2007



Nobodies: Modern American Slave Labor and the Dark Side of the New Global Economy

- [Introduction](#)
- [Remarks](#)
- [Questions and Answers](#)

Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: Good morning. I'm Joanne Myers, Director of Public Affairs Programs. On behalf of the Carnegie Council, I would like to thank our members and guests and C-SPAN Book TV for joining us today.

Our guest is John Bowe. He will be discussing his book [Nobodies: Modern American Slave Labor and the Dark Side of the New Global Economy](#).

I would like to begin by asking a simple question. How many of you have ever stopped to think about who is responsible for picking the oranges that brought this juice to your table this morning or the strawberries placed there? Have you ever thought about the individual who sews the label, "Made in America," into the clothes that you wear?

Take a moment and ask yourself, who are these people? How do they live? How much are they paid for performing these tasks?

The answers just may surprise you, as our speaker unravels the connection between our own consumerism and modern slave labor in America today.

In 1865, the [13th amendment](#) to the U.S. Constitution officially abolished and continues to prohibit slavery. Yet it is shocking to learn how little progress has been made in this area, since involuntary servitude still continues to flourish in many parts of the United States. Today in America, the number of workers who are kept in horrendous work environments, where they are paid sub-poverty wages without any benefits, the right to overtime, or the ability to organize, or even leave if they so choose, would shock and appall you.

In *Nobodies* , John Bowe writes about these issues to highlight the abuses and the immense indifference that exists in America, a country that prides itself on being free and democratic. He is passionate and concerned. He draws upon three case studies: farm workers in Florida, East Indian labor abuses in Oklahoma, and forced labor in Saipan, a U.S. territory in the Pacific.

As he shares his findings, he poignantly demonstrates how globalization and the actual slavery that results because of it have had the effect of degrading not only foreign workers in the United States who are abused, but also the character of our society as a whole. As one of our finest investigative reporters,

our speaker hopes that by sharing these stories and by studying how free and powerful people respond to the unfree and less powerful, perhaps we will then realize the potential hazards of our current enthusiasm for this phenomenon we call globalization.

Taking advantage of someone's desperation may be more than exploitation, and this is one of the things Mr. Bowe will be exploring this morning.

His writings have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *GQ*, and *The American Prospect*. He has also appeared on NPR's *This American Life*, as well as *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart*.

In addition, he is coeditor of [Gig: Americans Talk About Their Jobs](#), one of *Harvard Business Review's* Best Books of 2000, and he is co-screenwriter of the film *Basquiat*. In 2004, he received the J. Anthony Lukas Work in Progress Award, the Sidney Hillman Award for journalists, writers, and public figures who pursue social justice and public policy for the common good, and the Richard J. Margolis Award, dedicated to journalism that combines social concern and humor.

Please join me in welcoming someone who cares about what he writes and wants us to be concerned as well, our guest today, John Bowe.

Remarks

JOHN BOWE: Good morning. Thanks for having me here, first.

Second, I should warn you, I'm a much better writer than a public speaker. I think I have this tendency to make a lot of jokes, and stumble around a lot, and make it seem like I probably don't care about my subject as much as I do. So don't let the smooth taste fool you. I spent six years on this book, and it's hard to sum it up in just a few minutes, on my feet.

Lately, there have been all these books about capitalism and globalization and inequality between rich and poor. I have been going around for the last couple of weeks on a book tour talking about this, and in every audience, people are clearly very concerned about all this. Everybody knows there is something going on. The scales are tipping somehow, and that is somehow problematic. Just in general, in life, things should be in balance, and there is something that looks like it's going out of balance.

I guess what I came to believe while working on this book is that this problem is as scary as global warming. It is this reversion, sort of inexorable, to a way of life pre-Enlightenment, pre-democracy, pre-we're-all-created-equal. It is not something that people choose. A lot of it is just sort of the structural, inexorable thing, a lot like global warming. Once it starts and gets momentum, it's too late. Maybe I am wrong.

Currently, the top 1 percent of American households have gathered more wealth than the entire bottom 95 percent. Since 1970, the bottom 40 percent of American households have lost 80 percent of their wealth. This is not from the internet; this is from the U.S. Department of Labor, the Census Bureau. The same trend of growing inequality is spreading around the world. In the last 20 years, in 59 countries, average income is lower today than it was 20 years ago. The top one-fifth of the world has 80 percent of the world's income. The poorest fifth has 1 percent.

All of these trends are increasing.

Two hundred or 300 years ago, the difference in per-capita income from people in rich countries was two or three to one. A hundred years ago, that had risen to ten to one. It is currently 60 to one, and rising. Ironically, this change has been partly because of the abolition of slavery, which freed up people's productive capacity to work, be more productive, make more money. It's ironic that now that is resulting in this increase in inequality and that that could very possibly lead us back into slavery or something like slavery.

There is something that Justice [Louis Brandeis](#) said in the 1920s, which, coincidentally, was the last time

that wealth inequality was where it is now in the United States. He said, "We can have democracy in this country or we can have great wealth concentrated in the hands of the few, but we can't have both."

This book is about three slavery cases here in the United States now, today. It sort of breaks them down into the little psychic components and labor law and human-rights law components—the technical things that make it possible. What you realize—this is not a perfect statement or something I could argue scientifically—is that slavery is the opposite of democracy. It's the exact, perfect opposite.

One point that the book makes is that there are technical components that make these things. There are technical things that take away freedom, technical things that build freedom or enhance or promote freedom. They are actually fairly simple things.

One way in which I am getting in trouble for this book is that I approached it as a writer, not as a policy guy. That's all I know, journalism and writing. Now that the book has come out, I'm sort of forced to be a policy guy, and I'm not great at it. The solutions and the things that help a problem like this are so many and so vast and tie into so many different areas of public policy and morality and spirituality—whatever you want—that you could talk about 150 different things and you still wouldn't cover it.

But one of my primary concerns is just hitting at this blindness that we all bring to the subject. A friend of mine, describing our attitude towards privilege, said, "We can't see it because we can't see it." There is this structural part of our brain, and it doesn't matter if you are rich or poor, or liberal or conservative. In many, many parts of this book, when I was hanging around with really, really poor people, it wasn't some big evil corporation screwing over poor little Third World workers; it was some guy with a dime raking over the coals someone who had a nickel. So you have to get it out of your head that this is good versus bad. This is human nature. This is everybody.

I will put myself in that category, too. A while ago, I wanted to make some bookshelves. What was my first thought? Did I think, "Oh, I should call the union and find a carpenter and pay him 30 bucks an hour"? No, of course not. I thought, "There must be some Mexican out there who would be just thrilled to earn \$8.00 or \$10.00 an hour."

I think everything in this book plays out against this backdrop, worldwide. In the back of everybody's mind, there is this calculator running—"Oh, Chinese people make \$60.00 or \$70.00 a month. That's the going rate for labor now." I don't think there are too many drywall plasterers here in this room. We don't care what those guys get paid. You don't see and you don't notice, and you don't see and you don't notice.

Anyway, this not noticing is one of the things that I just became obsessed with, the ways in which we can't see. There are just a thousand of them.

Very briefly, the first part of the book is about a case in Florida, which I wrote about for *The New Yorker*. I heard about it while going around the country interviewing people for the last book I worked on, which was called *Gig: Americans Talk About Their Jobs*. That was 125 interviews of people, rich and poor, from supermodels to illegal aliens working in poultry plants, talking about their jobs. It's like 125 little documentary films.

I was driving around doing that, and someone in North Carolina told me about some people they knew in Florida who were working on a slavery case. I went down and checked it out. I really had no idea what a vast subject slavery is. But, really, in our heads, we should just think, there's music, there's painting, the visual arts, there's dance, and then there are ways in which we screw each other over. We have probably brought far more ingenuity to the last category, and creativity.

I just fell down into this rabbit hole, and I have sort of been there ever since, unfortunately.

The first part is about this case with some Mexican migrant workers who cross the desert into Arizona and get driven by a guy named Shorty to the swamps in Florida, where they are introduced to their new boss, a guy named El Diablo. El Diablo is diabolic, to say the least.

He says, "Do you guys have the money to give Shorty for the ride from Arizona?"

They come from the mountains in southern Mexico. They have never been to the United States. They don't know Florida from Arizona. They had never discussed their wages or what they were going to be paid or how much a dollar is.

When they are told that they owe Shorty \$1,000, but El Diablo is going to be gracious enough to give Shorty a check, they think, "Okay."

This is one of the things about globalization. Back in Mexico, in their small villages, they said everything worked on the law of *cojones*. If your boss didn't pay you, well, you all lived in the same small town, and if a boss was bad enough, at night everybody would gang up and trash his house or do something.

But with globalization, of course, you have people affecting each other who don't come from the same place, and that enables all kinds of tricks to be played.

What happens is, El Diablo tells them, "If you leave, I'm going to kill you." El Diablo is a guy who has killed people and kneecapped people and thrown them out of vans. He is a very scary guy.

During the course of writing about that, of course, I was able to get into the numbers and the structure of the whole agriculture industry. Americans pay 6.5 percent of our income for food, which is the lowest of any country by a good 50 percent. I think Canadians pay half again as much; Swedes pay about twice as much. It's not that we can't afford it. Agribusiness is the second-most profitable sector of the economy, after pharmaceuticals. The federal government gives about \$47 billion a year to agriculture in various subsidies.

This is the opposite of trickle-down. They have a powerless workforce. This, after all, is the industry that brought us Slavery 1.0. They have never conceived of themselves, nor have we ever conceived of agriculture, as a business that could or should play by normal labor rules. You don't see this in the auto manufacturing business, because they have unions. For some reason, we have always decided that it's okay if farm workers don't get paid.

So the story just traces the process by which these guys get sucked into this little world, where they are trapped and they can't leave. There is a great quote from a guy from the INS [Immigration and Naturalization Service], who says, "Look, these workers are so powerless. What would you do if you're down on a dirt road, you're 17 miles from the nearest town, surrounded by swamps, and there's someone saying they are going to kill you? If you leave, are you going to leave with your brother or your cousin? How are you going to go? Are you going to go through the swamp? You're going to make tracks like a herd of elephants. And heaven help you if these guys find you."

That's what it is. As one of the slaves described it, "I felt like all of a sudden I was in their pocket." You see the world just closing down, and that's it.

In each of these cases, federal prosecutors have decided that, yes, this person was a slave. In each of these cases, we are talking about bosses who rape and kill, and are on record raping and killing. I think that's good enough for me. The bottom line is, can you leave your job or not? I think that is a good baseline. If you can't leave your job, it's probably a problem.

The second part of the book is about a case in Tulsa. It's about this old Mississippi redneck, who is actually a likable guy, kind of a charming old guy. He and his wife Tina, who looks like the late [Tammy Faye Bakker](#), started a welding company in the 1970s. It grew to become a big place, where they make 200-ton big tanks for oil refining and electricity generation. The business prospered and then, with the decline of American manufacturing, he found it harder and harder to keep up with "them Koreans and them Chinese," who don't have any government regulations and taxes and all that stuff. He started to feel like he was losing out.

So he started a joint venture with some Kuwaitis to make these tanks over in Kuwait. Typically, in the

Gulf oil states, as most of you probably know, they have imported workers, guest workers, from India, the Philippines, Pakistan, and they pay them very little and they treat them very badly. That is what this guy was going to do.

He recruited for workers in India and got these very skilled welders. He decided he wanted to bring them over to Tulsa first, for a few weeks, and train them, to teach them the American way, before bringing them to Kuwait. So he brought over one group for three weeks, and that worked out okay. He paid them \$3.00 an hour, which was a violation of minimum-wage laws, but that's what they were going to be making in Kuwait, so why be inconsistent? Then he shipped them off to Kuwait. Then he brought over another group—the same thing, three or four weeks—and then sent them to Kuwait.

I think at some point the gears started turning. He was looking at these guys and looking at his American workforce and thinking, "Why am I paying these guys \$15.00, \$20.00 an hour?"

Here was one of the good things, too, about the story: He saw himself as a benefactor of the Indians. He was doing them a favor—because, of course, they are all starving to death in India. That's a poor country, where they don't have any money. So he wasn't just making a buck or saving money; he was doing them a favor, helping the "Indian boys," as he called them.

So he devised this whole deal where he would have an Indian recruiting firm find the workers and run them through some tests, and they would be the nominal employer. He came up with this really complicated deal where he would send their wages to India. He would wire the wages to this company, called Al-Samit, which also did some work for [Halliburton](#) in [Guantanamo](#). This company would wire the money back to Tulsa as their wages, and then it would get paid to the workers. It was this sort of hocus-pocus that you can do now with the internet.

He also decided that, instead of paying them minimum wage and instead of going through all this labor nonsense, like Social Security and health benefits and all that stuff, if this foreign employer was the employer, they could skip all that. After all, these workers were just going to be training, not really working. So it was sort of a different deal than just working.

At the same time, he thought, "Well, why should I have these guys all look for their own apartments? I'll just house them on the company premises, and that way they won't have to do all the work of finding apartments and wasting their money on rent and all that stuff."

As he explained it, "Sure, I could have had the recruiting company pay them minimum wage, then let the guys pay for their housing, food, and transportation. But they were only here visiting for a short time. They had no credit, no Social Security. No reason not to treat them as the guests of America they were."

So these guys come from India. They have paid a \$2,000 bribe back in India to get the job. Every single worker in America who comes here from another country comes owing somebody money. It is a threat that probably nobody in this room can really appreciate. Two thousand dollars in India is not a sum of money that you are going to make at almost any job you can get. You have borrowed that money from a loan shark. You are paying 10-to-20 percent a month in interest. These guys have power over you in a way that my student loan company does not have over me. If I default, it's a bummer. I might have some angst about it. But these guys can lose their houses. Of course, the whole extended family lives in a family compound, so if you lose it, there is this very, very real threat of putting your entire extended family out on the street, and you will never return to whatever respectability you had. They are dust.

So these guys come. For Mexican workers, it's about \$1,500-to-\$2,000; for Indian workers, it's \$2,000-to-\$20,000. I just found out about a Thai scam. An Israeli labor recruiter in Los Angeles has brought in 2,000 or 3,000 workers from Thailand. They have all paid about \$20,000. They are working right now in 14 different states. The same thing—they take away the passports when they get off the bus, and they say, "Get to work," and then they just take away money from their paychecks, deductions for this, deductions for that. Nobody speaks English; nobody can talk about it.

What is interesting about this John Pickle guy is just what an amateur he was. (John Pickle is the name of

the Mississippi guy I am talking about.) Everybody is doing this stuff. He put everything on paper. He wrote it up. He said, "This is one of the most visionary and forward-looking training programs in the history of cross-cultural business."

Here is a little deposition. This guy from the [EEOC](#) [U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission], who was really great, was questioning him.

He said, "When you and your executives were thinking about putting this deal together, did you consult any other companies to find out how might be some good ways to do it?"

This is the old guy answering: "No."

"Do you know if your executives did?"

"No."

"Mr. Pickle, is it fair to say you don't know all the details that went into the negotiation of each of the terms in this agreement?"

"That's a right statement."

"How long have you been president of your company?"

"Thirty years."

"And in that time, have you taken any courses at a college or seminars on employment discrimination?"

"No."

"How about human resources-management courses?"

"No."

"Have you ever attended any courses or seminars on harassment?"

"No."

"How about the [Fair Labor Standards Act](#)?"

"Nothing."

"How about any laws relating to pay generally?"

"Nothing."

"Immigration issues?"

"No."

"Tell me, if you have been president for 30 years and you haven't taken those kinds of courses or training, why is that, Mr. Pickle?"

"Well, I work with some pretty sharp people and kind of put myself out for them, just learned."

I want to match that kind of calculated ignorance up with what it looks like on the other side. This is a phone call from some workers in Florida. The way these workers get around from one area to another is with these secret van services that we don't even know about. But you can call from a tiny town, from a tiny Mexican grocery store. You call up, you buy actual tickets, and you say, "I want to go from this place in the middle of Florida to this place in the middle of North Carolina." These van services kind of flow with the crop season. So you go from tomatoes or oranges up to cucumbers in North Carolina or over to Indiana for blueberries or mushrooms or whatever. These van services, for a cheap price, will give you a

ride. They will drop you off in the middle of these small towns.

El Diablo had this sort of network of cousins and in-laws and people he worked with. They all communicated on their Nextel phones. They very much dominate these small rural areas. When they would see these van services coming to take away workers, whether or not the workers were their own, they would swagger over and say, "Who's in this van? You're taking our people."

They killed a guy a few years earlier, but the FBI doesn't know how to investigate these cases. You have a 6'2" white guy who doesn't speak Spanish showing up at the trailer home where 10 Mexican guys are working, and he starts speaking in English—"Where's Rafael? Is Rafael here?" Immediately they don't want to talk to him. The FBI want to work from 9:00 to 5:00. These guys are working from 5:00 in the morning until 7:00 at night, so how is that going to happen? The case never moves forward.

So the murder never got resolved, and these bad guys were allowed to keep going.

One part of the story is describing this attack, by some workers who were trying to leave. They did not even work for El Diablo, but he thought that maybe they did, because one of his workers had run away the day before. This is what happens when a worker calls 911 in South Florida. In the background of this cassette tape, you can hear windows being smashed and people screaming. It's just total mayhem.

I should have brought the tape, but it's very difficult to understand.

The phone rings. A southern woman answers: "911, police emergency."

A male Hispanic says, "Speak Spanish?"

The dispatcher says, "No. You speak English?"

He pauses and goes, "Okay, uh —"

The dispatcher cuts him off and says, "You need police, ambulance, fire, or what?"

The caller panics. He says, "*El mercadito*, Lake Placid."

The dispatcher—it really does seem like she is concerned, but it sounds like impatience on this tape—she says, "Where?"

He says, "The store, *mercadito*, Lake Placid."

The dispatcher says, "What? At the store?"

He goes, "Yes."

The dispatcher goes, "What street?"

He says, "27th."

She says, "Okay. What's the problem?"

Then there is silence. Then there is panic and then there are shouts in the background.

She screams, "What's the problem? Is there someone there who speaks English?"

Then the phone hangs up and you hear this dial tone. You hear the dispatcher saying, "Hello? Hello?"

It's just heartbreaking.

Then the phone rings again. She says again, "911. What's your emergency?"

A different guy starts speaking, "I need a cop over here because there has been fight with gun"

The dispatcher asks, "Where at, sir?"

He says, "*El mercadito*, store."

Mercadito just means "the little store," but it doesn't say which store. The stores oftentimes don't have names.

The dispatcher shouts, "I'm not understanding what you're saying. Slow down."

Then you hear more bedlam in the background, and he goes, "*Mercadito*, is the store."

The dispatcher says, "Spell it."

Now a third guy grabs it, "Hello? Hello?"

It keeps on going. Finally, the guy says, "Please, it's emergency here. Come quickly. Hello? Emergency! Emergency! Everybody have gun!"

Then the phone clicks again and you just hear this dial tone.

This is a part of the country where we have 300,000 Spanish-speaking people working. They don't get heard. They don't get police protection. If they call the department of labor, they get a phone recording, a white person speaking, not just English, but this special bureaucrat English—"By the way, our office is open from 8:00 in the morning until 12:30 afternoon on Wednesdays."

So thanks for coming to our country. Thanks for picking our fruit. We're not home. Good luck.

I want to take that little micro view. What I do in the book is hold that to globalization. You see [Thomas Friedman](#) on TV talking about how great globalization is. You look at [The World Is Flat](#). Every single interview is with a CEO. There is one little five-word thing in there where he says, "Oh, yes, by the way, only .02 percent of Indians are employed in the high-tech sector." Meanwhile, the average person—certainly, the 30 or 40 percent of the poorest people in India—has gone down, down, down. I think the average kid in India used to get 900 calories a day in the 1980s and now they get 600 calories a day.

There is a great quote from [Joseph Stiglitz](#), which I think, in a very euphemistic way, captures this whole thing. He says, "I think that political globalization hasn't kept pace with economic globalization." That is very much a way of describing what is going on here.

What I worry about, in all these cases I kept finding that the people doing the enslaving were usually able to present it as a positive—they said, "I'm helping these people. I'm giving them a job. They don't have a job elsewhere. Yes, even if I am doing X, Y, and Z to coerce them, and maybe I'm hiring an armed guard to wait outside the factory premises in Tulsa, think how little they were making back home."

There is this presumption that you can exercise this paternalistic, coercive control because you are doing someone a favor.

I just read about the hundreds of millions of people around the world we are lifting out of poverty and I compare that to the Spaniards coming to the New World and "helping" the American Indians by giving them the benefits of Christianity, and the white colonists "helping" the Africans by giving them the benefits of civilization. Heaven save us from these people "helping" each other. I think it's probably the first way to solve this problem.

A lot of times when I have been out talking about this, people start raising their hands and saying, "What are we supposed to do?" I am worse at that part than complaining and talking about how bad everything is. But there are, certainly, plenty of things to be done. There is an [Orwell](#) quote that says, "Economic and social injustice can stop the moment that we want it to." We just have to decide that we want to do it. But as far as how to do it, there are a million different ways.

There are consumer campaigns. There is a group that I write about a lot called the [Coalition of Immokalee Workers](#) in Florida, this heroic work advocacy group, this "multiculti" Mod Squad down in the swamps of Florida, who have had amazing success. They have teamed up with a lot of church groups and student groups. They had a boycott against Taco Bell. When I called up Taco Bell—you look at the pricing power that these large buyers of agricultural commodities have. They really sort of set their own price. It has nothing to do with the free market. Wal-Mart says what they are going to pay. Burger King says what they are going to pay. The farmer doesn't just say, "I'm going to hold out for a better price." If you are a tomato farmer, your tomatoes are going to rot in three days if you don't sell them.

When I first called Taco Bell about this, I had this spokesperson on the phone. I said, "There are slavery cases that have been popping up in the tomato fields. There have been six of them in the last few years in Florida. What do you think about that?"

He goes, "Well, it's heinous, but I just don't think it has anything to do with us."

What this Coalition of Immokalee Workers managed to do was to, finally, over the course of about four years, get Taco Bell to agree to pass on an extra penny a pound for the tomatoes they buy, which sounds infinitesimal, but it actually almost doubles the wages of the tomato pickers.

This is interesting, because it just totally bypasses any government mechanisms. It totally just admits that the government is no longer helping with this kind of problem, is no longer helpful with this kind of problem. We are going to start negotiating with the real power in this world, with corporations.

Since Taco Bell, McDonald's was the subject of a campaign, and now they have capitulated. Now they are going after Burger King.

It is actually pretty inspiring to see that these corporate campaigns can work; they do work. I felt good when my article in *The New Yorker* came out about the Florida case. The biggest shareholder of Taco Bell came in to the next shareholders' meeting and said, "What am I doing holding stock in a company like this?"

It's just too simplistic to say corporations are all evil and they don't want to do anything. I think that's bogus and I think it's lazy. If it threatens their profits, if there is a public-relations campaign that is effectively mounted, they don't want to have slaves; we don't want to buy stuff from slaves. Consumers want the same thing. There is a way to iron this out.

There is a bunch of other stuff, but I will save that for questions and answers, as far as policy things or things that could be done to address this. But for now, I should probably just shut up.

Thank you very much. I will take some questions.

JOANNE MYERS: Thank you for introducing us to the dark side of globalization.

I would like to open the floor to questions.

Questions and Answers

QUESTION: Thank you for telling us about the dark side of our country and suggesting that individuals can help make a difference.

The examples you gave were of men workers. What about women and sexual slavery and women unable to control their own bodies, brought to places that they never expected and sold, possibly, by their families, who need more money? What about that whole story?

JOHN BOWE: When I said that you almost have to look at slavery as being an art form, just like visual arts or dance or music—when I was getting into slavery, it's such a huge subject that you have to choose which neck of the woods you want to specialize in.

There are a couple of reasons why I don't even touch that subject with a 20-foot pole. Number one is that that has become a lightning rod for controversy between liberals and conservatives. Sex sells. Sex trafficking has been written about. It's horrible and it's real. It does happen. But the way that it has been written about has been kind of exploitive.

On the cover of *The New York Times Magazine*, there was an [article](#) about four years ago by Peter Landesman. This is just amazing to me. They show a Mexican schoolgirl in a Catholic school uniform from the neck down, with her flesh showing on the cover. It was totally prurient. This article was also one of the most poorly written—it was a horrible example of journalism—super-dodgy ethics.

Anyway, I didn't want to confuse the two issues. For me, what is germane is what I call labor slavery—that is, the manufacture of products that we all use, that we all consider legitimate. I don't see sex trafficking as being a contagion that could leap out of its bounds and fundamentally alter the way we live. I do see this addition to cheaper and cheaper prices and cheaper and cheaper labor as being vaster, more pernicious, and less written about and less explained.

That's why I don't address that. It's certainly not the case that I think it is unimportant or not horrible. I just had to choose which horrible thing I wanted to write about.

QUESTION: You were able to uncover El Diablo's activities. Why doesn't the government do something about his operations? If you can see it, why don't they see it?

JOHN BOWE: They are not paid to see it. The reason the book is called *Nobodies* is because I asked one of the guys at this Coalition of Immokalee Workers—there are different tactics that people take to address this stuff, but their sole mission really was to educate workers and to teach them their own power, and have marches and demonstrations and stuff. To my way of thinking, when I first started writing about that, that was uncool. These were dated tactics that don't work. I found it embarrassing. I found myself at one of their protests, and I was shrinking back. I hate that stuff. It reminds me of the uncool 1970s hippies and stuff like that. That is not necessary anymore. That is not how things are done now.

So I was always questioning them and being skeptical of them and asking them, "Why don't you have a legal campaign? Why don't you have a lawsuit? Why don't you lobby government?"

This guy just looked at me like I was so dumb (because I was). He said, "Don't you get it? We're *pelagatos*. We're nobodies. We're losers. Nobody looks after you when you're a loser."

That is really true. You look at who gives money to politicians. It's Taco Bell; it's every big corporation. They get millions and millions and millions of dollars a year from one side of the equation and zero from the other. We all go to which side our bread is buttered on. That's human nature.

They don't exist.

In the book, there is just this battery of things from the Supreme Court, from state legislatures, from the federal government—every single way, taking these guys from poor and miserable, and knocking them down a few pegs from there, taking away every avenue of legal redress, until they are just invisible. It is as calculated and manifest as anything you ever saw.

QUESTION: And they are not voters.

JOHN BOWE: And they are not voters, right. They don't even have the power to vote, exactly.

QUESTION: Thank you very much for your presentation, which is part of a whole strand of criticism that has been in a lot of media.

There are different ways to look at these problems as sectoral problems—McDonald's, Taco Bell—national approaches, international approaches. Two of the people who have been here in the past have been Tom

Friedman, whom you mentioned, and [Jeffrey Sachs](#). Joanne and I have had this discussion. I have been struck by the difference between Tom Friedman, *The World Is Flat*—that the United States has to catch up with China and India—on the one hand, and Jeffrey Sachs on the other, who has written this book called [An End to Poverty](#), which is about lifting the 1 billion or more people in the world from \$1.00 a day to \$2.00 a day.

I am wondering if you could say something about Jeffrey Sachs's view. In other words, deep poverty can be eradicated. We cannot, in his view, lift everybody to \$6.00 a day, but it would be a big achievement to lift people in Africa from \$1.00 a day to \$2.00 a day.

That juxtaposition is—Friedman ignores the billion who are very poor.

So instead of this sort of international minimum wage, which you alluded to, do you think what is really important would be to bring people up in their own societies, in their own frameworks, rather than trying to get everybody at a certain level?

JOHN BOWE: I think there is a huge, very dense nexus between economic and social justice. I am not smart enough to talk about it that well. I don't know if anyone is.

It's interesting. I was reading a book by a guy named [Kevin Bales](#), who is an expert on slavery. He is the head of an American group called [Free the Slaves](#). He has written a book called [Ending Slavery](#). He writes very compellingly about these very poor villages in India where antislavery efforts—like rescuing these kids who had been kidnapped and trafficked into working at looms and making rugs—how they freed those slaves and brought them to a school for a while, where they were fed well and educated about their rights.

Then these kids would go back to their villages and, at the age of 12, become village leaders and alert the whole village about trafficking and tell their neighbors, "Don't sell off your kids for this little fake reward of \$5.00, because it's not going to work out," but also getting the village to act collectively and fight against the landlords or the local corrupt officials or whoever is keeping them from getting government benefits and keeping them from getting good pay for whatever commodity they are producing.

All of this stuff starts with the political process, an awareness, a democratic process. That leads to the economic process.

Innately, I tend to think from the outside in, in terms of, let's raise their wages. So does someone like Jeffrey Sachs. But I think there is a whole other approach, which is equally, and possibly more, valid, which begins with democratic processes.

There is a great quote from—I can't remember who—that says, "Show me a man who makes \$3.00 more a week than his brother-in-law and I'll show you a happy man," whether they are making \$3.00 a week or \$150 a week or \$10,000. Everything is relative. I think in a lot of these cases it really isn't always a question of how much money people are making; it's just a question of whether they feel like wealth is being distributed fairly in their community. That is a huge part of this. If you address that, you address so many other issues of corruption, nepotism, et cetera, et cetera.

QUESTION: I very much appreciate what you have done, because I have actually visited some of these Florida places. But I am wondering about how you deal with these things. For example, when Washington recently cracked down on some Mexican illegal immigration, there were immediate responses in California. Tomato growers started moving down to Mexico. I know you can't move orange trees as quickly as tomato plants. But, still, I think there is that kind of—that stuff really is moveable. I am not sure that the workers will be better off if they grow tomatoes in Mexico as against California or Florida.

How do you take that into account in your suggestions?

JOHN BOWE: I say, move. If you want to move, move. People have been threatening with that forever and ever and ever. That is sort of the whole thing of globalization, right? If you unionize and you want

nine bucks an hour instead of the seven we are paying you, we will just have to move the whole factory from Ohio to China.

At this point, my feeling is, okay, move. When it gets bad enough, people will respond. What will happen is that enough production will be based outside the United States, and 70 percent of Americans will be jobless, and they will militate and they will get political again.

That was one of the really disturbing things. I didn't even talk about the third part of the book. I went off and lived on this Pacific island called Saipan for three and a half years. I don't want to explain the whole thing now, because it's super-complicated. What it is, is a society where 25 percent of the people are citizens and have passports and 75 percent of the people are guest workers. It was really like going back and visiting Greece or Rome or what the United States is going to be like in 50 years.

Then I would come back here to New York and all of my liberal friends would be complaining about [Bush](#) and everything.

I would say, "So have you done anything political in the last few years?"

They would say, "God, you've gotten so cynical."

So now I just feel like—you know, it's not just people on the right or conservatives or corporate people.

I saw that movie [Knocked Up](#) recently. I don't know if any people in this room are big fans of movies like that. It just has these slacker kids who don't do anything for a job. They are cute and funny, because they are such losers and stuff like that.

But those guys are the problem, too. The thing that enables them to not have jobs is the fact that people in China are working for \$60.00 a month. That's what lets them have this slacker lifestyle.

Now my disdain for those people—if they don't want to be political and they don't want to be informed about the world, fine. Wait 30 years and see what your life is like.

QUESTION: One of the things that I found most moving about the book is kind of what you just said. You talk a lot about your own progression and your own shift from being cynical and kind of disdainful about political action, and what can be accomplished by it—and what people can do for themselves—to really being respectful and admiring and excited about it.

The way you wrote it, you put yourself with the people you knew in New York and the people you were used to hanging out with, and what you begin to discover that they didn't see.

I wonder if there is more you can say, either about your own experience of that or maybe—not exactly the policy version of that, but that feels like another avenue to think about. What can be done to make the vision that you got from going firsthand, something that people can get by reading your book?

Do you know what I am asking? Is there some way of thinking about how people can start seeing these things that have been so invisible? It sounds like you had a lot of experience mediating between this world where people saw it and where people didn't —not just how bad it was, but the idea that action, political action, could do something about it, that there wasn't a reason to be completely despairing because the Coalition of Immokalee Workers could be successful.

JOHN BOWE: If I understand your question correctly, I would say that—I don't want to tell other people what to do, but most people are concerned with this stuff. Most people care about this stuff, rich or poor. They don't want to live in a world with slavery. But then, when they look at this whole thing, they just think, "Oh, this is too big. What can I really do? It's hopeless."

I think the important thing is to do something. You are not going to take on the whole economy at once. One person is not going to stop the juggernaut of globalization. But if you use that as an excuse to do nothing, that's pretty lame and that is not really acceptable.

So I guess my own journey now is, I don't want to hear a second of complaining. I am so uninterested in hearing anybody complain about anything. I have gone to a lot of these readings and people raise their hand, "And there's another thing," and they complain. I have gotten really rude, where I will just say, "Give me an answer. Don't give me a problem."

If you start looking into this stuff, there are a million things to do. There are fair food campaigns. There are these corporate campaigns. Now that the Democrats control Congress, why not start writing [Ted Kennedy](#) and [George Miller](#), who control the labor committees, and say, "You know what? The budget for the Department of Labor has been going down and down and down for 30 years, ever since [Reagan](#) got elected. Now there is one Department of Labor inspector for every 150,000 workers. It used to be one inspector for every 30,000 workers."

That right there—why don't we hire more Spanish-speaking DOL employees? Why don't we even hire some Indians from southern Mexico, from the hills down there, so that they can go investigate conditions where their own people are working? Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

Whatever one of those things you like, great. Don't do 20 things. Do two things and do them avidly.

QUESTION: Don't be inhibited about being a speaker. You are really terrific.

[Applause]

JOHN BOWE: I got lucky today.

QUESTIONER: We had a speaker here in the last few weeks [[Garry Wills](#)] who is a major religious voice. The discussion was the separation of church and state. In the course of his conversation, he actually made the distinction that slavery is not mentioned in the Old Testament or in the New Testament. I don't think he was proposing slavery. He was trying to show that there are political issues that have to be decided by citizens and there are religious issues.

I found myself sort of taken aback by his interpretation of that.

The question that I have for you is, where is the role of the religious people or the churches or synagogues in this issue? This is such a remarkable story. If there is any place for religion in this world, it seems to be to stand up for issues that you are describing.

JOHN BOWE: I think that the role of religion in this country is always poorly reported, because it's always reported by educated elites from either coast, who don't venture often enough into the hinterlands. I think the whole, quote/unquote, rise of religion was just stupidly reported.

I used to go hitchhike and ride freight trains and go meet just regular people at random. I did it for that reason, so I could see what is out there. I was fascinated.

The number of super-religious people I met was incredible. I would get people wanting to be preachers. People would pick me up and say, "I just picked you up because I want to practice my sermon. Can I do that?" It was just indie rockers or indie filmmakers. This was a way to be cool in your community.

I found that a lot of times it was charming, or it might be a whole bunch of racism buttressed up with something completely charming and inspired.

I always felt like, "God, there are about 30 percent of the people out there, and that's what they care about." I think this whole reporting of the rise of it and this whole characterization of it as being this redneck, only-conservative, only-anti-gay, pro-life/anti-abortion contingent is ludicrous. It's nonsense. The Bible mentions social justice a million times more than it mentions gay bashing. There is a lot of stuff in there. I think there is a huge contingent of religious people in this country that are sort of waiting for leadership.

Remember when somebody a few years ago came up with that "What would Jesus drive?" thing, the

anti-SUV thing? That was the first time in a while I heard some kind of progressive note coming out of the reporting on that world.

But I think a huge chunk of that world could just as easily be lured to the, quote/unquote, liberal—which I don't think of as liberal anymore—that side of American debate. There is a lot of energy waiting to work on this stuff, if anybody talked about this stuff in a clearer way.

QUESTION: John, I was struck by your comment about the FBI investigating this murder. Obviously, what you said about the rigidity of their work habits, the personalities, has wider ramifications, particularly against terrorism—the lack of cross-cultural awareness.

Did you happen to go into any FBI field office down there and talk to them, a supervisor, about the appropriateness of their people and their training and their ability to operate in that environment? I don't know whether you had a chance to do that, but it would have been interesting to see what their reaction might have been.

JOHN BOWE: I talked to different people at the Department of Justice and different FBI investigators, and also some INS investigators. What I found in most cases was that there were people who were genuinely interested in tackling this kind of crime. It took them a couple of years to learn how to do it, but eventually they did. Then they would get transferred to bank robbery in Pennsylvania. That just happened again and again and again. A lot of these people kept up their interest in trafficking and slavery cases, and they would try very hard to inform other people. But, just institutionally, there was this structural problem. They kept throwing away whatever expertise was accruing.

With the Department of Justice, A, they are being racked by all this nonsense from above, but also even the most well-meaning people—these cases are incredibly hard to try, because you are dealing with populations that are scared; they are broke; they don't have the money or leisure or patience to sit around for two or three years while the wheels of justice do their slow process. They need to be sending money back home to pay for the sick kid or to pay for the debt that is getting 15 percent interest. Nor do they have any reason to trust the government, since they come from countries where the government is corrupt.

So it takes so many people—and these community groups are really essential—to bridge the gap between the FBI, the investigator, and the worker, or between the DOJ, the prosecutors and the FBI, and the worker. They need to be finding food for these people and translating and doing social services and calming down anybody who has been through this traumatic experience. All of that stuff needs to be worked out.

I don't suspect that any time soon the FBI is going to develop an ability to do that. But they are developing an awareness that they need to work with these community groups. I think that is the beginning of something that might be good enough.

QUESTION: Thank you, first of all, for writing the book and for dealing with an issue that I think has been one of the biggest disgraces this country has had since 1865.

Is there anyone on the scene politically—and I mean on the national level—who seems sensitive to some of these issues?

JOHN BOWE: No. To be honest, I have tuned out largely from American politics—not politics as a whole, but I am not that inspired by seeing one person who is subsidized by Corporate America running against another. That is no longer interesting to me.

QUESTIONER: I'm not either. That's why I asked you the question.

JOHN BOWE: I think [John Edwards](#)—for somebody to actually bring up class and race, after 30 years of hearing this nonsense argument that class isn't important or that if you bring it up you are a troublemaker or you are dumb—just to mention the word "class" and to start introducing the notion—that's life. That's the sport. That's the game.

Of course it's a class struggle. There is nothing wrong with that. That is the whole tune.

So I think someone embracing that is exciting.

QUESTIONER: Yes, I happen to agree with you. I think Edwards is the only one who has had the courage to even open up discussion on that subject.

QUESTION: Could you talk a little bit more about the issue of legalization? It seems to me that most of the cases you have talked about really concern illegal immigrants and their powerlessness. Would it not, in a structural sense, be addressed in a large way if legalization could move ahead faster? What do you think the prospects are for that?

JOHN BOWE: There are a couple different parts to the answer, I think.

One is, agriculture has been a bad egg forever. These are the people who brought us slavery the first time. Since slavery has been abolished, there has been one ruse after another, like tenant farming, chain-gang labor. They used POWs from Germany for a while—any sorts of labor they can get, one guest-worker program after another. You read the history of any guest-worker program, from German [redemptioners](#) coming to the colonies in the 1700s all the way up to [H-2A](#) workers now. They get abused every time they are brought in by the business elite and the political elite. They always undermine the working population of every area. It's a very non-democratically arrived-at decision. The local population is always angry about it. Their wages go down, because here is a captive population, one that is not equal to full citizenship level.

Really, this is something I am rabid about and focus on very specifically in the book. The difference between citizen and non-citizen is enormous. It is radical. Introducing non-citizens is corrosive.

What is going on now with illegal aliens is the latest wrinkle on a very old problem. The problem is not that they are illegal. That is just what is being seized upon right now to gain an advantage. But then you flip that around and the fact of their illegality and the fact that there are not 10 million of them, but, as a [Bear Stearns](#) report said a couple of years ago, it's more like 20 million. This report was warning investors to not believe the U.S. census, that they needed to know the real picture. These guys are not exactly Bolsheviks over there.

That is a huge percent of the population. I liken it to introducing AIDS into a body. It might only be a few cells that are HIV-infected, but it has a really big effect. You do not want to have non-citizens floating around your otherwise polity, because it totally ruins that idea of "all people are created equal."

In the end, I arrive at a very, very conservative position on immigration. The current immigration debate includes Senators [Feinstein](#) and Kennedy joining up with Bush and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce to argue that we need to increase the guest-worker program, the H-2A program, from what it is now, about 120,000 workers, to something like 500,000-to-700,000 guest workers. That is a disaster. That is the quickest way to suicide that I can think of, in terms of working people's wages. You are just going to pit these people who are already taking it on the chin against these people who are not citizens. They can't vote. They can't fight for their job rights or anything.

I don't know what the answer is as far as how to clean up the current mess. But I have to say, having guest workers and stuff like that is horrible. I think they need to go after employers. Social Security numbers are the key. It's very easy to check whether a Social Security number is valid or not. As long as you can make it so people will quit screwing around with that—\$1 billion a year would take care of that problem.

JOANNE MYERS: Thank you, John, for speaking about the unspeakable.

To watch this event on C-Span, [click here](#).

Copyright © 2010 Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs