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Revitalizing Imperialism: Contemporary Campaigns against Sex Trafficking and Modern Slavery*

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Abstract

In Canada today the issue of human trafficking is high on the public agenda. A variety of activities are included under the rubric, including "homegrown" or domestic prostitution, where crossing either national or internal borders is not a requisite for state definitions of trafficking. Canada does not stand alone in this attention for an expansive definition of human trafficking. Globally, sex work/prostitution, "sex trafficking," child labour, undocumented migrant labour, and "modern slavery" are integral to hegemonic discourses on "the horrors" of human trafficking. In this paper I look more closely at three prominent campaigns that sustain this discourse and discuss some of the work that these campaigns do. I argue that a closer examination makes visible a twenty first century version of the "white man's burden" supported by contemporary western, corporate, neoliberal interests, through which the unfettered exploitation and abuse of working people's lives and labour continues. So, rather than getting to "the bottom of things," I argue here that dominant discourses on human trafficking tend to obfuscate structural problems and revitalize imperialism in new ways.

Keywords: Sex trafficking, Modern slavery, Humanitarian campaigns, Imperialism.

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Introduction

In the 1990s, debates about human trafficking took place primarily amongst feminists. On the one hand Asian and Western European activists and scholars connected to the Stichting Tegen Vrouwenhandel (STV) in Netherlands and the Global Alliance in Trafficking Against Women (GAATW) interrogated the presence of women in prostitution in South-east Asia and migrant women in Western European sex industries, arguing for an understanding of the women's activities as gendered labour and migrant work. They advanced that "the trafficking of women" was a case of migration involving sexual labour in the context of unequal relations between the Global North and South. On the other hand, some American, British and Australian feminists conceived of the problem of women in the global sex trade as "female sexual slavery". Out of this work emerged the US-based, Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW), that teamed up with women's rights organizations such as Gabriela in the Philippines that were organizing around sexual exploitation at US military bases and in tourist industries in South-east Asia. Since then, many others have joined the debate. Indeed, "human trafficking" has almost become a household word, although its meaning is very confused, and it is often used interchangeably with "forced labor" and "slavery" (Chuang, 2013). Today, three main campaigns dominate the current debate, each with its own set of actors, agendas and assumptions about how to eradicate human trafficking, and in the following I first briefly describe the campaigns and then discuss a number of implications for global anti-trafficking discourse.

The dominant anti-trafficking campaigns

Inspired by anti-white slavery feminism of the 19th century, scholars and activists such as Kathleen Barry, Sheila Jeffries, Melissa Farley, Donna Hughes, Dorchen Leidholdt, and the Coalition Against Traffic in Women (CATW) established a campaign that is commonly identified as "abolitionist feminism" -

sometimes referred to as anti-prostitution feminism or prohibitionist feminism - that aims at the eradication of what is believed to be a quintessential expression of patriarchy - prostitution. The contemporary movement is directly lodged in the 1960s radical feminist movement, but remarkably, while many earlier "RadFem" ideas about the oppression of women have been contested and been redefined or re-thought, an unreconstructed, unexamined definition of prostitution persists in this feminist approach. Prostitution is unconditionally, and without exception, defined as violence against women and an abuse of human rights, "regardless of whether it is forced or voluntary" (Sutherland, 2004:141). Abolitionist feminism is noted for having introduced the notion of "sex trafficking," for colluding with "strange bedfellows" such as the Christian right, for supporting rescue missions of women and children in the sex trade, as well as advocating carceral politics that include the criminalization of the demand for sex work (see for example, Hynes and Raymond, 2002; Agustin, 2007; Bernstein, 2010).

A second and increasingly hegemonic international movement is the modern-day or anti-slavery campaign, also referred to here as modern slavery abolitionism, which is inspired by the 19th century anti-black slavery movement and today is heavily influenced by the work of the American, Kevin Bales. Bales is known for founding and helping establish various anti-slavery organizations worldwide, and to have first estimated the number of modern day slaves in 1999. He is joined by others such as Siddarth Kara, Director of the Program on Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government , Benjamin Perrin, a university law professor in Canada, and former lead policy advisor to the Canadian Prime Minister's Office; and Andrew Forrest, philanthropist and chairman of the Fortescue Metals Group and co-founder of the "Walk Free Foundation" and the "Global Slavery Index".[1] Prominent in this campaign are also journalists such as Nicolas Kristof of the New York Times, who

[1] http://www.globalslaveryindex.org/ and http://www.globalfreedomnetwork.org/

frequently reports on the plight of "sex slaves" and his wife, Sheryl WuDunn, with whom he created the campaign, "Half the Sky".[2]

According to such academics, journalists, and business people human trafficking is not the same as chattel slavery as it is not premised on the ownership for life of one person by another. Rather, they argue, it is about the force or violence exerted by an individual or company towards another, through which the "victim" loses control over her or his life. They do note, however, that the majority of the cases do not fit neatly into this ideal category of "the slave," as they are more properly situations of debt-bondage, where a person is indebted to another and works for that person to pay off the loan (Bales, 1999). Human trafficking, in this campaign, is then far more comparable to Asian indenture prevalent in the post-slavery era in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (see Bahadur, 2014; Roopnarine, 2007) than to the slavery that Africans expereinced. Moreover, the dividing line between "slavery" and "freedom" is unclear – indeed it is difficult to establish that line in the twenty first-century given that many people experience force and coercion in legal work situations, and where the difference between forced labour and poor working conditions is hard for to determine (O'Connell Davidson, 2006). Slavery in this campaign also does not exclusively focus on the sex trade even while much attention is given for women and girls in what is identified as forced prostitution. It is generally understood to cover the four practices included in the 1956 UN Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery – debt-bondage, serfdom, servile (arranged) marriage, and child servitude – but it is also related to definitions in the UN Protocol on Trafficking that emphasizes the forced sexual exploitation of women and girls, and to ideas of forced and compulsory labour as contained in the ILO Forced Labour Convention. Nevertheless, modern slavery abolitionists maintain their own definitions.

[2] http://www.halftheskymovement.org/pages/movement

The third and growing trend can be identified as "celebrity humanitarianism," referring to the global charity and philanthropic efforts of entertainment stars, billionaires, and "spectacular" NGOs (Kapoor, 2010). Included here are a number of Hollywood stars who in the past decade have adopted human trafficking and modern-day slavery as social issues to speak out against, some of whom have created NGOs against child trafficking and slavery, others who made or starred in documentaries or feature films about sex trafficking, and some who work as UN ambassadors on the subject. The main thrust behind such celebrity campaigns and attention is the rescue of women, particularly young women and underage girls from what they deem to be "modern-day slavery" and "sex trafficking," picking up from the terms introduced by the two groups of aforementioned abolitionists. The activities vary from the DNA "Real Men don't buy girls" campaign with videos that make fun of things that "real men" don't do (such as driving while blindfolded, making a grilled cheese sandwich with an iron, shaving with a chainsaw, etc.), to the Emma Thompson mockumentary that depicts the physical and psychological harm that young women face in very graphic detail, and which is seen to typify the trafficking/sex slavery episode (the film follows a naive teenage girl in an unknown eastern European country, who is deceived by her girlfriend, bought by a group of men speaking in a Slavic language, brutally raped, urinated upon, locked in a brothel, whereupon she slits her wrists and dies in a pool of blood). Celebrity humanitarianism is broadcast widely in the media – the celebrities' hearts are seen to be in the right place, their pockets deep, and their star status quickly brings attention to a problem that is believed to one of the most heinous. However, as Dina Haynes concludes from an extensive review of celebrities' involvement in anti-trafficking campaigns, that rather than significantly advancing the eradication of human trafficking,

> most celebrity activists reduce the complexity of both the problem and its potential solutions to sound bites, leading the public to believe that "doing something" — anything at

> all — is better than doing nothing, when the opposite may well be true (Haynes, 2014:40).

Far more can be said about the definitions, goals, visions and impacts of these three campaigns. For example, it has been amply documented elsewhere that they result in stronger anti-prostitution ideologies, infantilizing rescue missions to save women and girls deemed "innocent victims," greater police surveillance of the sex trade, new policies and programs to catch traffickers, new legislation to catch "pimps" and clients of prostitutes, more border controls to prevent "aliens" from entering wealthy areas of the world, a greater number of detentions and deportations of so-called illegal migrants, and a generalized panic about the idea of human trafficking that is causing anxiety especially amongst young women seeking to travel abroad or migrate (see, for example, Anderson; Sharma; Wright, 2009; Bernstein, 2010; GAATW, 2007; Kempadoo; Sanghera; Pattanaik, 2005). Such "collateral damage" of the anti-trafficking industry, while harmful to sex worker, labor migrants and refugees is, however, not the focus of the rest of this article. Rather, in the following I hone in on the way in which the campaigns promote a racialized neoliberal discourse that authorizes twenty first century global corporate capitalism.

Race and anti-trafficking campaigns

The racialized character of the campaigns and interventions is a subject often avoided, yet once a critical race lens is deployed, certain patterns become apparent. So, for example, each campaign can be seen to be inspired, founded and directed primarily from within "developed" racialized centers of the world, by predominantly white women and men, with the Global South and East/the "developing" world, serving as the "dumping ground" for a range of Western fantasies. Indian brothels, Bangladeshi factories, Nigerian slums, Polish truck-stops, or Thai massage parlors, in this way, become sites for anti-slavers, abolitionist feminists, and celebrities to raid and to capture, rescue,

and return home suffering bodies (and such raids may be accompanied by a photo shoot with brown or black children, or tweets during a raid) (Kapoor, 2013; Agustin, 2012; Ahmed, 2014). The rescue fantasy is a means through which the endeavors are legitimized as altruistic and humanitarian, obscuring the reliance on and reproduction of, the racial knowledge of the Other in the historical tropes of, on the one hand – the hopeless victim, impoverished and incapable of attending to their own needs – and on the other the benevolent civilizing white subject who must bear the burden of intervening in poor areas of the world. The rescue mission then becomes a vehicle of transformation of the self – through contact with the Other – providing the "rescuer" with a sense of satisfaction, and a form of pleasure or even enjoyment due to the psychic investment that is made in the process (Ahmed, 2000; hooks, 1992; Kapoor, 2013). While Laura Agustin has written extensively on the praxis of the rescue industry with regard to the sex trade, calling it "the soft side of imperialism" where people such as Kristof "embrace the spectacle of themselves rushing in to save miserable victims, whether from famine, flood or the wrong kind of sex" (Agustin, 2012), Barbara Heron's analysis of race and gender in the Western "helping imperative" is equally pertinent. From her own training and experience as a Canadian development worker in Africa and through interviews with others in a similar position, she identifies a consciousness about the world that carries a colonial continuity of a sense of Western/Northern entitlement and obligation, which, she argues, constitute two dimensions of the white bourgeois subject today (Heron, 2007). This consciousness, she points out, enables white Canadian middle class women to feel they can intervene globally "to do Something" over there, positioning Others as amenable to the western interventions, yet without questioning their role as global do-gooders (Heron, 2007:54). Indeed, doing something "for the other's own good" in Africa or elsewhere in the South, bolsters the women's own subjectivity, identity and self-esteem to the extent that the "desire" to be engaged in development, "while a

manifestation of the helping imperative" ultimately appears as "a profound desire for self" (Heron, 2007:156).

This "updated version of the white man's burden" as one web journalist names it in relation to the "self-styled modern-day abolitionist" Mira Sorvino, is that campaigners "tend to regard themselves as noble saviors on a mission to rescue millions of (mostly brown) people" (Rothschild, 2011).[3] Scholars such as Kapoor, and Agustin concur, arguing that it underpins contemporary western humanitarian interventions, while Parreñas et al (2012) note that it also becomes evident around the issue of human trafficking and slavery. Abolitionist feminism, with its roots in the nineteenth century White Slavery discourse spawned maternal feminist charitable rescue work of middle-class women, that appeared in urban centers in Europe and the colonies, through which mothers were exhorted to protect "daughters," and respectable women were called upon to rescue "fallen women" (Doezema, 1999; Walkowitz, 1980). It contained a rescue and redemption narrative in which a class of European and American women was positioned as the moral and spiritual custodian of poor and working class women and girls. Today, the campaign typified by the CATW, locates its moral obligation and civic responsibility in great part in the rescue of "prostituted" women and children (victims) from the clutches of male privilege, power, and lust ("sex trafficking"), and celebrates its success in extending its international reach (especially in Asia), reproducing the colonial maternalist position in relation to the non-western world while reconfirming white western feminine subjectivity as benevolent. Contemporary antislavery advocates share a similar dimension of the modern "white man's burden" in that they see themselves as leading a moral crusade against an "unconscionable evil" that proudly claims to be following in the footsteps of the British and

[3] The "white man's burden" refers historically to the poem written by Rudyard Kipling about the moral responsibility of the US to uplift and civilize people of the Philippines, which has been taken as illustrate the racialized character of Western imperialism more generally (see Parreñas; Hwang; Lee, 2012).

American nineteenth century evangelical-inspired movements to abolish the enslavement and trade of Africans. In a very detailed examination of the history, Quirk and Richardson reveal how much the earlier antislavery movement was steeped in white supremacy, noting that "Europe's commitment to anti-slavery included self-congratulatory efforts to differentiate between "civilized" and "uncivilized" peoples, and, as such, helped to legitimate imperial expansion between 1850 and 1914" with anti-slavery becoming a "hallmark of European civilization" (2009:78). Similarities with present-day campaigns are remarkable. For example, in the twentyfirst century white middle-class or elite men – American, British, Australian – dominate the anti-slavery campaigns. They are the founders of the majority of the international abolitionist organizations today, populate the executive boards and directorships, and possess the resources and cultural capital to produce books, news items and films on the subject. Non-whites and non-westerners are, in the campaigns, most commonly positioned as in need of rescue or education, as the modern "slaveholders," especially in Asia and Africa, and as "survivor leaders" and tokens. Or as with Siddarth Kara, they may be identified as integral to white supremacy, as "part of a larger colonial tradition that (mis)places the blame for third-world woes on culture" with "bad culture" defined as the source of the problem of sex trafficking (Parreñas et al., 2012:1023).

Accolades abound for the rescue work, including a Pulitzer nomination and prize, an honorary doctorate, various awards for human rights and peace work, appointments as UN ambassadors, and Emmy awards for documentaries, often launching individual campaigners to celebrity status. A sense of obligation and entitlement to intervene around the world is unquestioned – the campaigners feel free to roam the earth, convinced of their own righteousness in saving poor people. Moreover, the history of the early abolitionist movements as having been steeped in white guilt, fear of black violence, distrust of black men, colonialism, paternalism, as well as conservative Christian values, is barely addressed by the modern campaigners. How this legacy and the

history of an uncomfortable politic that sometimes emerged between whites and blacks in the earlier abolitionist movement around questions of social equality is dealt with, is not clear. Instead, racism is banished to the past, even while the argument is made that there is no sharp divide, indeed many continuities, between old and new practices of slavery. Indeed, it may even be argued that Europe's civilizing colonial approach was beneficial, in that "the imposition of European rule on Africa increasingly placed anti-slavery on local political agendas" (Quirk; Richardson, 2009:90). The contemporary problem of slavery is thus transferred to "developing" nations, absolving the West from complicity in sustaining contemporary conditions of exploitation, force and violence in labor markets. As noted recently about the Global Slavery Index:

> [it] ignores global interdependence to frame modern slavery as an issue rooted in the Global South. It exculpates the Global North of its continuing role in extreme exploitation and perpetuates a politics of rescue (McGrath; Mieres, 2014).

So rather than producing a self-reflexive white subject, we are presented with the image of a daring knights and damsels, whose moral obligations are to save the world – especially Asia and Africa – from itself, as well as affirmations of white masculinity and femininity as amongst other things, powerful, benevolent, and morally superior.

Global capital and neoliberalism

The other dimension in this analysis pertains to the understandings of the global political economy and neoliberalism, which is perhaps the most evident in the modern slavery abolitionism and celebrity humanitarianism campaigns, yet which runs through abolitionist feminism in unmarked ways. The problem of "trafficking" sex or otherwise, is, as all three campaigns acknowledge in various ways, grounded in inequality between

"the have's" and "the have not's" as it is the latter – marked by poverty, gender and age – who are vulnerable to force and violence in migration and work. Global capitalism is thus acknowledged as the economic context within which sex trafficking and modern-day slavery occurs, and although believed to create certain problems (such as poverty), is not identified as a problem from which people need to be freed. Rather a neoliberal understanding of the political economy is upheld that takes capitalist free enterprise, individual liberty, and private ownership as essential to human freedom (Harvey, 2014:204-5). With such an approach, individuals – traffickers, criminals, clients, pimps, corrupt immigration officers or policewomen or men, or greedy businesspeople - specific "bad" corporations and companies that violate labour laws and codes of conduct, or isolated national governments that oppose western hegemony (such as Cuba, South Korea, Syria, Venezuela, Zimbabwe, etc.), are classified as the problem. "Deviants" to the contemporary global order and political economy thus are singled out, and the task of the anti-trafficking campaigners is to introduce more regulations in order to bring these "rogues" into compliance with dominant (western, capitalist), hegemonic standards and values. The US TIP report, for example, targets countries through its annual assessment, the Polaris Project targets individual states in the US, the Walk Free Foundation emphasizes businesses and industries, and CATW focusses on individual men – clients and pimps. The results are more laws and the criminalization of greater areas of human life and an intensification of policing and surveillance, including more prosecutions, detentions and incarcerations. Yet this leaves intact the greater system that lies at the bottom of things, as Emma Goldman pointed out over a century ago, and indeed, capitalism is not only left untroubled, but given a boost. One of the strategies then, to end modern slavery, is by "raising unprecedented levels of capital to drive change" as the Walk Free Foundation aims to do, or it is believed that "more capitalism is needed to bring more

people out of poverty, and [that] can also be the most effective tool to bring people out of slavery".[4] Elizabeth Bernstein adds an important comment on this: "the 'freedom' that is advocated by contemporary abolitionists" she writes, embraces neoliberalism and "locates all social harm outside of the institutions of corporate capitalism and the state apparatus. In this way" she continues,

> the masculinist institutions of big business, the state and the police are reconfigured as allies and saviors, rather than enemies, of unskilled migrant workers, and the responsibility for slavery is shifted from structural factors and dominant institutions onto individual deviant men (Bernstein, 2007:144, 141).

The focus on the individual – person, corporation or agency – enables claims that the problem can be found in a wide range of incidences, situations and conditions that can affect anyone, anywhere at any time as well as in "every industry and corner of the earth," and causes for the problem are no longer relevant.[5]

But how, might we ask, does the magic bullet of capitalism work when capitalism itself produces the very conditions that the campaigners are seeking to address? Did it not, as Eric Williams argued more than half a century ago, produce slavery, racism and colonialism that caused destruction and underdevelopment in African and Asian societies? And did it not leave the legacies that are still deeply felt today in countries such as Haiti, which are trapped in neocolonial dependencies and debts, as well as in black communities in North America? Can more capitalism undermine or reverse the power and rapaciousness of transnational corporations that pick up and leave industrialized countries with their regulated markets to find the cheapest labour possible, and which use their might to extract relaxations around taxation, laws

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[4] http://youtu.be/niZPU4JkHBA.

[5] See for example, the websites of the Not for Sale campaign and the Global Freedom Network [http://www.notforsalecampaign.org/about/ and http://www.globalfreedomnetwork.org/].

and working conditions from the host country, creating slavery-like conditions in the process? Will capitalism alleviate the damage caused by neoliberal free-trade agreements that favor the already wealthy and powerful nations to the detriment of the weaker? Can more capitalism influence the management of financial markets that work to benefit of the banks and their managers, stop the growing privatization of human life and the ecology that supports it, or halt the continuous drive for greater consumption that is necessary for capital accumulation and profit? And, along this vein should we not ask in what way is it possible for the neoliberal state that favors "free trade" and few regulations on the flow of capital, technology and goods, to undo the harms that capitalist exploitation puts in place? Is more capitalism really the panacea to the problem of modern slavery and human trafficking?

It is quite well established that several centuries of globalizing capitalism and (neo)liberal agendas have produced the problems that underpin the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few and the dire circumstances for the world's majority. David McNally reminds us of the vampire qualities of capitalism when he writes "the essence of capitalist monstrosity is its transformation of human flesh and blood into raw materials for the manic machinery of accumulation" (2012:115). Many people, he argues, are not just harmed, but mangled and worked to death, and indeed, this has been chronicled from European colonialism and slavery, through the industrial revolution in the western world, and into globalized modernity. It becomes evident through, for example, the 2015 Credit Suisse Global Wealth Report, which points out that "While the bottom half of adults collectively own less than 1% of total wealth, the richest decile holds 87.7% of assets, and the top percentile alone accounts for half of total household wealth" (Credit Suisse, 2015:11). This working of capitalism produces, as Kapoor drawing heavily on the work of Slavoj Zizeck foregrounds in his analysis, a social and economic apartheid between the haves and the have nots – the Included and Excluded. Unsurprisingly, many of the benefits and privileges – including economic, psychic and racial – accrue to those already in the ranks of the Included.

When brought into conversation with the growing evidence of large numbers of people trapped in "modern-day and sexual slavery" we see a correlation between a rise in forced labour in sex and other industries and the ongoing accumulation of immense wealth by a few – that the one is happening at the expense of the Other. And in light of such a correlation, we must ask whether a system that generates such inequality, servitude and exploitation can be used to fix the problem. What is called among philanthropists such as Gates, as the "big bang approach" - of injecting millions of dollars into poor communities, a la Jeffrey Sach's Millennium Villages Project in Africa - is open to close scrutiny and a great deal of skepticism. Charity is not, as Vanity Fair's journalist Nina Munk discovered after following the Sachs project for six years, the same as sustainable economic development (Munck, 2014), but it does do the work of propelling the CEOs into the limelight and of alleviating some of the guilt and anxiety amongst the elite whose grotesque wealth is accumulated off the sweat and blood of millions of others. Kapoor also concludes that the charity work of celebrities while perhaps bringing media attention to humanitarian crises, is implicated in both the (re)production of western nations as sites of benevolence and generosity, - in the celebration of the "great nations" of the world - and in unquestioningly promoting capitalism by virtue of being tied to the corporate world through their professional work, earning some of the highest incomes globally, and profiting from their brand-image (Kapoor, 2013:29). They avoid, he documents in his book, confronting the corporate power they so profit from. Celebrity humanitarianism, as well as modern anti-slavery and abolitionist feminism by virtue of their lack of critique or attention to the global political economy, settles only on "an outward violence that is symptomatic of an underlying structural violence, which the spectacle conveniently obscures" and in failing to tackle the broader politics of inequality while naturalizing neoliberal capitalism as caring and humanitarian, the campaigns work to depoliticize the global economy (Kapoor, 2013:115).

Conclusion

Combining the three contemporary campaigns – modern antislavery, abolitionist feminism and celebrity humanitarianism – we see a neoliberal white chivalrous crusade across the world, born of a moral sense of goodness that shores up the power and subjectivity of the North, with the "developing" Global South and East as the dumping grounds for helping imperatives involving rescue and charity. They have little effect on the causes of the problem, and the subjectivity and humanity of the Other is secondary. Moreover, there is a notable lack of engagement with other perspectives and experiences, especially those of women from the Global South and the "subaltern" (Ho, 2005; Kapur, 2010). In the outpouring of outrage, condemnation and claims to human rights that reverberates through the campaigns, the marginalized, racialized, debt-bonded, and the poor are spoken for and represented, but rarely are they positioned as authorities on human trafficking and slavery or as voices in their own right. The work of counter campaigns and organizations as exemplified by the GAATW located in the Global South is easily eclipsed, and the non-western/ migrant/sex working 'victim' becomes the ground for competing abolitionist, feminist and humanitarian claims, pushed aside by not only the depoliticized neoliberal master narratives but also the racialised, neoimperial gaze. The dominant human trafficking/modern-day slavery discourse thus operates through several registers and through a number of prominent and eye-catching campaigns, absenting the major causes of the problem of unfettered exploitation of human labour and bodies today. It produces epistemic, political and material boundaries between those who are viewed as victims and those defined as the saviors, between those who "know" and those who are deemed incapable of knowing, between those who theorize and those who experience, between those who have wealth and those who do not, while bolstering the image of a compassionate, benevolent west. With no effect on the causes of the problem and, indeed,

advocating more neoliberal regulation and a stronger form of capitalism, imperialism gains a new life.

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