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In den Klauen der Tabakkonzerne

Slavery can change in form, but from its origins remains one of the fundamental components of tobacco culture worldwide

Tobacco and slavery : a neverending history

Von Luciano Ruggia

From its very origins, the history of tobacco is intimately linked to that of slavery, to the point that one can consider that slavery is one of the essential genetic components of this industry. Over time, if the slave trade has disappeared, tobacco continues to cause modern forms of slavery, always changing, depending on the context and local economies. A constant today seems to be the use of children, who are particularly economically vulnerable, in the harvesting and handling of tobacco leaves, which is an activity highly dangerous to health. Finally, even if they try to hide their implications, it is the large tobacco multinationals that consciously maintain these forms of modern slavery.



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Tobacco was quickly introduced to West Africa by the Europeans and it seems to have been well established and cultivated in Sierra Leone as early as 1607. In 1611, it is reported that soldiers in the Congo kingdom smoked tobacco to stave off hunger. Tobacco was thus a known and sought-after commodity and by the mid-17th century, tobacco was established as one of the main goods used to buy slaves on the African coast. Most of the tobacco taken to Africa was thus destined for these shameful purchases, but tobacco of lesser quality was also distributed to the slaves chained in the ships, probably also to assuage their hunger and to avoid revolts (Handler, Jerome S., 2008).

Tobacco is at the heart of the triangular trade led by the Portuguese. Tobacco was grown in Brazil, particularly in the Bahia region, but its intensive cultivation required a large workforce, hence the need for slaves to plant and process the product. It was then brought back to Lisbon, from where the best quality was sent throughout Europe and the inferior quality was sent to Africa to buy slaves, who were then taken to Brazil (Verger, Pierre, 1964). Tobacco was also grown in some North American colonies, mainly in Virginia, to supply the English market. Here the cultivation of this plant developed from the beginning of the 17th century, and

prospered, thanks to the work of slaves, until the American Civil War (Wikipedia (1)/ Encyclopedia Virginia).



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The Atlantic trade and tobacco: the origins of a perverse marriage

Tobacco is a tropical plant native to Central America, already used by the Amerindian populations for religious or medicinal purposes or for simple consumption due to the addiction that tobacco causes. However, unknown to Europeans until the arrival of Christopher Columbus, it was one of the first tropical products to fuel colonial trade. Columbus describes tobacco for the very first time in his travel journal on 6 November 1492, when two sailors he sent to explore the land returned to the Spanish ships and reported seeing many "*...men and women with a half-burnt weed in their hands, being the herbs they are accustomed to smoke*" (Columbus, Christopher, 1843). The tobacco trade in Europe started very quickly and already in 1533 a tobacco merchant was established in Lisbon (Wikipedia).

It was the French ambassador to Lisbon, Jean Nicot, who in 1599 first sent tobacco leaves and seeds to Francis II and his mother, Catherine de Medici, indicating that tobacco should be snuffed. The king's recurring headaches were said to be wonderfully cured, even though he died in December 1660 at the age of 17. The myth of tobacco as an herb with almost miraculous medical properties was thus born and would fuel a growing European demand. As early as 1660 the French also began to cultivate what they called the Queen's herb, which botanically is called Nicotiana or Nicotine herb, from which the word nicotine is derived.

But it was not only the Portuguese who used tobacco to feed their slave trade, but also the Dutch, English and French. The French vessel “Duc de Laval”, weighing 250 tons, left La Rochelle on 28 July 1777. Before setting sail for Africa, it made a stop in Lisbon from 17 to 31 August, where it bought 500 rolls of tobacco (the rolls were big cones of chewing tobacco) to use in exchange for slaves. On 21 November 1777, the ship “La Nègresse” also stopped in Lisbon to buy tobacco before going to the Benin coast to load 413 slaves (Mettas, J. et al., 1978-1984).

From its inception, the trade and consumption of tobacco has been intimately linked to slavery: slaves are needed to cultivate this drug, which is becoming more and more widespread in rich and colonialist countries, and at the same time tobacco is used as a currency to buy these same slaves. But after the progressive abolition of the slave trade and the Atlantic trade in the first half of the 19th century, this intimate and perverse relationship did not disappear but simply took on new forms. Particularly in the United States, after the end of slavery, there was a real racial profiling of the African-American community to make them strong tobacco users (Pendarvis Harshaw, 2019).



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Tobacco and the modern forms of slavery

Today, it is difficult to find chained slaves harvesting tobacco. However, new forms of slavery are present, including forced labour, often caused by situations of extreme poverty. It is often children, women or migrants in precarious situations who are most exposed to this new slavery.

Brazil, which was one of the first countries to use slaves in the cultivation of tobacco, is still very far from having forgotten this practice. In early 2021, one of Brazil's largest tobacco exporters, Continental Tobacco Alliance, was accused of using slave labour, including children, on farms that were under exclusive contract with this exporter (*Le Brésil interdit l'esclavage qu'il définit légalement: « slavery is defined as forced labor but also covers debt bondage, degrading work conditions, long hours that pose a risk to health, and any work that violates human dignity.»*). Brazil is the world's largest exporter of tobacco and CTA is one of its biggest players with over 12,000 contracted farms (Teixeira, Fabio, 2021).

Other more subtle forms of slavery – even if they do not correspond to its classic definition – are also taking place. Today in Africa, slaves are no longer bought and the large multinationals, in order to claim to have clean hands, avoid direct involvement in tobacco growing. This is just a cover-up strategy, while these same industries pay generous bribes and fuel corruption in the tobacco-growing countries, as recent scandals have shown (STOP).

In Europe, too, forms of slavery are perpetuated linking tobacco cultivation and the exploitation of poor agricultural workers, often migrants in precarious situations. In southern Italy, particularly in regions such as Campania, there is a phenomenon known as "caporalato". During the harvest period at the end of the summer, a "caporal", an informal intermediary who recruits labour, goes to road junctions where agricultural workers, increasingly migrants, gather in hopes of finding work. These workers hired by the day receive miserable wages but must accept these working conditions to hope to be chosen again the next day. The "caporale" takes the migrants to the farms in his van and gets paid by the farmers to provide them with this low-cost labour (Mastrandrea, A., 2020).

Tobacco growing and child labour

Today, it is particularly child labour in tobacco growing that is a serious problem. One might expect to find this child labour only in very poor countries, but in fact it is still common even in Switzerland. Worldwide, it involves tens of thousands of children and constitutes a real form of slavery (Unfairtobacco). The work of minors in this crop is prohibited worldwide, but it continues because of the severe forms of poverty which fuel it, even though it is still underpaid work. Harvesting requires handling tobacco leaves, which exposes young people to the transmission of nicotine through the skin and thus to a serious risk of exposure to the so-called green tobacco sickness (GTS). This is nicotine poisoning caused by the transdermal absorption

of nicotine from the surface of moist tobacco plants. Tobacco pickers, whose clothing is saturated with rain-soaked tobacco or morning dew, are at high risk of contracting GTS (CDC).

In the United States, child labour in tobacco growing is still widespread and regularly denounced by human rights organisations (Wurth, Margaret et al., 2014). This type of work violates both art. 32 of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child (ICRC) (Fedlex) and art. 3 of ILO Convention No. 182 concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour (Fedlex I).



Child working in a tobacco field in Malawi. Photo: by German photographer Olivier Reinhardt © Uli Kopp (uk@zeitenspiegel.de)

In Switzerland, it is still common in tobacco growing to hire minors as young as 15 to work during the harvest period at the end of the summer. One might think that we are inventing this, but the phenomenon is very real, even if we do not have the means to quantify it. An advertisement that appeared online on a youth employment site, "Adosjobs.ch", on 6 June 2018 aimed to recruit four people to work in Dompierre, in the Canton of Vaud: "The work consists of picking and drying tobacco leaves. It is a physical job. We are looking for young people of at least 15 years of age from the region (we do not provide accommodation) who can travel by their own means." The work runs from 5 July to 31 August 2018 and is paid "8-15 CHF/hour depending on the quality of the work" (Adosjob). As this is a very difficult and poorly paid job, farmers in the Canton of Vaud do not hesitate to call on the labour of young French cross-border workers, and it is the organisation Swisstabac that centralizes the recruitment procedure for these summer jobs (Topo, 2007). Allowing this type of work in Switzerland today is a clear and serious violation of the ILO Convention 182.

Tobacco industry and slavery: a hidden relationship

Today, in many countries, the industry consciously perpetuates modern forms of slavery in tobacco growing, particularly in some Low-to-Middle-Income Country (LMIC). At the same time, the same industry claims that it only buys production from other entities, often national export monopolies, and therefore has no responsibility for the exploitation that tobacco growing generates. The industry, aware of its catastrophic image, does its utmost to proclaim, hand on heart, that it is even fighting against child slavery. The main propaganda effort in this direction was the creation of the Eliminating Child Labour in Tobacco-Growing Foundation (ECLT) in 2000 in Geneva. The ECLT's board includes all the major tobacco industries and it had an income of \$5.7 million in 2019, all of it coming directly from these industries (Tobacco Tactics, 2021). The ECLT's work is nothing more than a cover-up, but it was even able to obtain the observer status at United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). As this status is quite easy to obtain – with over 4,000 organisations now taking advantage of it – this opens the door for them to participate in many meetings and events of other UN member organisations, thus creating a clear contradiction with article 5.3 of the WHO Framework Convention for Tobacco Control (FCTC).

The stated aim of the ECLT is to help eliminate child labour in tobacco growing. However, over the last 20 years this form of exploitation has not diminished in any way and the ECLT has, at best, failed in its objective (Lunt, Amy, 2021). To believe in the moral bankruptcy of the ECLT would require first believing that its objective is really what it claims to be. We believe, however, that the ECLT is nothing more than a front group that allows the industry to infiltrate international discussions, gather information and spin its public image.



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Slavery is in the DNA of the tobacco industry

Tobacco industries that buy their material from a country that still allows child labour in tobacco cultivation are fully and knowingly complicit in one of the worst forms of modern slavery. It would be necessary and urgent to ban all work by minors and women in these crops, and also to set high minimum wages. Every time we read the financial reports of Philipp Morris International (PMI), British American Tobacco (BAT) and Japan Tobacco International (JTI), or

other tobacco companies, we must be aware that their billionaire profits are made through the forced labour of tens of thousands of children, women and extremely poor farm workers. But slavery is in the genes of this deadly industry and we should not expect that, apart from window dressing, they will ever take any real action if they are not forced to.

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