

## **Strategy and Reputation: the Big Business of Slave Labor in 21st Century Projects<sup>1</sup>**

[John Schlichter](#)

***"The way to gain a good reputation is to endeavor to be what you desire to appear." Socrates (469 BC - 399 BC)***

Is the use of slave labor on large infrastructure projects a real thing in this day and age? Indeed it is. One may be forgiven for overlooking slavery as a valid strategy transparently situated and socially accomplished by sanctioned parties to develop the physical structures intrinsic to modern society. But this strategy-as-practice that turns people into property to erect our public works is a global standard. Over 20 million men, women, and children are trapped in forced labor worldwide, generating over \$40 billion annually in profits for their captors. One would expect slavers to garner nasty reputations in the process, but they are glorified for roads and reservoirs, factories and fundaments, and pipelines and parks.

Whether prison labor constitutes slave labor has been an ongoing debate in the United States ever since the 13th amendment both abolished slavery and legalized it in the case of prisoners. Slavery was deemed despicable unless the slave owner was the state, in which case slavery was not only righteous but profitable. Beyond America's borders, slave-based business strategies abound unencumbered by this cognitive dissonance. Cities the world over are built by slaves provisioned by merchants to municipalities. Evidenced by the extent to which the public takes it for granted (or fails to recognize it), slavery is an international institution.

I have witnessed it firsthand, auditing megaprojects that used unskilled Chinese prisoners who had been shipped outside China as compulsory labor camps. With no other pedigree than imprisonment, they were conscripted to build roads and bridges under harsh conditions on behalf of the state actors importing them. This open secret only came to my attention as I forced my way through layers of subcontracting to investigate the root causes of rampant quality issues on behalf of my client. I was not the first to learn bridges were failing because they had been built by slaves no more skilled in architecture than astrophysics. I was merely the first to report it, recognizing that the project teams, project sponsors, and even the public were complicit.

Slavers run a gauntlet of public perception, parrying issues of legitimacy and efficacy arbitrated by the polis. Do you care who builds your bridges provided they get you from A to B? More to the point, who makes the slavers' reputations: do they or do you? As conceits of the collective consciousness, reputations reflect social mores, and the choices you make regarding the reputations you assign others reflect on you. The matter is thrown into sharp relief by the dramatic realities of human bondage, begging the question "Who is the criminal in this endeavor?" The prisoners? Their wardens? The sellers? The buyers? The beneficiaries? The bystanders?

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Dostoevsky said the degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons. But we need look no further than our roads, rails, tunnels, and bridges. State-sponsored servitude will collapse in an instant when the public's consent is withdrawn. In the words of La Boétie, "Resolve to serve no more, and you are at once freed."

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## About the Author



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**John Schlichter** coined the term "Organizational Project Management" or "OPM," which is the system for implementing the business strategy of an organization through projects. OPM became a global standard and is how companies throughout the world deliver projects valued in billions if not trillions of dollars. "John has contributed greatly to PMI," Greg Balestrero, CEO, PMI Today, 2002. "In John's role as the leader of PMI's OPM3 program, he has immeasurably contributed to the growth of the profession," Becky Winston, J.D., Chair of the Board of Directors, PMI Today, 2002. Having created OPM3© (an international standard in project, program, and portfolio management), John founded OPM Experts LLC, a firm delivering OPM solutions and a leading provider of maturity assessment services. Industry classifications: NAICS 541618 Other Management Consulting and NAICS 611430 Training. John is a member of the adjunct faculty of Emory University's Goizueta Business School.

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