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Response Paper: *Slavery by Another Name*

In this paper I discuss *Slavery by Another Name*, a 2012 documentary by Sam Pollard that exposes the hidden ways slavery was imposed upon African Americans during the period since the adoption of the Thirteenth Amendment till the beginning of World War II.

The information revealed in the film was mostly not surprising for me as I had read about the convict leasing and peonage systems in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century America before. However, the movie did provide many additional details and much context to what I knew. I was impressed by the statistical data about 90% of all the prisoners in the South in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century being black. Moreover, the film informs that two thirds of these convicts were imprisoned for shockingly trivial offences. Their “crimes” could include speaking loudly, walking beside a rail work, selling farm products after dark, or – most frequently – being vagrant.

The film also connects convict leasing with the industrialization in America. Most of the prisoners were leased as a workforce to various emerging industrial companies. The period of the Industrial Revolution in general is known for extreme exploitation of workers and complete disregard for their safety, health, and well-being. But in case of African-Americans all these tendencies were amplified to an almost unbelievable extent.

I have also learned much new information about debt peonage from the movie. I was surprised to discover the extreme brutality this system often demonstrated. Those black people who were accused of debt to their employees – usually falsely or through fabricated

cases – went through terrible physical and psychological abuse. Sometimes, they were kept in cages. Often, these black people died or were killed while trying to work off their debt.

Still, for me, one of the most shocking things about these forms of hidden slavery in America is their duration. The convict leasing system was prohibited only in the 1920s. The debt peonage system prevailed till 1942. So essentially slavery in America existed well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, although officially it was abolished in 1865.

*Slavery by Another Name* also made me reconsider the sources of America's prosperity and economic well-being. The creators of the film emphasize the role of the new slavery for the economic growth of the South and – as a result – of the USA in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This role was so important that Theodore Roosevelt's administration and the President himself preferred to turn a blind eye on the evils of the debt peonage for African Americans in the South, so that the country did not lose the immense profit obtained from this new form of slavery labor. The late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century was the period that – in many respects – set the foundation for America's future prosperity and becoming the world's largest economy. The fact that black people's slavery labor contributed a lot to this success casts a shadow on the U.S. economic superiority for me. But it also elevates the role of African Americans in America's current economic leadership.

Although the situation for black people in the USA today is considerably less drastic and brutal than it used to be in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the effects of that period and the tendencies typical for it can still be traced in modern America. The convict leasing system which led to the majority of prisoners being black created a stereotype about inherent criminality of African Americans. This stereotype still prevails in the U.S. mass consciousness. Moreover, the majority of prisoners in America today are once again black. This situation became particularly severe after the beginning of the War on Drugs, the campaign that appears to be targeting mostly black population.

As the discrimination addressed in *Slavery by Another Name* becomes especially urgent in modern America and as the information exposed in the film is not widespread enough, *Slavery by Another Name* is the movie everyone should watch.

Works Cited

Pollard, Sam, director. *Slavery by Another Name*. TPT National Productions, 2012. *YouTube*, uploaded by See Black See Power, 5 July 2014, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=UcCxsLDma2o](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UcCxsLDma2o).