

PLAYING WITH REALITY

Edited by Sidney Homan

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**DENYING, MANIPULATING, CONVERTING,
AND ENHANCING WHAT IS THERE**

Edited by
Sidney Homan

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For Norma and all who are optimists without illusions

2 Feeling Good or Doing Good? Enabling Economic Exploitation through Ambiguous Bliss, Willful Ignorance, and Polarized Thinking

Elizabeth A. Bennett

Today, 31 million people are slaves.¹ Nowhere is it *legal* for one person to own another. Yet, contemporary slavery—forcefully coercing a person to work in dehumanizing conditions—takes place all over the world. Most modern slaves are held hostage through debt bondage.² Some are forced into marriage or trafficked into countries where they have few rights or protections. Almost all live in chronic poverty without any reasonable alternative employment.³

Exploiting vulnerable workers is a profitable endeavor. Businesses typically recruit slaves for a low price, spend little to maintain their health, and discharge them once productivity wanes. These practices generate more than 150 billion USD in profit each year, with a return on investment of nearly 400%.⁴ Perhaps, then, it is unsurprising that modern slavery is a contributing factor to today's unequal distribution of wealth.⁵ The world's most affluent 100 people own more wealth than everyone in the world's poorer half combined.⁶

Unfortunately, the global market for free labor (non-slave workers) is only scarcely more humane. Dangerous workplace hazards kill more than 2 million people on the job each year, making work a more deadly endeavor than war.⁷ Sadly, the risks of employment often do not pay. In many contexts—clothing factories, for example—workers routinely earn less than 50% of the local living wage.⁸ Poor compensation is typically not the result of low profits but instead unequal distribution of value added. In the clothing, 99% of a garment's retail price is distributed further up the supply chain.⁹

Against this grim backdrop of economic exploitation, the notion that *something must be done* is ubiquitous and urgent. I hear it on the news, as journalists decry the crumbling infrastructure and unsafe working conditions responsible for mass casualties in factories and on farms.¹⁰ I see it on campus, where posters recruit students to stand in solidarity with the nonunionized janitors cleaning dorms and support farm workers growing produce for cafeteria food. I notice it in the narratives of American students

who study abroad in the Global South, as they compare their host families' employment opportunities with their own.

Seizing the opportunity, companies large and small now offer the opportunity for consumers to improve workers' lives without inconveniencing themselves, spending much money, or exerting any effort. Clever pitches and colorful anecdotes teach consumers that everybody can "win." As a concept, "everybody wins" is familiar heuristic with positive association: helping others often *feels good* too; trade theory assures us that both parties *can gain*; and declaring "everyone a winner" can build self-esteem. Over the past two decades, the idea of "doing well while doing good" has metastasized and taken residence in nearly every nook and cranny of economic life. Business schools teach students how to pursue the "triple bottom line" by simultaneously serving "people, planet, and profit." Hip companies win contracts and attract talent by showing off their "B-Corp" certifications—commitments to use corporate power to "benefit" society and the environment. Multinational corporations deflect critique by hiring a few corporate social responsibility experts to organize volunteer days, attend charitable events, participate in meetings about human rights, and present anecdotal illustrations of the private sector contributing to public good. Retailers promise shoppers that buying this or that product means contributing to a cause or supporting a community or helping a family. Consumers "buy one" (pair of eyeglasses or shoes or women's underpants) from brands that "give one" to a person who cannot afford their own. Overall, businesses and consumers promise themselves and each other that they have created a game in which everybody wins. Unfortunately, the evidence is increasingly clear that when it comes to addressing modern slavery and economic exploitation genuine win-win scenarios are, *in reality*, less common than we would like to think.¹¹

For the past ten years, I have indulged my curiosity about what "doing good" in this context really means: Are corporate claims truly based on "what is there?" Or is the global business community collectively "playing with reality?" Through interviews and observations, desk research and document analysis, I have come to know many committed, passionate, intelligent, and realistic people whose work I respect and consumption ethos I admire. Some of my closest friends and personal heroes work in this space. I, myself, identify as an "ethically-oriented shopper." It is from this vantage point that I have come to notice patterns in how we "deny, manipulate, convert, and enhance" reality so as to *feel good* about our roles in the modern economy, even if we are not, in fact, *doing good* in addressing pervasive and unnecessary problems.

In this essay, I offer three data-driven fictional vignettes. Each illustrates a distinct way in which companies, brands, and retailers make it easy for consumers to "buy" into a delusional reality. In **Act One: Clothing**, businesses and nonprofit organizations claim to pay tens of millions of people a living wage, but never do, and forget to update marketing materials

accordingly. By engaging in *aspirational bliss*, we celebrate the *idea* that something good *could happen* without waiting for signs of real impact on the targeted beneficiary group, so we feel good. In **Act Two: Coffee**, a hopeful entrepreneur aims to do no harm but searches for evidence of exploitation in all the wrong places. By choosing *willful ignorance*, we avoid information that could expose painful realities about our role in supply chains, so that we don't feel bad. And in **Act Three: Cannabis**, weed dispensaries arbitrarily promote and dismiss ethical products without actually knowing what their ethical claims really mean. Through *polarized thinking*, we evade the uncomfortable mess of ambiguity by assuming that ethical claims are either fully justified or completely fabricated as to enjoy knowing we are right. Through these examples about clothing, coffee, and cannabis, we can see how—in any sector—companies and consumers might engage in and encourage others to exercise aspirational bliss, willful ignorance, and polarized thinking.

The essay closes with a discussion asking: So what? Who cares? What happens when we self-placate in these ways? And, how does playing with reality perpetuate economic exploitation and permit modern slavery?

Act I. Clothing and “Aspirational Bliss”

In the late 1990s, most countries lowered trade barriers, opened financial markets, and strengthened commitments to economic integration. Social justice activists identified globalization as an opportunity to create a new global economic order. They lobbied for national and international policies prioritizing living wages, stable commodity prices, safe working conditions, and union rights. Largely disappointed by policy results, some activists appealed directly to markets. One strategy was to develop business regulations that upheld social and environmental values and then pressure brands (such as Nike) to voluntarily purchase from suppliers—factories in low-income countries—that verified compliance with these standards through third-party audits. Consumers could incentivize specific brands by purchasing goods with fair trade certifications and eco labels. Over the past two decades, voluntary ethical certifications have proliferated. They are used in most countries and cover a wide range of products—from chocolate to soccer balls. Voluntary standards influence the income and working conditions of tens of millions of wage workers and small-scale farmers and are part of a broader strategy to address modern slavery and child labor. They have had some limited success.¹²

Today, many university bookshops and clothing stores offer ethically certified apparel. If you visit the certification organization's website for more information, you are likely to see claims about farmers and factory workers receiving a fair, decent, or living wage.¹³ This is exciting! Living wages are perhaps the most basic and important step toward achieving the United

Nations' Sustainable Development Goals for 2030, which include decent work, ending poverty, and reducing inequalities. Of course, if a parent is not paid enough to feed their family, what attributed to the effects of stress on the brain about the arrangement could be called “a fair and decent living wage”?¹⁴

Over several years of research on certifications, I began to notice a trend: impact reports suggested workers and farmers were struggling to make ends meet; certified factories and farms reported not paying a living wage; and certification organizations admitted they had yet to figure out how to deliver on this promise.¹⁵ In 2018, I decided to systematically study how 16 textile certifications implement their living wage standards. I reviewed certifications' instruction manuals for auditors, consulted auditor trainers, discussed implementation with standards directors, and met with the executive directors of several certification organizations. My findings show that not one certification actually fulfills this promise. It is an open secret that most sustainability labels simply verify payment of minimum wage—which can be a fraction of the cost of living—while others do nothing at all.¹⁶ When I inquired about the disconnect between marketing claims and workers' realities, most interviewees in the certification community reported that living wages are an aspiration intended to guide reality in the right direction. Despite 20 years of good intentions, this goal has yet to be realized. I have come to identify this way of playing with reality as “aspirational bliss.” When we engage in aspirational bliss, we celebrate a hoped-for reality—that is, a fantasy.

Act II. Coffee and “Willful Ignorance”

About a decade into the blitz of eco labels and fair-trade certifications, around 2010, a critical countermovement began to emerge. International development organizations reported that certifications failed to deliver results. Watchdog groups showed how social and environmental standards had been diluted to cut production costs and appease corporations. Academics documented how the value added from ethical claims accumulated in the same pocketbooks as traditional capital.¹⁷ For these reasons, a new trend emerged: eschewing certifications and opting for simple, transparent, fair trade relationships between buyers (such as coffee importers) and suppliers (such as coffee farmers).

In the coffee sector, micro-roasters and independent coffee shops exploded with claims about their direct, personal relationships with small coffee farmers. As evidence, cafés posted farmers' names on tasting menus, displayed maps of coffee-growing regions, and plastered enlarged photos of café owners' arm-in-arm with smiling growers in the fields. The coffee was advertised as fair, just, sustainable, community-oriented, supportive, and equitable. The claim was that supply chain actors would put aside

traditional differences in bargaining power to distribute profits equitably and provide one another with steady business and long-term partnership. A few of these initiatives are brilliant.¹⁸ Others are concerning.

Between 2010 and 2012, I began asking *who decides* what is fair and *how can we trust* their claims. My research included interviews with more than 100 people working in “ethical” coffee supply chains. I asked many café owners very basic questions about their “trips to origin” to meet the farmers who grow their ethically traded coffee: What portion of coffee prices goes to the farmer? How does the farmer’s revenue compare to a living income? How often do children attend school and what do they eat? Has the direct trade relationship smoothed commodity price volatility or made it worse? As one café owner explained to me:

When I go to origin [coffee farms], I don’t see children being beaten. Everybody smiles at me. There is no forced labor—I know this because I did not see anyone wearing ankle chains. I never met the migrants, but I’m sure they’re treated well—the farm owner is a nice guy.

He also confessed that he had never asked the coffee importer for evidence of these claims or tried to understand more about how his economic relationship with the farmer measured up to his concept of economic justice. I have come to identify this approach to playing with reality as “willful ignorance.” When we engage in such willful ignorance, we choose to avoid encountering information that may challenge an optimistic assessment of reality and/or overestimate the quality of information we have.

Act III. Cannabis and “Polarized Thinking”

In 2014, Oregon voters legalized cannabis (marijuana) for adult use.¹⁹ When the first dispensaries opened in 2016, I was curious to know how sustainability certifications, fair trade claims, and other forms of ethical consumerism manifested in America’s fastest-growing agricultural sector. I was particularly interested because, historically, cannabis production can be hard on the environment and prone to various forms of workplace abuse.²⁰ With a team of undergraduate research assistants (who were at once surprised and delighted by the assignment), I visited a random sample of half of the dispensaries in Portland. We asked “budtenders” four questions: (1) Do you have any socially responsible or environmentally friendly cannabis products available? (2) If so, what makes it good for society or the environment? (3) Do consumers request ethical products often? (4) Why do you think there isn’t greater demand for ethical products? We recorded and coded their responses and repeated the process again three years later, in 2019.²¹

Along with four years of interviews, media analysis, and participation in industry events, the budtenders’ responses disclosed two common

approaches to ethical products—opposite sides of the same coin. The first was to assume that ethical claims are not only valid but also make other unrelated positive attributes more likely to be true. As one budtender explained:

You might try this cannabis edible! It’s an organic chocolate bar with weed! The wrapper is made from recycled material. Hmm... I think it’s probably fair trade, too—it’s from a small company and everything is from here—it’s made locally.

Unfortunately, there *are no organic standards* for cannabis, there was no indication that the ingredients were fairly traded, cacao and sugar *do not grow* locally, and the company was owned by a large investment group. Yes, it was made locally—but is that really a special selling point when cannabis cannot cross state lines? We pressed him to explain how he knew so much about the company and its practices. “Oh, it’s just one of those companies that does stuff like that, you know? Like, I’m sure they probably pay a living wage. My boss says the owner is a really cool.” We were unconvinced that he had legitimate evidence to support his claims. By assuming all claims are true and that virtuous properties often go together, this budtender avoided navigating the trouble of evaluating the validity of claims and the contradiction of products being ethical in some ways but not others.

The opposite version of this approach is to assume that all ethical claims are, in fact, fabricated marketing myths. From this perspective, any trait that is not particularly ethical undermines the value of all other ethical claims. I witnessed this logic in motion when meeting with the founders of a new sustainability certification for cannabis. I suggested they require growers to provide health, dental, and vision insurance, as well as ergonomic consultations to prevent repetitive motion injuries common among cannabis trimmers. I pointed to the example of a farm I *know* has these policies. Yet, the founders insisted that growers *never* live up to such claims and—even if they did—that farm should not be considered sustainable because it uses electric grow lamps to augment sunlight. The notion that “you can’t trust a farm that calls itself sustainable *and* uses all that energy for grow lights!” was repeated over and over.

What unquestioning optimism and critical dismissal have in common is an unwillingness to embrace the ambiguity, paradox, and contradiction that defines the very intersection of markets and morality. When we engage in “polarized thinking,” we reject the discomfort of being neither right nor wrong, good nor bad. In doing so, we allow perfection to make an enemy out of what is relatively good.

In the context of consumer activism, to “play with reality” is to overestimate the power of markets, undervalue inconvenient truths, dismiss the complexity of modern slavery, and, ultimately, enable economic exploitation. Ambiguous bliss, willful ignorance, and polarized thinking may enable suppliers and consumers of ethical products to feel better, but at what cost? By endorsing a culture of “everybody wins,” we may come to believe that all complex problems can be resolved without either party engaging in sacrifice. By ignoring the differences between brilliant, equitable business models and cheap marketing ploys, we miss the opportunity to support real social change. In thinking that we have allocated resources toward addressing a problem, we may be less likely to contribute to other, potentially more impactful, strategies for change. And by training ourselves to believe in easy, clean answers to complex problems, we may misunderstand the root causes of suffering in other situations, too. In a moment marked by pandemic, climate change, and growing inequality, the notion of compromising humanity’s capacity to solve problems is terrifying.²²

What troubles me *even more*, however, is how we respond to the realization that we (or others) have been playing with reality. For suppliers and consumers alike, the temptation is often to not only abandon the ethical marketplace—a grave error, in my opinion—but also to ignore the nagging sensibility that *something must be done*. “If buying (or selling) this product doesn’t solve the problem completely, then there is no way to be part of the solution!” This line of thinking can be the beginning of a cycle of cynicism and political disengagement. It not only strips us of our own agency but also makes us more vulnerable to the sorts of ideas we might ordinarily find abhorrent: some people are more deserving than others; some countries should be satisfied with less than others because it is more than they had before; some communities should have been cleverer. At our worst, we might even think: it has always been this way and it always will; even though I have privilege, it’s not my job to dismantle hierarchies of oppression.²³

Must ethical consumerism allow problems to flourish while disabling humanity’s inherent ability to work for change? No. There *is* another way forward: instead of checking *out* of reality, we can pay closer attention to *what is really there*. This means approaching consumer activism as an opportunity to learn about complex problems, to understand the human consequences of supply chains, to draw connections between markets and public policies, and, occasionally, to find a company or brand that we are thrilled to support. On the consumer side, when we see t-shirts boasting fair trade for factory workers, for example, we might ask how living wages and healthful working conditions are verified. In a coffee shop selling “its own version” of fair trade, we can become curious about how profits are distributed, whether prices have stabilized, how much farmers’ incomes have gone up. Buying a joint can occur alongside a conversation about why some ethical claims are legitimate, while others are not. On the supply side, we can make it easier for consumers to learn about problems, solutions, and tradeoffs by providing accessible, detailed information about the ethical

products we supply. Although ethical markets alone will not generate economic revolution, they can most certainly catalyze change.²⁴

If you are a person who votes with your pocketbook or provides consumers the opportunity to do so, perhaps you will consider joining me in an experiment. What happens when we refrain from seeking relief by overstating impacts, avoiding distress by understating problems, and creating comfort by avoiding ambiguity? How does this practice change or challenge what is in our line of vision? What is it that we begin to see more clearly? I imagine it might be the case that when we *stop feeling good* and start *playing with what is really there*, we actually become better equipped to respond to economic exploitation and modern slavery.

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Notes

- 1 Siddharth Kara. *Modern Slavery: A Global Perspective*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017, p. 18. Similar estimates are provided by the International Labor Organization and Walk Free Foundation in “Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage.” International Labor Office: Geneva, 2017.
- 2 Austin Choi-Fitzpatrick. *What Slaveholders Think: How Contemporary Perpetrators Rationalize What They Do*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017, pp. 10–11.
- 3 Siddharth Kara. *Modern Slavery: A Global Perspective*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017, pp. 10–30. For more resources on modern slavery, see: Walk Free Foundation (walkfree.org) and the Council on Foreign Relations (cfr.org/modern-slavery).
- 4 This is much greater than the 10–20% ROI on slaves in the United States before the civil war. Siddharth Kara. *Modern Slavery: A Global Perspective*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017, pp. 20–30.
- 5 For more on the socio-political dynamics of domestic and international wealth distribution, see Thomas Piketty’s *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014.
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- 7 Michael J. Piore and Andrew Schrank. *Root-Cause Regulation: Protecting Work and Workers in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018.
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- 15 MSI (Multi-Stakeholder Initiative) Integrity. "Not Fit-for-Purpose: The Grand Experiment of Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives in Corporate Accountability, Human Rights and Global Governance," Berkeley, CA, 2020 (<https://www.msi-integrity.org/not-fit-for-purpose/>).
- 16 This research is part of a broader book project. The conference paper detailing these findings has been presented at three academic conferences and is available by request: Elizabeth A. Bennett. "Bold Claims, Weak Wages: The Implementation of "Living Wage" Standards in Voluntary Sustainability Certification Programs," prepared for presentation at the Society for the Advancement of Socio-Economics (SASE) Annual Conference, New York City, 2019; International Studies Association (ISA) Annual Conference, Toronto, 2019; Fair Trade International Symposium (FTIS), Portsmouth, UK, 2018.
- 17 Stefano Ponte. *Business, Power and Sustainability in a World of Global Value Chains: A History of Power, Politics and Profit*. Chicago: Zed Books Ltd., 2019.
- 18 For example: Catracha Coffee, Equal Exchange, Maggie's Organics. For more on Catracha's profit-sharing model, see: Elizabeth A. Bennett and Janina Grabs. "Rethinking the "Necessary": Trade-Offs of Distributing Value to Suppliers: An Analysis of the Profit-Sharing Model." *Harvard Kennedy School Working Paper Series*, 2021 (<https://carrcenter.hks.harvard.edu/publications/rethinking-%E2%80%9Cnecessary-%E2%80%9D-trade-offs-distributing-value-suppliers-analysis-profit>).
- 19 "Cannabis" is the plant's genus and the term used in international treaties. "Marijuana" is used in some legal documents but has historically been deployed within racist scapegoating campaigns. See John Hudak. *Marijuana*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2016.
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- 21 Elizabeth A. Bennett. "Extending Ethical Consumerism Theory to Semi-Legal Sectors; Insights from Recreational Cannabis." *Agriculture and Human Values*, 35, no. 2 (2018): 295–317.
- 22 Mara Einstein. *Compassion, Inc.: How Corporate America Blurs the Line between What We Buy, Who We Are, and Those We Help*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012.
- 23 For more on "the space between the hubris of benevolence and the paralysis of cynicism" (to use the words of scholar Ananya Roy), see Danielle Puretz's "Moving Beyond Benevolence and Cynicism: A Graduation Speech." Berkeley, CA: University of California, Berkeley, 2015. (<https://blumcenter.berkeley.edu/moving-beyond-benevolence-and-cynicism-the-global-poverty-practice-minor-a-graduation-speech/>).
- 24 Fair World Project is a non-profit organization that has produced some of my most trusted resources for navigating "ethical" markets. (<https://fairworldproject.org/>). See the "International Guide to Fair Trade Labels: Edition 2020" co-published with three other fair trade watchdog organizations: Commerce Équitable France, FairNess, and Forum Fairer Handel (<https://fairworldproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/international-Guide-to-Fair-Trade-Labels-2020-Edition.pdf>).