

Book Review
**The Anti-Slavery Project: From Slave Trade to Human
Trafficking**
By
Joel Quirk

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Joel Quirk's *The Anti-slavery Project* examines the evolving political project of the anti-slavery movement. Quirk is wary of the separation between historical and contemporary slavery, therefore, grapples with developing an understanding of definitions concerning slavery, legal measures that impact the interpretation and practice of slavery, the limitations and strengths of the legal abolition movement, and terms that create connections between "classical slavery" and contemporary slavery. As such, Quirk disrupts the division between historical and contemporary slavery by offering a new concept: the "Anti-Slavery Project." The Anti-Slavery Project is "an ongoing task, or undertaking which has gone through a number of phases, and to a distinct form of historical project" that is regularly compared to transatlantic slavery (5). Quirk investigates the discursive development of the anti-slavery movement in Britain, which has had international implications in the twenty-first century. An overarching argument in *The Anti-Slavery Project* is that little has improved with the implementation of legal abolition, as evidenced through the analysis of historical events including the legal abolition of slavery, history of the British anti-slavery movement and colonialism, and a discursive analysis of discrimination and debt. The existence of slavery and slave-like practices and the growth of human bondage are endemic to the failures of legal abolition. Quirk contends that the failure of legal abolition is due to ideologies that perpetuate difference and social discrimination. The method in *The Anti-Slavery Project* delineates that an interdisciplinary approach is central to conceptualizing slavery through history, the law, and politics.

The Anti-Slavery Project offers three significant frameworks for relinking "classical slavery" and "contemporary slavery." Firstly, the *Anti-Slavery Project* situates the political history of slavery in Britain as a point of departure for international historical politics and anti-slavery. Quirk traces a political discourse of slavery by beginning with the abolition movement in Britain, for two significant reasons: 1) Britain produced a discourse of the anti-slavery project as a stark and solvable

problem and 2) Britain laid the groundwork for understanding the contradictory and political fragmentary dynamic of the anti-slavery project. Slavery was philosophically, religiously and ideologically endorsed. An important shift occurred with Enlightenment thinkers who changed the perception of slavery as a norm to being seen as inefficient, sinful and understanding the abolishment of slavery as a religious obligation. The abolition of slavery in Britain (1807) was driven by the middle class, who mobilized through social, political and governmental responses. A “project” that was born out of difference between the enslaved and the rescuers, the anti-slavery project viewed slavery as inhumane, unchristian and as the anti-thesis to liberty. Although Britain is useful as a starting point, Quirk’s argument is limiting. The role of the United States, China, and Japan with defining international politics of slavery are rendered invisible and the abolition of slavery as Eurocentric, such an argument also marginalizes the central role of slaves, freed slaves, and women abolitionists in defining anti-slavery politics. Secondly, Quirk situates the anti-slavery project in the context of imperialism; one cannot separate the justification of colonial conquest through ongoing practices of slavery and the introduction of coercive labor tactics. During colonial periods, slave owners were not checked. As such, Quirk illustrates how the anti-slavery movement reproduced a Eurocentric international order that evolved through European perceptions of “exceptionalism” and the expansion of European political authority. Africa was framed in terms of commerce, Christianity, and civilization. However, “Anti-Slavery not only provided a major catalyst of informal empire in Africa, it also exposed some of the limits of British hegemony” (91) where slavery practices persevered even after the abolition of slavery. Quirk’s analysis of coercion, colonial subjects, labor practices and European exceptionalism could have been developed more; what was said was poignant, interesting, and I wanted to read more.

The third intervention that occurs in the second part of the book, “Linking the Historical and the Contemporary” is the highlight of *Anti-Slavery Project* and this section offers a provocative case for theorizing “classical slavery” and “contemporary slavery” by discussing the limitations of legal abolition. The limitations of legal abolition are shaped by the boundaries of freedom, economics of exploitation, negotiation and contestation, and the search for “suitable replacements” (113). As articulated by Quirk, “the Anti-Slavery Project did not do away with ideological cleavages and social hierarchies, but instead introduced a qualified claim that even people at the bottom of the social and racial pecking order should not be officially enslaved” (117). Another limitation of the legal abolition of slavery is described in how abolition necessitated systems of indentured migration from places such as India to the Caribbean to fulfill labor demands through systems that distorted consent. The categories that comprise “contemporary forms of slavery”

such as exploitation, debt-bondage, the sale of children, and apartheid, may be traced to the United Nations in 1988, as a response to the absence of legal definitions and ideological assumptions that slavery is a “historical relic, which belongs in the past” (162).

To further solidify the limitations of legal abolition through a contemporary response, *The Anti-Slavery Project* comes to a close in the last section through examples of contemporary slavery. Cases include that of Mauritania and the public sales of female slaves that were made visible in 1980, and ongoing wartime enslavement embodied in recent conflicts in Sudan and Uganda. Both are examples of countries that are relegated as remnants or examples of “classical slavery” in the twentieth century due to ongoing issues with social membership gender dynamics, political participation and economic mal-distribution. Consequently in separating slavery and bonded labor; it became internationally known in the 1990s that Indian children ended up in bondage to fulfill their parents’ obligations.

The Anti-Slavery Project’s inquiry into the relationship between classical and contemporary slavery is useful for the scholarly inquiry of human trafficking as a movement that is mobilized under the banner of “Modern Day Slavery.” An ambitious development, the “project” aspect of the Anti-Slavery Project was not fully sold as new terminology that captures the phases of anti-slavery; contemporary and classical slavery. It was not clear whose project an anti-slavery project is? Regardless, *The Anti-Slavery Project* as a scholarly text is organized and useful as a point of departure for historical, legal, and political inquiry addressing slavery; contemporary slavery, classical slavery, and the discourse of slavery that links slavery as one in formation.

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