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# Review of The Anti-Slavery Project: From Slave Trade to Human Trafficking

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**Joel Quirk. 2011. *The Anti-Slavery Project: From Slave Trade to Human Trafficking*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.**

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, causing him to grapple 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." He describes the Anti-Slavery Project as "an ongoing task" that has already progressed through various phases to become "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* asserts 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 politically fragmentary dynamic of the anti-slavery project. Slavery was philosophically, religiously and ideologically endorsed. An important shift occurred with Enlightenment thinkers who challenged normative perceptions of slavery and instead defined it as inefficient and sinful. Enlightenment thinkers understood the abolishment of slavery to be 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 United States' hegemonic role in defining international politics of slavery is rendered invisible. It is useful to contextualize the history of the abolition of slavery as Euro-centric; however, 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, as Quirk writes, "Anti-Slavery not only provided a major catalyst of informal empire in Africa, it also exposed some of the limits of British hegemony" (91) in those locations 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 further developed; his writing is poignant and interesting, and left me wishing 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*. 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 by the causality in which 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 its contemporary critique of the limitations of legal abolition, *The Anti-Slavery Project* closes with examples of contemporary slavery. This final section describes the cases 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 to a marginalized status as remnants of “classical slavery” in the twentieth century attributed to ongoing issues with social membership gender dynamics, political participation and economic maldistribution. Another example of the limitations of legal abolition is described as the consequence of 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 into human trafficking as a movement that is mobilized under the banner of tackling “Modern Day Slavery.” Quirk focuses on the “project” aspect of the Anti-Slavery Project; this was not fully convincing as new terminology that captures the phases of anti-slavery in both contemporary and classical slavery. Unclear: who belongs an anti-slavery project? Regardless, *The Anti-Slavery Project* as a scholarly text is organized and useful as a point of departure for scholarly inquiry into interdisciplinary approaches that address slavery, including contemporary slavery, classical slavery, and the discourse of slavery that links slavery as one in formation.