

# *Enslaved: True Stories of Modern Day Slavery*

Jesse Sage and Liora Kasten (eds), Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, 218 pp.

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**Also under review:** *After Abolition. Britain and the Slave Trade since 1807*, Marika Sherwood, London and New York: I. B. Tauris & Co., 2007, 246 pp.

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‘Even by the strictest definition, slavery’s soul-murder and slow death are facts of daily life for millions of people’ (p. x) say Jesse Sage and Liora Kasten of the American Anti-Slavery Group (AASG) in the excellent collection *Enslaved*. They have assembled a powerful collection of first-hand accounts of the petty cruelties, chronic terror, and degrading personal conditions of contemporary slavery – tales of trafficking between Haiti and the U.S., domestic slavery in Sudan, life and death in Chinese labour camps, and a Western Saharan country where the Arab minority have systematically enslaved one million black Muslims.

The survival of enslavement reveals the incompleteness of liberal democracy: though in essence an economic relationship, servitude works by removing individuals from the political sphere. Slavery, the oldest tyranny, is resistible only when enslaved and free recognise the fundamental right to liberty of enslaved men and women everywhere, and the fundamental barbarity of those who would enslave. Yet an incomplete commitment to antislavery is abroad today and often stems from what Charles Jacobs, president and co-founder of the AASG, calls the ‘human rights complex’ – a conceit that prevents Western activists and commentators from seeing wrong done by anyone but Westerners (Sage and Kasten pp. 209–10). ‘If you want to know whether a human rights atrocity will get attention ... look at the identity of the oppressor, not the degree of the abuse or the identity of the oppressed,’ suggests Jacobs. The tragic consequence of this mistake is that ‘abuses by Western governments attract intense scrutiny, while dictators and others who are “not like us” rarely face concerted campaigns.’ The plight of slaves is hidden from Western intellectuals – ‘if they do not have the “luxury” of a Western oppressor, they are all too often forgotten’ (p. 210).

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The Arabic world has never seen a widespread and popular antislavery movement equivalent to the British example, and today the slave trade is endemic in parts of that region. Women are especially prized; trafficked into sex slavery, their utility or beauty (or both) is often deemed to have been expended by the age of 25. Many are then killed, and their bodies dumped. The salvation of enslaved people such as these will come only if we are prepared to support their resistance without hesitation. Although many slaves have risen out of bondage to form the backbone of modern antislavery movements (Sage and Kasten p. ix) we must join them without equivocation.

We learn, for instance, of Ellen, an American, who alerted the AASG to her Kenyan friend Juma's plight. Juma answered an advert for a job in Egypt but ended up in domestic servitude. '[Juma's] story does not feature the levels of brutality of some others ... [but] it represents a form of bondage that traps hundreds and thousands of people around the world today' (p. 144). *Enslaved* offers its eyewitness accounts as a call-to-arms for citizen abolitionists in America and elsewhere. In so doing, it looks back to a specific historical precursor. Northern antislavery sentiment was stoked by tales of Southern barbarity prior to that other imperfect emancipation achieved by the American Civil War (pp. 1–2).

Marika Sherwood's *After Abolition* charts the history of another and earlier legal abolition of slavery, in the United Kingdom and the British possessions. After a brief synopsis of the abolition movement's beginnings, Sherwood's main focus is on the way in which Liverpool and Manchester continued to profit from the proceeds of slavery and the slave trade even after 1807. She extends this critique to the immoral gains made by private companies from British involvement in Cuban and Brazilian trafficking, to the dilatory abolition in Africa, and to the growing indifference towards slavery of the British parliament and people.

The quantity of sources the author cites is impressive, and her passion for the subject obvious. However, far from adopting the detached tone of most historians, Sherwood has pre-chosen her target, the ill-defined 'British,' and has trawled the archives for evidence to sustain her animus. Sherwood also assumes that Western students of abolition have until now worked under the hegemony of an imperialist narrative (p. 175) but this is just not so. We have known about 1807's limitations for many years [1], while Sherwood's account of scholarly neglect of women and Africans ignores the work in recent decades of a number of authors. [2]

Sherwood is not immune to the 'human rights complex' which she projects back onto the history of slavery. As a result she can sound exculpatory in her discussion of non-Western slaveholders. In the most egregious example, we are informed of the benignity of African masters compared to the cruelty of their American (European) counterparts. 'Even if enslaved for life, usually [slaves] could marry and become assimilated into their captors' families and villages, even if not always as equals.' Indeed we learn that slaves in Africa 'were not dehumanised or treated brutally' (p. 6). [3] Nineteenth-century 'paternalist' slaveholders in the U.S. told themselves similar things.

Sherwood's book might have yielded some clues as to what to avoid when undertaking an abolition programme but by eschewing an empirical assessment of the British abolition of slavery in favour of normative condemnation she is able to offer little in the search for an effective paradigm for future emancipatory efforts.

Sherwood does offer a forensic examination of the continuing relationship between 'legitimate' businesses and the slave trade (pp. 58–82) after abolition. And it is right that legal abolition should be seen as a beginning, not an end to the process. But a blanket denunciation of Britain's entire emancipatory programme cannot lead to a rounded understanding of effective emancipation. First, it involves flatly dismissing the entire mountain of Parliamentary labour from above. Sherwood sneers at 'the meaningless Acts, the almost annual Select Committees looking at various aspects of these issues' as 'just good publicity' (p. 177). Second, it tends to ignore the deeds – successful or otherwise – of slavery's victims in the story of abolition. [4] In attempting a political argument, Sherwood makes the wrong one. She puts so much emphasis on the incompleteness of British top-down, interventionist emancipation that she overlooks the resistance offered from below.

At its base, the purpose of enslaved resistance is to force captors to acknowledge bondpeople's humanity, or, as an acclaimed historian of eighteenth-century North American slavery puts it: 'extracting this admission [is] ... a form of slave resistance, because slaves thereby oppose ... the dehumanization inherent in their status.' [5] Today, that resistance is as necessary as ever. There are Sudanese Islamists advocating the enslavement of black Africans, Christian and Muslim, in pursuance of a medieval *ummah*, and Janjaweed rapists proclaiming the women they rape to be 'slaves.' But thankfully, like Granville Sharp and Olaudah Equiano before them, activists such as Sage and Kasten are dedicating their lives to fighting this evil.

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And there are the risen enslaved themselves, whose voices of resistance are so well captured in this collection.

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### Notes

- [1] See Anstey 1975, pp. 255–7; Eltis 1987. More recently (and perhaps more accessibly), Jordan 2005.
- [2] Midgley 1992; Walvin 1998. See also Holt 1992, pp. 151–3.
- [3] Compare Quirk 2006, pp. 590–1; Miers 2003, pp. 32–8.
- [4] See Klein 1998, pp. 159–77; Lovejoy and Hogendorn 1993, p. 92; O’Hear 1997, pp. 4–20.
- [5] Morgan 1998, p. xxii.