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April Roundtable: Introduction

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April Roundtable: Introduction

Abstract

An annotation of:

"A World Enslaved" by E. Benjamin Skinner. Foreign Policy (March/April) 2008.

Keywords

Human rights, Slavery, Human trafficking

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“A World Enslaved” by E. Benjamin Skinner. *Foreign Policy* (March/April) 2008.

An Annotation

Touted as the first international human rights movement, the abolition of African slavery was a monumental paradigm shift in redefining who is a human being and how human beings as such should and should not be treated. However, we have recently seen a re-emergence of this phenomenon. As yet another repulsive outgrowth of globalization, modern slavery and the human trafficking channels that feed slaveholding necessitate another shift in the way we understand slavery so as to confront this old problem in new ways.

“Most people imagine that slavery died in the 19 th century. Since 1817, more than a dozen international conventions have been signed banning the slave trade. Yet, today there are more slaves than at any time in human history.”

How did this “solved” problem resurface? Why is it that the international norm against holding human beings as property weakened or collapsed? One response to these questions proposes, as [Alison Brysk](#) does in this month’s *HRHW* Roundtable, that the original abolition movement targeted states and state-sanctioned actors, while this new manifestation is an accumulation of “private wrongs” perpetrated beneath and beyond the state itself. Or, as [Christine Bell](#) suggests in her response, human rights is not about solving problems per se; rather, human rights advocates must be proactively and morally vigilant in their pursuit of emancipation lest the abuse return in a more dynamic form. Like a drug-resistant virus, slavery has made its way through the cracks in legal and political structures, and has survived its previous abolition in order to thrive through economic arteries.

“But, until governments define slavery in appropriately concise terms, prosecute the crimes aggressively in all its forms, and encourage groups that empower slaves to free themselves, millions more will remain in bondage. And our collective promise of abolition will continue to mean nothing at all.”

As slavery itself has changed, so its opponents must also change. Modern slavery exists in many forms, masked by various types of façade. The trade and ownership of sex workers and debt laborers are two notorious forms of modern slavery and, along with the multitude of others, will demand novel approaches to abolition. As [Anna Aganhanglou](#) remarks for the Roundtable, it is best to understand modern slavery as another incarnation of its predecessor, as imperialism over the body, an understanding that would beg a specific response supporting market regulation as well as advocating for individual self-determination. Or, as [Eric Heinze](#) suggests in his contribution, slavery should be categorized along with other human rights abuses that compete for prioritization among an array of foreign policy objectives. In any event, it is clear that the type of “on-the-ground” research that Skinner presents in this article (and in his book from which this is an excerpt, [A Crime So Monstrous](#)) is necessary for fruitful analysis and unyielding activism.

All this and more in this month’s installment of *HRHW*’s Roundtable...