

Book Review

Enslavement as a Constant Feature of Human History

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Statelessness and Contemporary Enslavement

By Jane Anna Gordon

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In her third single-authored book, *Statelessness and Contemporary Enslavement*, Jane Anna Gordon, Manchester (UK) born and Chicago raised, of Jewish South African parents, offers readers a thought-provoking, rigorous and well-formulated series of arguments in four chapters, an introduction and a conclusion. Jane Anna Gordon is a Professor of Political Science by training and has university affiliations in American Studies, El Instituto, Global Affairs, Philosophy, and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Connecticut, at Storrs. Jane was also the president of the Caribbean Philosophical Association from 2014 to 2016. *Statelessness and Contemporary Enslavement* is an articulate, diligently documented, beautifully written, and superbly argued book that proved difficult to put down. It offers readers the much sought after "faces of enslavement", and "degrees of statelessness" that we would all like to know of, as we look back at our past and contemplate the way forward amid the most recent world-wide protests that brought a global face to the state of racism and enslavement still in operation. A large portion of the protests that swept the transatlantic from the Americas to Europe geared their acts of rebellion at toppling statues of colonialists involved in the slave trade, the evidence of which we witnessed from South Africa to the United

Kingdom and the United States. #KingGeorgeMustFall and #RhodesMustFall, speak to our youth's refusal to contend and identify with statues of colonialists who usurped our land and enslaved our people.

Histories of enslavement have such a strong presence in South Africa, especially at the Cape, the city where Jane Anna Gordon's father, John Comaroff was born of Jewish parents who escaped Nazism in Lithuania and the Ukraine. *Statelessness and Contemporary Enslavement* will resonate with South African readers at many different levels. Not only does the book bring a broader, more holistic approach to the study of histories of enslavement, it also ties it very closely, and for the most part simultaneously, with statelessness, and usurpation. The varied examples within the European continent will come as a surprise to readers; it is a warm welcome to me since I have spent a great deal of my adult life explaining histories of enslavement to students I work with, that are not derivative or limited to the African continent, but extends far beyond it, even how I trace the history of psychoanalysis through the youthful Jewish young man Joseph, twice enslaved, who later becomes the dream interpreter and saves Egypt and her people from starvation.

In reading through and following on from Jane Anna Gordon's references, I realised that few books bring the study of statelessness and enslavement together; they are usually studied as though they are separate entities when in fact Jane Anna Gordon brings them together, in the same text, on the same page, where their study is thrust in full force. What is remarkable in this text is that Gordon has steered away from the individualistic accounts of statelessness and/ or enslavement that practitioners of law and human rights lawyers often take up with a singular, individualistic, case-study approach but focused her attention on a broad range of research that is global in scope. Whilst Jane Anna Gordon is known as a political theorist, and a great one at that, her work in Political Theory and more generally Africana Studies, in *Statelessness and Contemporary Enslavement*, also draws on the work of several Indigenous scholars. The range of scholarly engagements makes her text rich and varied. It offers a study of a broad range of geographical locations, peopled by fleshed histories, to better understand statelessness and enslavement.

Jane Anna Gordon's vast knowledge of political theory and Black studies comes through very strongly in this book, maintaining sensitivity where necessary whilst not taking short-cuts on rigorous research for which the book will be remembered. Among the many arguments and citations that are

systematically presented in the introduction is Gordon's reliance on Jacqueline Stevens's 2010 text, *States Without Nations: Citizenship for Morals*, in arguing a reconceptualisation of states by separating states from nations.

In the introduction, titled, "Two Euromodern Phenomena", Jane Anna Gordon offers readers a comprehensive introduction to the book in seventeen pages. From the start, she is transparent in her determination to bring together statelessness and enslavement, even though precedents follow that offer quite the contrary. "As with statelessness, enslavement, historically and in the present, is not a radical exception. Indeed enslavement is such a constant feature of human history – one that implicated so much of our species – that is its eradication or relative transformation that requires explanation" (page 5). In the introduction and the four chapters that follow on from it, there is a thorough engagement of the work that set the foundation for scholarly work on enslavement, such as the work of Eric Williams' text, *Capitalism and Slavery*, first published in 1944, cited by its reproduction date of 1994. Eric Williams was also the first prime minister of Trinidad and Tobago. Born after the first world war, Williams completed his first degree in 1935 at the University of Oxford, where he was ranked at the top of his class. He later obtained a D. Phil, aided by a grant made available to Alfred Claud Hollis. Williams received his PhD but not before travelling around Europe and experiencing first-hand the anti-Black racism of Nazism in Germany. I mention this here, since this particular history of Caribbean scholars like Williams and later Stuart Hall, who also went to Oxford under a Rhodes scholarship, was among a group of esteemed scholars who investigated the relationship between and among racism and empire, the enslavement of peoples in the colonies, which features among some of the examples in Gordon's book.

In Chapter One, "Degrees of Statelessness", Gordon notes: "If the production of stateless people in Europe and North America was bound up with how these nation states refashioned themselves in the first quarter of the twentieth century, their initial formation also rendered nations of people stateless" (page 19). In this chapter, Gordon unpacks several global arguments, with significant examples, and shows how statelessness when specific to regions that are not part of our imagination of enslavement, blur our understanding of the identity of the citizens who are left homeless and stateless. In Chapter Two, "Theorizing Contemporary Enslavement", she draws our attention to contemporary enslavement, which resonates with the current era of scholar-cum activists. I immediately thought of debates that have centred

around whether indentured labourers who were brought from India to Durban by the British can be considered enslaved, and/or whether the conditions for enslavement, which many have argued do not include guest-workers, matter, rather than the acts of dehumanisation that point to ownership and the inability to articulate any form of consent. The latter has been a topic of debate at many events in Durban among a growing number of scholars interested in the study of slavery in South Africa. Jane Anna Gordon asserts: "Just as it is useful to see what is similar and distinct about slaves and wage slaves, it is also illuminating to consider what enslaved people and guest-workers do and do not share in the relationship of their work, status and foreignness. This is because guest-worker programs produce a unique form of precariousness that renders those affected most prone to literal enslavement and other closely related forms of forced labor," (Page 66). I leave readers further to explore the relationships of guest-workers on their own. In Chapter Three, "On Consent", Gordon immediately ushers her reader into the work of Carole Pateman and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In this chapter, Gordon truly shines, as she zooms into arguments on consent that are not only pertinent to the study of enslavement but also to gender, sexuality studies, LGBTQIA studies, in unpacking the agency of the subject who is oppressed and what kind of permission, in a form regarded as consent, any oppressed person who is owned as property can offer. She notes: "There is no doubt that consent had a tragic career from its beginning. Emerging in the seventeenth century in Europe with a growing number of masterless men whose existence challenged reigning conceptions of social order based on natural hierarchies of power and subordination, it was not inevitable that it would attain hegemonic status" (page 82).

In Chapter Four, "Lucrative Vulnerability", Jane Anna Gordon puts forward a series of arguments that scholars on the legitimacy of slavery have made, especially whether it is a misnomer when applied to forced or bonded labour in contemporary society. Gordon also unpacks the racialised and gendered grammar of enslavement, such as "contemporary forced labour" or "trafficking". Gordon opens up a series of arguments as to why particular conceptual frameworks have steered disciplines such as Women's Studies and Gender Studies, and what the pitfalls of these suggest.

Statelessness and Contemporary Enslavement is a must-read. What is particularly significant is that the content not only crosses disciplines but makes a magnificent case for the knowledge it brings forward on two subjects – statelessness and enslavement – as an intertwined study that we have rarely

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had the benefit of engaging with simultaneously. Scholars of history, philosophy, literature, politics, and those within art and music will benefit significantly from understanding enslavement and statelessness histories. It is equally beneficial to read and become familiar with Jane Anna Gordon's earlier texts cited below.

- Gordon, J.A. 2001. *Why they Couldn't Wait: A Critique of the Black - Jewish Conflict Over Community Control in Ocean-Hill Brownsville, 1967 - 1971*. New York & London: RoutledgeFalmer.
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