

This is a pre-print of an article published in *Women's Studies International Forum*. The definitive publisher-authenticated version Mackay, F. (2014) (Book Review) *The politics of sex trafficking: A moral geography*, Erin O'Brien, Sharon Hayes, Belinda Carpenter. Palgrave Macmillan (2013), 225, ISBN: 9781137003386. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 44. pp. 203-204. ISSN 0277-5395 is available online at: <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0277539514000570>

Review for *Women's Studies International Forum*. 600 – 800 words. Reviewer: Dr Finn Mackay.

Title: 'The Politics of Sex Trafficking: A Moral Geography'

Authors: O'Brien, Erin; Hayes, Sharon & Carpenter, Belinda

Palgrave Macmillan, 2013

225 pages

ISBN: 9781137003386

.....STARTS.....

This is a well-structured and accessible analysis which compares American and Australian policy discourses on trafficking for the purposes of prostitution. As well as big ticket policy architecture in this field, such as the Palermo Protocol and the US Trafficking in Persons Report, this book also explores the narratives used by NGOs, including religious organisations, pro sex-industry groups and feminist groups campaigning against the industry of prostitution. A fascinating and enriching addition is data from interviews with individuals in such organisations as well as politicians and policy makers in the two countries under study.

This book will be of interest to anyone studying the passage of policy and how different agendas become adopted and enacted in law, policy and funding. It will be relevant to a wide audience, including feminist scholars, *Women's Studies* and *Gender Studies* students as well as those in *Policy Studies* and *Law*. As would be expected, the two main agendas under scrutiny are the long-running oppositional and polarised perspectives of groups in favour of treating prostitution as labour like any other, and groups which view prostitution as a cause and consequence of gender inequality and thus seek to end it. In the book the former standpoint is referred to as the 'sex-work perspective' and the latter as 'abolitionist'. It is quite clear throughout the book that the authors belong in the former category.

The authors are concerned with what value judgements or 'moral imperatives' are behind the linking of sex trafficking with prostitution, a link they observe in policy discourses in both countries, although the approach to the issue is treated quite differently in each. Where the US has largely accepted language from abolitionist campaigns and problematizes both sex trafficking and prostitution, Australia in contrast has legalised brothel prostitution in some states and has been more suspicious of attempts to causally link prostitution with sex trafficking. The authors undermine assumptions that a legalised prostitution industry could in any way be a cause of sex trafficking or a factor increasing the likelihood of trafficking into a country, what is referred to in policy speak as a 'pull factor'.

They are concerned that it is actually a demonization of prostitution itself that has led those in the abolitionist camp to see bonded labour in the sex industry as somehow unique, or inherently more harmful than that in any other industry. Such demonization is allegedly fuelled by "the social construction of a dualism of sexual behaviour, of 'good' and 'bad' sex, where good sex is intimate, private, romantic and bad sex is commercial, promiscuous, transitory" (pg2). Added to this, abolitionists have also been conned by heteronormative, conservative and sexist scripts about masculinity, femininity and sex, which they apparently perpetuate in their narratives. These outdated scripts define masculinity as sexually predatory, active and driven by biological sexual

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needs, and in contrast, define femininity as passive, victimised and not sexually motivated. Thus abolitionists are unable to see migrant sex workers as anything other than victims and will always view those whose labour is exploited in this industry as doubly harmed, compared to those whose labour is exploited in any other industry.

Abolitionists are also attacked for focussing on the demand for prostitution and sex trafficking, in an environment where the 'consumer demand' for goods or services produced, often through similarly criminal or exploitative methods, by any other industry is not paid similar attention or even problematized in any way. The authors ask why it is not possible to see "the demand for sex as a consumer choice, like orange juice or cheap clothing" (pg165).

As one of the abolitionist Radical Feminists referred to in this book I found much to disagree with, not least the way that nuanced and complex feminist and anti-capitalist arguments are misrepresented. Valid, political objections to the multi-billion dollar global industry of prostitution are reduced to 'moral imperatives', wherein we share with the religious right an "idealised understanding that 'good' or acceptable sex only occurs in a specific sort of relationship, alongside a shared aim of rescuing women from their own decision-making" (pg37). Page after page the same tired old stereotypes lurk like spectres between the lines, portraying Radical Feminists as a marauding moralistic brigade motivated by the sort of biological essentialism and conservative Christian values which our movement has fought against for centuries. It is not Radical Feminists who created or perpetuate the heterosexist scripts which the authors rightly condemn; in fact it is these very scripts which underpin the long existence of prostitution. Throughout the ages prostitution has been justified within patriarchy as a suitable profession for (poor, marginalised and working class) women, as a deterrence to rape and as a protector of the nuclear family by preventing men from having extra-marital affairs to assuage their presumed 'biological needs'. As for the authors' frustration and bemusement over the problematisation of demand, I can perhaps enlighten them: women are not oranges or shoes. Women are not commodities or consumer goods. As a conclusion, I have no argument however with their following statement: "Despite some changes in attitudes, sex work is still viewed as harmful to women, children and communities" (pg167). Yes, guilty as charged.

.....ENDS.....

Dr Finn Mackay

Senior Lecturer, Sociology

University of the West of England