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**Review Article: A Round Up of Some Recent Books on Prostitution and Sex Work: Kaoru Aoyama, Thai Migrant Sexworkers: From Modernisation to Globalisation, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009; Laura María Agustín, Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets and the Rescue Industry, London: Zed Books, 2007; Elizabeth Bernstein, Temporarily Yours: Intimacy, Authenticity and the Commerce of Sex, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007; Sheila Jeffreys, The Industrial Vagina: The Political Economy of the Global Sex Trade, London: Routledge, 2009; Roger Matthews, Prostitution, Politics and Policy, London: Routledge Cavendish, 2008; Marc Padilla, Caribbean Pleasure Industry: Tourism, Sexuality and AIDS in the Dominican Republic, Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2007; Teela Sanders, Men Who Buy Sex, Cullompton: Willan Publishing, 2008; Teela Sanders, Maggie O'Neill and Jane Pitcher, Prostitution: Sex Work, Policy and Politics, London: Sage, 2009; Tiantian Zheng, Red Lives: The Sex Workers of Post Socialist China, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009**

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## A Round Up of Some Recent Books on Prostitution and Sex Work

Kaoru Aoyama, *Thai Migrant Sexworkers: From Modernisation to Globalisation*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009; Laura María Agustín, *Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets and the Rescue Industry*, London: Zed Books, 2007; Elizabeth Bernstein, *Temporarily Yours: Intimacy, Authenticity and the Commerce of Sex*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007; Sheila Jeffreys, *The Industrial Vagina: The Political Economy of the Global Sex Trade*, London: Routledge, 2009; Roger Matthews, *Prostitution, Politics and Policy*, London: Routledge–Cavendish, 2008; Marc Padilla, *Caribbean Pleasure Industry: Tourism, Sexuality and AIDS in the Dominican Republic*, Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2007; Teela Sanders, *Men Who Buy Sex*, Cullompton: Willan Publishing, 2008; Teela Sanders, Maggie O’Neill and Jane Pitcher, *Prostitution: Sex Work, Policy and Politics*, London: Sage, 2009; Tiantian Zheng, *Red Lives: The Sex Workers of Post Socialist China*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

The study of human sexualities advances on. Forty years ago when I made my first research foray into studying the rent boy scene in London’s Soho, the study of prostitution was very limited. Kingsley Davis’s classic functionalist account of the 1930s was still the key sociological work being debated, along with a limited number of slight ethnographic excursions on call girls and their career patterns. Most of the writing in this field leaned heavily on models of pathology to locate the ‘girls’ (and the ‘boys’). I was impressed by the work of Albert Reiss on rent boys where he showed how straight young men could have sex with men and maintain a masculine and straight sense of self – provided they kept playing the active role. But it was with the arrival of second-wave feminism during the 1970s, that the analysis started to change – and notably when Mary McIntosh published her short but seminal work on ‘Who needs prostitutes?’ The answer to this question, of course, was direct: it was men. And soon radical feminism appeared with its strong critique (notably eventually in Kath Barry’s significant *Sexual Slavery*), alongside the newly formed (and named) sex workers’ movements (like C.O.Y.O.T.E) who started to tell their stories and campaign for the rights of sex workers. The analysis was changing.

Since that time, there has been a major widening, deepening and speeding up of the worlds of prostitution and sex work. Globalization, mediaization, digitalization,

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AIDS and the spread of neo-liberal ideologies of markets under postmodern capitalism have all helped to transform and proliferate sex markets both old and new in every country of the globe. A vast new world of buying, selling and profiting from sex has developed. And alongside this, a substantial major field of scholarship has been developing in this field. Here I have selected a small cluster of this work (with apologies to lots of others) to indicate something of the wide range, debate and challenge of this field.

### ***Feminist tensions: Prostitution or sex work?***

Sheila Jeffreys' latest book, *The Industrial Vagina: The Political Economy of the Global Sex Trade*, is a good place to start. Her position is very well known with a lineage of significant critical, radical feminist publications stretching back 30 years. It is part of that tradition of pioneering feminists who see male sex as a very serious problem and campaign against it (a trend analysed initially in Judith Walkowitz's research on the 19th-century feminist campaigners). Here Jeffreys re-argues, illustrates, and carefully amplifies much of her earlier work through an examination of the contemporary global sex trade in all its horrendous manifestations: the massive international increase in pornography, the growth of stripping and sex clubs, military prostitution, the rise of prostitution tourism (as opposed to sex tourism) and the development of the traffic in women. She is severely critical of those many feminists who want to 'normalize' the sex trade in all its dire contemporary manifestations and her argument is basic: prostitution is not withering away as earlier feminists hoped for. Instead it is flourishing on a global scale within a free market ideology: 'prostitution has been industrialized and globalized' (p. 3). She is concerned with the 'harmful cultural practices' in which 'men, through payment, or the offer of some other advantage, gain the right to use their hands, penises, mouths or objects on or in the bodies of women'. It is a sex trade in which women are sold. She is quite uncompromising – her position is not one open for negotiations and, like the arguments of radical feminists generally, I think it is important for this stance to keep its firm ground and be listened to. For it raises in a very clear, striking and stark way the issues at risk. In a way, it is almost a feminist 'ideal type' of women's subordination. Of course, I think she is over the top and lacks some subtlety – but that is often what is needed so that the big issues can be seen. And I tend to agree with her that beneath a lot of the fancy arguments, a huge number of women across the world are indeed being seriously abused, violated even terrorized. Jeffreys is unequivocally on the side of women and she writes clearly, to the point and with strong details. I think she would make a great starting point in a classroom and elsewhere for a debate on these issues.

But then, immediately, one needs to read the work of Laura Agustín as a counterpoint. Laura María Agustín is an intellectual feminist maverick who seeks to deconstruct the entire field and challenge much thinking. In *Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets and the Rescue Industry*, she draws from years of researching and thinking about the position of women travelling in the global economy, many of whom engage in various forms of 'selling sex'. Much of what Jeffreys claims, I guess Agustín would dismiss as myth. At the core of her argument is the idea that migrants often make 'personal choices' to travel and work in the

sex industry. Her specific interests though are not with groups like street workers but with migration and trafficking. She sees them as a part of a dynamic global economy; and one where often the sex control industry makes the situation worse, not better, for them. Indeed the core of this book is an attack upon the ‘rescue industry’, which ostensibly has a long history of ‘saving women’ while in fact it is driven by a ‘feminist fundamentalism’ which frequently and actually harms women. This book is reviewed elsewhere in *Sexualities* (Vol. 12, no. 6) and her ideas are developed in a special issue of *Sexualities* in 2007 (Vol 19, no. 4). But it has to be mentioned again here. She problematizes the whole area of those who work to help these women – and who place them ‘in need’. She advocates listening to the voices of the migrant women. Between the work of Agustín and Jeffreys there is a major and long-standing feminist tension at work on many levels.

### *Human agency and the need for complex global ethnographies*

To help us move beyond this tension, we need to turn to grounded ethnographic work. Here some of the contradictions and subtleties come forcefully to the fore. We start to see the complexities of real empirical grounded observation where life is always much more messy, contradictory and ambiguous. One route for doing this is to give a focus to the complex paths of human agency. This is the concern specifically of Kaoru Aoyama (*Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets and the Rescue Industry*). Her special interest lies in the women who leave Thailand for the sex industry in Japan. Here there is a major theme of much recent work: an international world of sex slavery, trafficking and coercion which runs parallel with the needs of migrating women who find sex work to be a means to support themselves and their families. In interviews and participatory action research, Aoyama gives a sharp and very focused analysis to this dilemma. Drawing partly on earlier debates of Carole Pateman and Julia O’Connell Davidson, she is concerned to steer a middle road between these positions – which for her is the empirical reality of these women. Her sex workers struggle in different places and at different times of their lives with different material conditions and different meanings. Aoyama’s study above all is concerned with studying women’s human agency and again it is compelling in detailing its empirical complexity. There is no one pattern of agency but multiple routes and sites. The experience is not cut from one cloth.

Tiantian Zheng’s ethnography, *Red Lives: The Sex Workers of Post Socialist China*, also sees this complexity. Her work focuses on the ways in which sexuality and sex work are shifting in a post-Mao landscape. Becoming a field worker in the city of Dalian, she closely observes young Chinese women who become Karaoke Bar Hostesses. She interrogates their situation not only in the business, but also in their family and earlier backgrounds. Unsurprisingly, her research was far from welcome in China. She discloses some of her many difficulties in conducting such research – not least as she becomes partially engaged in waiting on the men herself, the only acceptable role that would allow her to be present in such bars as a Chinese woman. All this, though, helped her to get close to the data and it becomes another finely observed ethnography which investigates what goes on in the club, the kinds of roles that the girls have to play, and their lives outside.

What is striking here is that, yes, of course, Sheila Jeffreys is right. Patriarchy (or the gender order) and male dominance can be observed at work everywhere, as can the damage being done to the women. Zhen directly links this sex work to patriarchy and masculinity in China as it is in serious post socialist change. But the stories are more complex than this. The girls are from poor backgrounds and she shows the sheer poverty and degradation of their village lives – ‘the wretched living conditions in the countryside’ (p. 150): ironically, damned as these hostesses’ city experiences are, they seem a lot better. At least too they can send money back to their families. So the stories they tell here start to get more nuanced. They rationalize that their work is for the benefit of their family. More: there is real change in their lives. Often they started their city work in the sweatshops but found themselves moving up and beyond – so that they are now furnished with the very clothes made in the sweatshops. Up to a point the quality of their lives is better, full of problems as they remain nevertheless. Yet at the same time they daily confront the downright objectionable behaviour of many of the men they have to deal with. Zheng’s work joins a growing band of well researched feminist ethnographies of the international sex work scene – notably the work of Julia O’Connell Davidson and as an ethnography of migrant sex workers in China, this study seems to this reviewer to be a first; a must read.

Mark Padilla’s work, *Caribbean Pleasure Industry: Tourism, Sexuality and AIDS in the Dominican Republic*, is the only book to be discussed here that is about male sex workers. His study of men in the Dominican Republic joins a growing cluster of inspiring ethnographies of queer sexualities – Richard Parker’s *Beneath the Equator* (1999), Don Kulick’s *Travesti* (1998), Hector Carillos *The Night is Young* (2002), Martin Manalansan’s *Global Divas* (2003) amongst others. All of them have provided rich grounded descriptions of the specificities – and inevitable ambiguities – of the intersections of global and local cultural sexual life. Padilla’s focus is on the Dominican men who have sex with male tourists whilst often struggling to maintain themselves as ‘heterosexual men’. This is, of course, by now a very well-established world pattern even though it moves under different names with different dynamics in each local setting. Elegantly written, this book nevertheless provides the template for all such work in the future by bringing together and taking seriously the connection to (a) political economy – the links between sex work and the wider work place and market; (b) the cultural bricolage (especially in this case the cross between colonial elements (often based on slavery), and those based on post-colonialism and postmodernism (highlighting *inter alia* the arrival of both tourism and the modern global queer); (c) their mediations in local contexts (families, bars, streets and city life); (d) the ways identity tensions are massively induced and (e) ultimately its connections to health (and the spreading of HIV and AIDS – the rationales for such study in the first place.). On all this Padilla provides rich case studies and material. Like most of the books under review, it is a joy to read – many case studies bringing the material alive and making for moving reading

### *Contemporary social organisation and new intimacies*

Two other books make striking new contributions. Elizabeth Bernstein’s *Temporarily Yours* might well become a benchmark as she looks at the broad

trans-historical shifts in the sexual economy from premodern to postmodern societies. While much of the book is focused on prostitution in the Tenderloin area of San Francisco and to a lesser extent Amsterdam, she develops an overarching thesis about the changing nature of sex commerce in late modern society. She schematizes the differences between 'early-modern sexual barter, modern-industrial prostitution and post-industrial sexual commerce' (p. 170). The latter she claims has a very different shape, and it is one with which all studies from now on should have to engage. Yes, sex work and prostitution have become massively more diversified than ever before with a wider range of services; something indeed that Agustín, Jeffreys and others also make clear. It is dispersed everywhere – breaking down the old distinctions of private and public, and no longer necessarily locating itself within specially stigmatized areas and red light districts. New technologies have become endemic in much of its organization. But more telling still is the suggestion that there has started to be a real shift in the meaning of sexuality in these times – towards what she calls a 'bounded authenticity'. Here a new 'relationship meaning' is evolving; and it is becoming more and more common. Sex is not just a sexual release (if it ever was?), but is developing into a more complex relationship linked to intimacies. She claims that there is no longer a simple cash nexus and market relation, but increasingly one where many sex workers are paid to provide erotic acts premised upon the promise of an 'authentic' interpersonal connection. The public-private boundaries between intimacy and commerce are being reworked in new and challenging ways.

Teela Sanders also hints at a similar development in her work. She is a UK sociologist who has already made her mark on this field of inquiry (see *Sex Work – A risky business* (2004)). In *Men Who Buy Sex*, she turns her attention to the punters – to the men. This is an area that is often overlooked. And since social policies have recently taken a turn to criminalize men (in Sweden in practice, and in the UK in proposal), this is a needed study to clarify debate. Just what are the men like who seek sex from women this way? As they are becoming increasingly the object of social policy makers, she provides much in the way of data and argument to be considered. She works from a framework where 'client conduct is not necessarily oppressive, damaging or respectful' (many might find this contentious); Her sample is recruited from media and internet sources (she had some 457 emails from men interested in the research as well as prior contacts from earlier research She had some 134 biographies and 52 interviews). She looks at both what pushes the men towards sex workers (emotional needs, unsatisfactory sex and so on) and pulls them to it (the 'attractiveness' of the sex industry, entertainment and other factors) and develops a typology of men (explorers, yo-yoers, compulsives, and bookend older men and permanent purchasers). I found Sanders' study of the men utterly engaging. There are as one might expect multiple reasons for engaging with sex workers, and their scripts range from the very traditional through those who were looking for friendship, trust and mutual enjoyment. Her work parallels the work of Bernstein and others in suggesting that sex work or prostitution should no longer be seen as about sex alone, but about new forms of the search for intimacies, of ways of making out in a late modern world. Ultimately, Sanders provides a strong and very critical voice against the criminalization of commercial sexual behaviour, and favours a strong campaign to defend the rights of sex workers.

### Textbook prostitution

I am only sampling a few of the many new books on sex work. It does seem that there has been a major growth in this academic /research/activist field. So much so that reviews and textbooks are now needed to make sense of it. I will end with two of these 'textbook' guides.

Roger Matthews provides the criminologist's view (he is also something of a male radical feminist). He has been studying prostitution for over 30 years and his review takes us through the traditional concerns of criminologists – dispelling myths, charting the career patterns, examining entrances and exiting. In *Prostitution, Politics and Policy*, he discusses the major policy responses to prostitution – regulation, decriminalization, legislation and prohibition; with debates between feminists clarified and the case of Sweden given focus. The key to the book is the 'vulnerability and victimisation' of prostitutes – he charts the ways in which women become victimized through violence, drug use, housing problems; and how this also links with huge risks to health and well being. Many of the sex workers he discusses lead damaged lives. Matthews' own position is that of a 'radical realist' who aims to steer a path between those wanting to abolish prostitution and those seeking to humanize it. For him, prostitution is 'continuous and relentless and built in to the fabric of women's lives' (p. 45). Overall, the book aims to provide a critical perspective on prostitution policies and the policies and legal chaos that surround this. The trouble is that he starts his book by recounting the horrific story of five sex workers murdered in a few days around Christmas 2006. The story was a national horror story in the UK, and although he is wide ranging in his concerns, this image of the victimized and brutalized street walker is never far away. Matthews is good at overviewing issues but tacitly behind much of the book is this one model: that of the victimized street walker. And this is only one story. The complexities of different kinds of sex work are not Matthews' brief and it limits the book.

The text by Teela Sanders, Maggie O'Neill and Jane Pitcher, *Prostitution: Sex Work, Policy and Politics*, is a much more comprehensive and satisfying book. This book strikes me as likely to become the current book to encourage students to read. Written by three well-known and respected feminist writers, they want to move beyond binaries while covering the whole global ground: the markets, the sex workers, the men, the special areas of children and trafficking, as well as issues of justice, welfare and globalization. This is clearly a textbook for students – coming complete as it does with useful summary boxes, layered questions at the end of each chapter, glossaries. There is even a closing chapter on methodology and doing research in this field (and they strongly advise against undergraduates conducting field research!). With this textbook approach, sex work and prostitution seems to have come of age as areas of academic study. There is much to debate, think about and act upon in all these books.

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