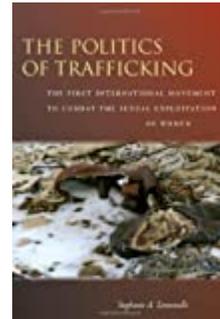




Stephanie A. Limoncelli. *The Politics of Trafficking: The First International Movement to Combat the Sexual Exploitation of Women.* Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2010. 216 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-6294-6.



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The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same

What I took away from this very interesting and detailed study of the history of sex trafficking (prior to World War II) is how seemingly little things have changed in the anti-trafficking movements, debates, and outcomes since 1899. The book is also a cautionary tale about how progressive movements can be co-opted by nationalist and conservative agendas, in particular regarding control of women's bodies and movement. The author, Stephanie A. Limoncelli, does a wonderful job demonstrating the real differences between the two main anti-trafficking groups in Europe around the turn of the last century, and her nuanced analysis of the two groups reveals the dangers (in our current climate) of lumping all anti-trafficking groups together. The first group she profiles, the International Abolitionist Federation (IAF), was made up of liberal feminists who wanted to end the sexual exploitation of women by making trafficking in humans a crime. What they did not want to do was criminalize domestic prostitution for either prostitutes or their clients, and instead wanted to use education, rather than legislation, to stop prostitution. The

other group, the International Bureau for the Suppression of the White Slave Traffic (International Bureau), was made up of what Limoncelli calls the "purity reformers" (p. 6). Their interests were of a more prurient nature, and they were against prostitution, obscenity, and homosexuality, and wanted to enforce legal standards for any sexuality outside marriage. They clearly wanted a role for the state, therefore, in regulating sexuality, particularly prostitution, and in the end the International Bureau worked with national governments to deport foreign women working as prostitutes and criminalize unregulated prostitution.

The author's main argument is that what started as a well-meaning, feminist attempt on the part of IAF to protect women and girls from sex trafficking across global, racial, or ethnic lines became dominated by the International Bureau that had aligned itself with state actors whose main concerns were with nationalistic worries about migration and controlling undesirable migrants in particular. In doing so, the purity reformers ended up reinforcing state control over women's mobility and sex-

ual labor. Where feminists in the IAF wanted to protect women from men, supporters of the International Bureau ended up working to protect the state from the women.

The author also makes it clear, in a way that I have never fully understood, what interests the state had in regulating women's sexuality in relation to state and empire building. For instance, women were needed for the presumed sexual and domestic needs of the male military, laborers, and state officials in the colonies, but the racial biases of the time required a separation of the races in sexual relations. European women were brought to the colonies for marriage to or prostitution with European men, meaning that the state was absolutely complicit in the (usually) voluntary trafficking of women from one metropolis to another. However, it also raised the nationalistic problem of, for instance, Italian women being used as prostitutes in countries where the Italians were touting their moral superiority to the colonies. The machinations that the colonial authorities went through to protect their women and at the same time use other women is extremely revealing. As one Italian colonial authority in Somaliland wrote, "it is an elementary question of prestige in relation to the natives that non-Italian white women were used for prostitution (p. 34).

Chapter 2 contextualizes the rise of military and colonial prostitution and shows how the regulatory system of prostitution created the infrastructure for sex trafficking. Because it was taken for granted that men need sex, in the early stages of colonialism concubinage was the norm, where European men lived with native women in domestic and sexual relationships. Only later did European women migrate for marriage with European men. Concubinage was gradually replaced with prostitution as interracial sex and miscegenation became problems for the colonial powers. The author provides fascinating details of how small-scale exchanges between European men and colonial women became regulated by Western bureaucracies and in doing so reduced these (once independent) women to common prostitutes (p. 22). She provides ample evidence that regulation oppressed these women further and provided the institutional mechanisms for the traffic in women (p. 38).

Chapter 3 outlines the problem of trafficking as seen by her two main anti-trafficking groups, and illustrates the important differences between them. As Limoncelli says, we tend to lump them all together as anti-white slave trade activists with all the baggage that it entails when in fact we need to carefully analyze the actual similarities and differences so that we can see how

the feminist group lost out in the end. As Limoncelli describes the ideology of the IAF, they seem contemporary in their outlook in contrast to the purity reformers: they were against the sexual double standard, realized that the label of prostitute trapped women, and believed that regulation of prostitution denied the civil liberties of women. This is in sharp contrast to the International Bureau whose members were attempting to regulate sexuality itself. As Limoncelli writes, the International Bureau was caught in a contradiction: they did not support prostitution but to abolish state regulation would be to call for a reduction in state control over sexual activity (p. 63).

Chapters 4 through 7 offer detailed case studies showing how the two main groups fared in influencing state actors at the League of Nations, and in the Netherlands, France, and Italy. The divisions between the groups played out in the League of Nations and we see the first shifts from the desire to protect women to protecting the state. The IAF was most successful in the Netherlands where activists were victorious in abolishing licensed brothels and convincing the government to apply anti-trafficking legislation both at home and in their colonies in the Dutch East Indies. France was dominated by the International Bureau but it was very unsuccessful in abolishing prostitution or trafficking. France had an entrenched regulated brothel system and lacked an independent feminist movement. Catholic women were more interested in rescuing women than in abolishing prostitution and worried about the secularization of the state and the influence of Protestant women in the IAF. France extended its regulatory system to its colonies in north Africa and Indochina, and brothels were put in place wherever the military was stationed. In Italy, which had a brothel system modeled on the French, the IAF had even less success than in France. Again, Catholic women shunned the abolitionist movement, believing that it was English propaganda and that prostitutes required redemption, rather than liberty (p. 135). Italy was also trying to catch up in its empire building and so needed to control the movement of women into the colonies for work in Italian and colonial brothels set up for the military men and laborers.

Limoncelli concludes by showing how and why the International Bureau was more successful in obtaining anti-trafficking legislation by aligning itself with state actors, whose interests were of nation building, not the protection of women from trafficking. And as she convincingly argues, anti-trafficking measures acted to increase state oversight of women and their sexual activity and

movement. They did not, as the IAF had hoped, work to decrease the criminalization of women.

Several aspects of the book are immensely important for the contemporary anti-trafficking movement. As Limoncelli states, governments continue to use anti-trafficking measures as migration control since their concern is with state interests, not the interest of individual women. As well, the debate continues to focus almost exclusively on the women, rather than the men. What is also completely relevant for today's discussions

about prostitution policy and anti-trafficking (and what has eerily stayed the same) are the questions that dominated this debate: Does regulating domestic prostitution encourage trafficking (as argued by the IAF) or does the lack of regulation simply make trafficking go underground (as argued by the International Bureau)? Although the author does not come down clearly on one side or the other, if the case studies in this book indicate anything it is that state control over women's sexuality and movement is never a good thing for women.

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