

***Review of The state of sex: Tourism, sex and sin in the new American heartland by Barbara G. Brents, Crystal A. Jackson and Kathryn Hausbeck, New York: Routledge, 2010***

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This book is exemplary of contemporary studies published on sex work. These studies share certain commonalities. Firstly, they avoid at all costs falling prey to one of the rigid dichotomies that exist concerning sex work. They reject the feminist abolitionist standpoint in its entirety and although they depart from the feminist sex workers' rights position, they do not straightjacket the analysis to fit the discourse. Secondly, like other studies of this kind, the analysis of sex work is not done in isolation, rather it is embedded in an analysis of broader social processes. The authors analyze brothel work in relation to globalization, the tourist-leisure industry and finally, as another form of service work. As they suggest in the Conclusion, it is only when prostitution is studied within the broader social context in which it takes place that it will stop being seen as a social oddity.

After the Introduction, the book begins with a chapter that theoretically contextualizes the specificity of Nevada's legal brothel system. It explains how late capitalist consumption has encouraged a free market in relation to choice and how this has resulted in new types of personal and intimate relations which "can be bought and sold via orderly, less ambiguous contractual arrangements within the market" (p.34). While this chapter gives insight into theories that help the reader to understand this argument, it nonetheless suffers from an inherent pitfall of studies which attempt to address two audiences simultaneously— the general informed public and the academic. The theory is presented descriptively and functions as a contextual background, offering few theoretical challenges to the specialized academic reader.

The following chapter presents the history of legal prostitution in Nevada, and convincingly illustrates its incomparability to other locales. This chapter demonstrates how prostitution started in the mining towns and became the second largest tourist attraction, the first being gambling. It illustrates how brothels were integral to the development of the tourist industry and how this in turn, determined the legislation which eventually channeled all forms of sexual services into brothel work and confined it to suburban and rural areas. This last point is taken further in Chapter 4, in which the authors offer an in-depth portrayal of the contemporary brothel industry, describing in particular the differences between the rural and suburban brothels, the latter of which cater to higher class clientele and, until recently, the former predominantly to the lower middle class and working class. Particularly interesting is the authors' discussion of the shift in ownership from individuals – mostly women - to small business and corporate partnerships, which has a direct affect upon marketing strategies as well as the amount of capital that can be invested in the establishments. Even though this chapter offers interesting insights, it contains an overkill of description. Each setting is described in too much detail producing an inventory-like description which becomes tedious.

Chapter Five and Six zooms in on the women working in the brothels. Chapter Five sketches the paths that women take to end up in brothel work. Three different paths are discerned: [1] those who came directly from non-sexual jobs in the service industry; [2] those who came from the legal sex industries like erotic dance or adult film; [3] those who came from illegal prostitution. For three quarters of the women, labor market dynamics contributed to their choice to enter into sex work. The service industry, which is the only opportunity for employment for the majority of these women, offers no economic stability. Moreover, sex work pays better. Another contributing factor motivating women to enter the work is the nature of brothel work, as it is flexible, temporary, part-time and many women are independent contractors. Chapter Six, is one

of the strongest chapters of the book. It discusses how the women perceive their work, and links it to the notion of emotional labor. They distinguish three different ways sex work is performed, as physical, caring or holistic. It shows clearly that most women have virtually no problem with the work itself nor the fact that they separate their private identities from their work identities. Unlike some feminist theorists, who argue that such compartmentalization is inherently difficult, the authors note that it is the stigma of sex work that makes the work stressful and contributes to the women's negative feelings about their work. However, the chapter loses its strength because of authors' choice to use a conventional style of representation. Each aspect is introduced by a brief interpretative elaboration, followed by the presentation of slices of interviews or fraction of vignettes to support their interpretations. While this does illustrate the diversity encountered, and is commonly used to verify interpretations, it is too predictable and does not do justice to the abundant and rich information the authors collected over the years. A more ethnographic form of representation would have improved the chapter.

The authors are successful in presenting a study of prostitution within the context of different broader social processes; nonetheless, they are less successful in showing how gender, class, ethnicity are reproduced within this system, an assertion which is presented in various chapters of the book. This can be attributed to the book's highly descriptive nature. Description is essential in qualitative research. The trick is to encounter the balance between presenting pure description, presenting theoretical informed description, and finally, presenting description against an analysis of existing theories. Unfortunately, the authors do not go much further than a level of description that is occasionally theoretically informed. Thus, the reader only receives descriptive illustrations that hint that gender, sexuality and ethnicity are in motion in this context without linking these to contemporary gender theories. This would not only have increased the readability of the book (as well as shortening it to some extent) but it is also a missed

opportunity to contribute to theories such as intersectionality, a domain which needs to be further developed in sex work theory. However, the book persuasively documents a particular type of prostitution within a specific context. Thus, it is worth reading for those interested in or researching the subject of sex work.

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