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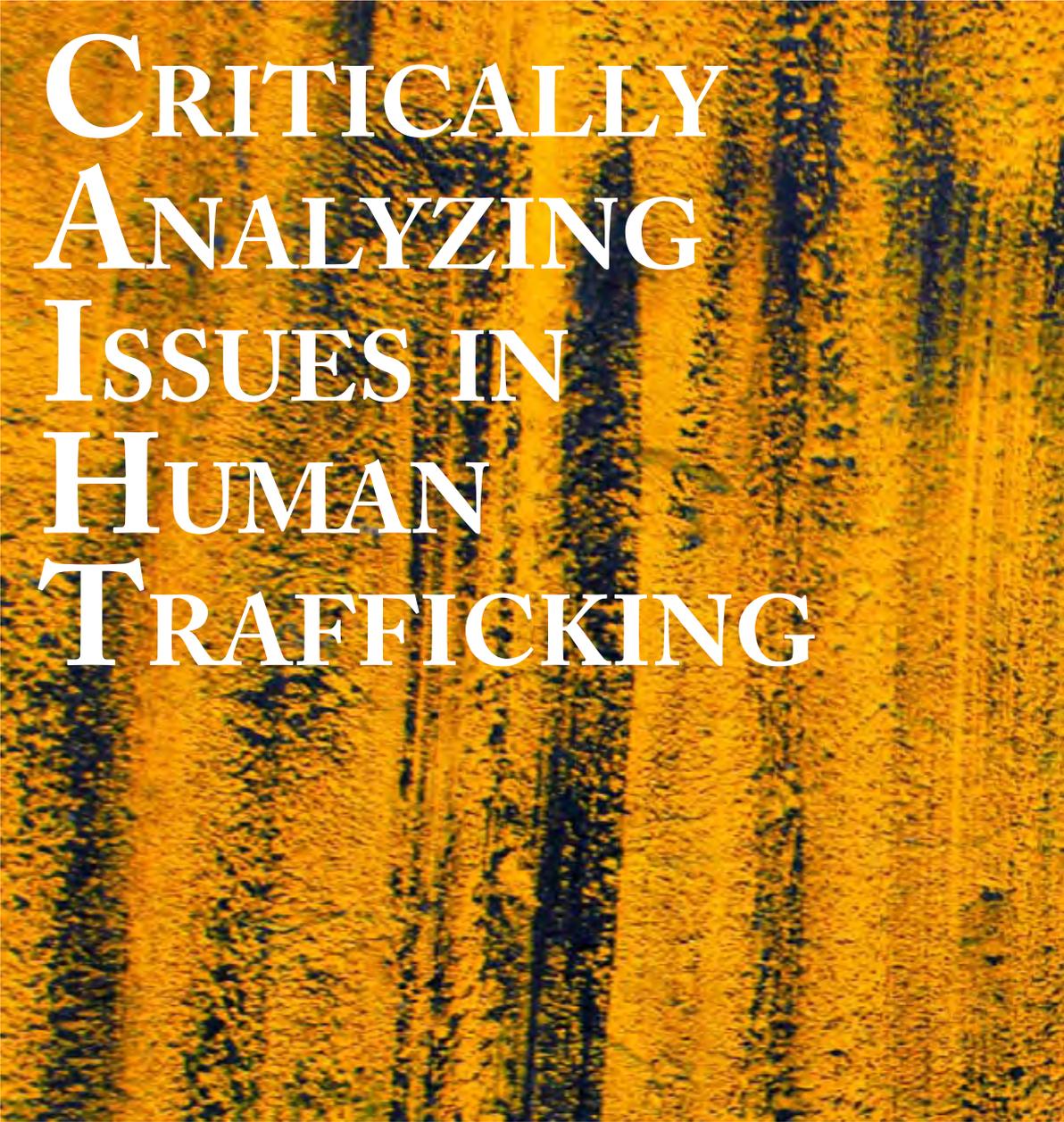
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Publication Date

2008-03-01



CRITICALLY ANALYZING ISSUES IN HUMAN TRAFFICKING

ELIZABETH BERNSTEIN'S "THE SEXUAL POLITICS OF 'NEW ABOLITIONISM': IMAGERY AND ACTIVISM IN CONTEMPORARY ANTI- TRAFFICKING CAMPAIGNS"

by Alani Price

LIKE ME, many people may at first glance gloss over the popular images and rhetoric of human trafficking as an “easy” moral judgment. Upon examination, however, issues of globalization, immigration, law enforcement, gender roles, and controversial legal definitions make human trafficking an extremely complex tragedy—one that defies generalization and, within the political reality of international and national laws, is often conflated with other

interests such as state control of immigration or prostitution. It is therefore to our benefit to consider and analyze the wide range of views being expressed by different stakeholders in the anti-trafficking effort. Elizabeth Bernstein's lecture offered a glimpse into her analysis of the ideological politics surrounding and informing anti-trafficking discourses, particularly what seems an unexpected, powerful coalition between contemporary feminists and evangelical Christians as self-identified "modern-day abolitionists" of not only trafficking but also all forms of prostitution/sex work.

Bernstein explained that prior to her interest in this study she had performed ethnographic field research for over a decade with sex workers in global cities. She engaged in participatory research in the sex workers' organizing efforts to address injustices, including abuse from police, deportation, and unfair labor practices. Her interest in trafficking was piqued as she noticed that these organizing efforts were beginning to be undercut in the late 90's by US federal and state anti-trafficking laws which equated prostitution with human trafficking – which was beginning to be termed "modern-day

slavery." In addition to approaches in the US such as increasing criminal penalties for pimps and sexual clients, a growing international concern prompted the 2001 *Trafficking Victims Protection Act* with an intent to monitor other countries and initiate financial sanctions if they do not take sufficient steps to combat trafficking. "Internationally based NGOs not explicitly denouncing prostitution" became disqualified for federal funding. Bernstein quoted Ambassador John Miller as arguing against the use of the term sex worker (instead of prostitute), because it "served to justify modern slavery and dignify perpetrators." In her quest to better understand this new "campaign to free slaves," she chose, for methodological reasons, to study the motives and ideologies of anti-trafficking activists rather than "lived phenomenon" of trafficked persons.

EVANGELICAL/FEMINIST COALITION

One of the most striking outcomes of the national and international prominence of trafficking is the coalition of contemporary feminists and evangelicals. In highlighting this outcome, Bernstein empha-

sized that trafficking has received singular attention from the Bush administration, and when pointing out the cooperation between the political right and left, quoted economist Allen Hertzke as saying it is one of the "most significant human rights movements of our time." The 2001 Charitable Choice Initiative in particular made federal funding available to evangelical abolitionist groups, among other organizations.

By sharing the same point of view on certain women's issues such as pornography and prostitution, feminists have at various times been given a warm welcome by conservatives. Though also receiving funding from Christian organizations, Bernstein showed that these feminist leaders in particular see evangelical organizations as offering more of a partnership in their cause than liberal organizations. Both groups hold particular views about sexuality and gender, conceiving situations of "violated femininity" and "victimization." They have a shared premise on prostitution, that it is a "gendered social exchange" which amounts to "literal enslavement."

Modern-day abolitionists such as the Amazing Grace organization use the

estimate of 27 million “slaves” or trafficked persons to claim that modern trafficking is even worse than the era of “chattel” slavery from Africa. This oft-quoted figure of 27 million comes from Kevin Bales’ *Free the Slaves* organization and purposefully includes all sex workers. The definition of slavery given is the total control of one person over another for the purpose of exploitation. Bernstein asks how this modern day slavery is distinct from “chattel” slavery. She connects the current use of slavery language with moral panic about “white” slavery in 1909, which consisted of a similar coalition of new abolitionists coming together and using the power of anti-slavery speech for a new “free the slaves” campaign. Bernstein explained that before this period, eradicating prostitution had not been a priority for church leaders. The release of media stories of women’s sexual enslavement were seen as irrefutable moral horror, depicting young white girls being abducted and forced into prostitution, typically by foreign men. These stories were later determined to be without factual base, but nevertheless were powerful enough to pass federal anti-prostitution legislation (White-Slave Traffic Act of 1910, known as the Mann

Act), as well as being a “useful stepping stone for host of additional causes,” such as suffrage and prohibition.

According to Bernstein, the “images and tropes” of sexual slavery—“violated femininity, shattered innocence, and the victimization of ‘womenandchildren’” (which she explained has become one word)—have been replicated at different times for both politics and dramatic journalism. For example, in 1885 William Stead bought a thirteen-year-old virgin from a poor family in London for £5 as a “journalistic stunt” to show the tragedy of child prostitution. To illustrate the drastic change in moral perception of this act, Bernstein contrasted Stead’s consequent punishment of three months in jail with the uncritical and highly supportive reaction given to Nicholas D. Kristof of the *New York Times* for using the same technique: He purchased two girls in Cambodia in 2004, supposedly to “save” them from slavery. In most popular depictions of trafficking, whether in such Hollywood movies as *Trade* (Kreuzpaintner, 2007) or *Holly* (Moshe, 2006) or on religious magazine covers, images of poverty, economic conditions, or alternative reasons for migration are conspicuously missing.

Bad men, Bernstein explains, are the singular problem in these images and stories, which never consider the structural or situational context of their subjects.

In the language of anti-trafficking groups, Bernstein points out, there appears a recycling of metaphors from anti-abortion campaigns: slavery, rescue, abolition. Such language rests on perceptions of the viability of women’s decision-making and asserts that the mere availability of options is a danger to women, who are sexually “vulnerable.” This vulnerability comes to the forefront of discussion when women are, problematically, working “outside of the home.”

In the course of her research, Bernstein discovered that her attempts to generalize evangelical conservatives held “limited purchase,” because of the fracturing occurring in evangelical Christian groups: some may describe themselves as Christian moderates or progressives, affluent evangelicals may embrace women’s rights and social justice, and some advocate for separation from other evangelical organizations. The Not for Sale social movement, which aims to unite churches, universities, and individuals in efforts against slavery and has, for example,

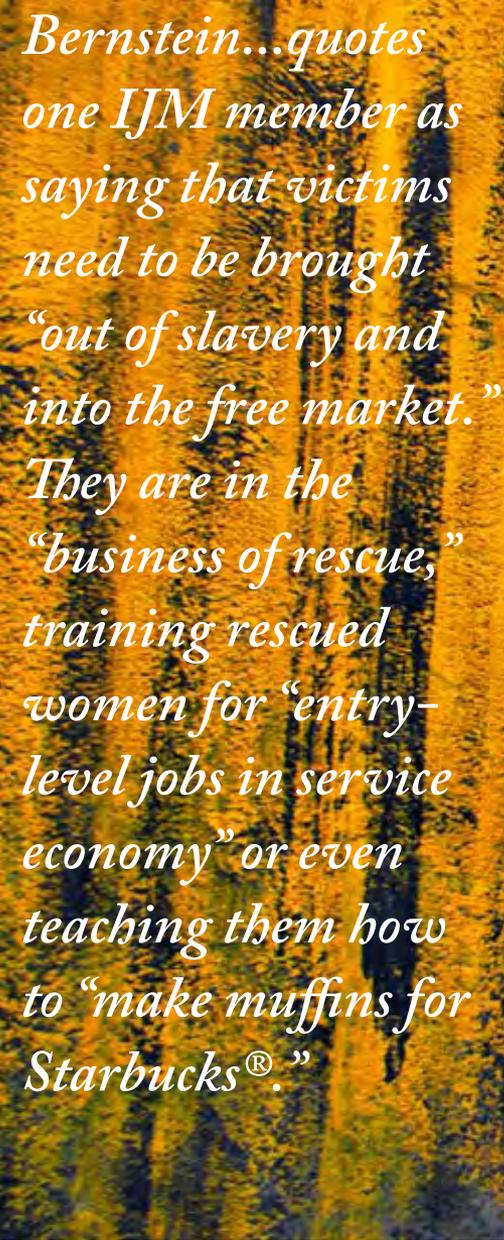
debated abandoning the label “evangelical” because of the term's loaded history.

Even when evangelical groups may describe their political views as moderate or liberal, their views of sex work should not be construed as progressive. Instead, Bernstein identifies their stance as “neo-liberal,” that is, seeing social problems stemming from “deviant individuals rather than mainstream institutions, seeking social remedies through criminal justice interventions rather than through a redistributed welfare state, and advocating the beneficence of the privileged rather than the empowerment of the oppressed.” This approach “leaves intact the very social structures that encourage risky migration and exploitative informal sector employment,” including the rare but real situations that would “rightly” be classified as trafficking. Furthermore, the “militarized humanitarianism” prevalent since the 1960s focuses on a model where men go undercover to rescue and bring to reintegration facilities. Such rescuers are not always welcomed, with women escaping from rescue facilities to return to brothels or sex workers throwing stones at vehicles of rescuers. The “rescue-and-restore” model nonetheless remains the standard

for feminist and evangelical organizations that continue to organize undercover brothel busts, where men take a “moral leadership role” as “rescuers” or “saviors.”

PRO-BUSINESS REMEDIES TO TRAFFICKING

Within this “refashioning of commercialized sex and trafficking,” Bernstein also noticed a plethora of pro-business remedies to trafficking. She quoted from the website of the International Justice Mission (<http://www.ijm.org>), which advertises their belief that “trafficking is not a poverty issue; it’s a law enforcement issue.” In this paradigm, missionary work is done by “bringing capitalism to other places so they can replace sex business with other entrepreneurial activity.” The organizations she visited focused not only brothels, but on debt bondage and rice factories. This expansion is connected with ideology about women’s freedom; the “perceived freedom and autonomy of women in the West.” Sex work is one way to “escape” from traditional roles, but abolitionists perceive the only way to escape from “backwards” traditional roles are envelopment in the capitalist system, by way of



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microcredit, for example. Missionary tourism trips visit brothels to witness slavery firsthand. The moral panic around eradicating prostitution in the “third world” has attracted a majority of white, middle-class anti-trafficking advocates.

Bernstein further illustrated the extent to which anti-trafficking agencies use the pro-business model. She quotes one IJM member as saying that victims need to be brought “out of slavery and into the free market.” They are in the “business of rescue,” training rescued women for “entry-level jobs in service economy” or even teaching them how to “make muffins for Starbucks®.” Rather than framing trafficking as involving “globalization, gendered labor, migration,” it is rather a “humanitarian concern global capitalists can combat.” Now, “rather than the practices of capitalism creating sweatshop conditions,” as they were viewed in the recent past, “such practices are the very definition of freedom.”

RACIAL IRONY OF ENFORCEMENT AGENDA

Enforcement-wise, the domestic agenda to federalize criminalization of prostitution has resulted in an unprecedented crackdown, mostly on people of color in major cities. To illustrate this point, Bernstein reads from her 2006 fieldnotes from an anti-trafficking meeting. These women participants admitted that although they knew little about trafficking they were moved by media images and “wanted to help.” During a presentation on the arrest of street prostitutes as the best way of eliminating domestic trafficking, Bernstein noted the “sad irony of throwing poor black people in jail as a means of fighting slavery” appeared to be lost on the audience. Not only in trafficking but also in domestic violence, many feminists have also shown a commitment to the carceral state rather than to the welfare state. Bernstein discussed the stark and ironic contrast with other types of feminist activism against the “prison industrial complex,” where forced labor in prisons amounts to slavery. Bernstein calls attention to the fact that it is the “women and men of color participating in street-based

sexual economy” who are put in prison “in the guise of being delivered out of slavery and into freedom.”

Bernstein concludes that the true consensus of abolitionist groups lies in the “corporate capitalist ideals of freedom and carceral paradigms of justice.” She said we should not be focused only on the bonds that exist between Christians and feminists but on those that now exist between “people of all religions that have traditionally held different ideas” about institutions such as family, the market, or the role of the state. Bernstein reminds us to notice that the “responsibility of slavery [has] shifted from structural factors onto individual, deviant men”—specifically “brown men.” Her talk points us toward considering whether the current ideologies, tropes, and images in anti-trafficking strategies are actually helping women and men who are performing truly “forced” labor—or if these strategies merely fit into alternative, powerful agendas of capitalism, anti-immigration, or anti-prostitution.

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