

**BookReview: SEX, WORK AND MIGRATION:
THE DYNAMICS AND REGIMES OF CARE AND
CONTROL** Laura Maria Agustin **Sex at the Margins:
Migration, Labour Markets and the Rescue
Industry** London: Zed Books, 2007, 224 pp., ISBN
9781-84277-8609

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Postprint / Postprint

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

O'Neill, M. (2008). BookReview: SEX, WORK AND MIGRATION: THE DYNAMICS AND REGIMES OF CARE AND CONTROL Laura Maria Agustin *Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets and the Rescue Industry* London: Zed Books, 2007, 224 pp., ISBN 9781-84277-8609. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 15(2), 142-145. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13505068080150020406>

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women. But as much as we, academics, would like to see women engaged in finding their own motives for resistance, we need to be careful not to project our own fantasies on them. The variety of Afghan women's experiences has engendered a multiplicity of identities, in which patterns of resistance can be found in practices that also appear, at first sight, as acts of compliance.

NOTE

1. Hazara is the third largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, after the Pashtoon (also called Paxto or Patan) and the Tadjik. The Hazara community is from *shiah* confession and therefore represents a religious minority that has faced much discrimination throughout history.

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SEX, WORK AND MIGRATION: THE DYNAMICS AND REGIMES OF CARE AND CONTROL

Laura Maria Agustin
Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets and the Rescue Industry
London: Zed Books, 2007, 224 pp., ISBN 9781-84277-8609

Sex at the Margins is a very timely book in the context of current debates, dialogue and dominant discourses around the analytic intersections of the commercial sex industry and migration. This book is the first to grapple with the intersections of migrating to sell sex with a specific focus on the agencies and organizations including researchers involved in 'helping' the stereotypical subjects/objects of research – sex workers, poor women and migrants.

Taking an ethnographic approach, Agustin tells the reader:

I did field work in order to gain information until now absent from most discussions of commercial sex, on the practices of social agents attempting to help people who sell sex . . . I wanted a theoretical space that would allow me to resist moralising as well as western cultures' claim that its values are best. (pp. 136–7)

The central thesis is that 'those declaring themselves to be helpers actively reproduce the marginalisation they condemn . . . social helpers consistently deny the

agency of large numbers of working-class migrants, in a range of theoretical and practical moves whose object is management and control: the exercise of governmentality' (pp. 5–6). Ultimately what this means, for Agustin, is that the class of women (and men) constructed as 'prostitutes' is perpetuated especially through mainstream discourses along with 'victim' identities imposed on 'prostitutes' in the name of helping them. Such discourses serve to feed into and support 'isolationist immigration policies' (p. 8).

Chapter 2 discusses theories of tourism and migration with a focus upon 'working to travel' and 'travelling to work' for the women, men and transgenders who leave home and travel to work in the 'personal and home services in Europe' (p. 11). The key message here is that people have two basic choices to enter Europe: either as tourists or as workers – with a job offer or 'official working papers in hand' (p. 27). For the undocumented, the intermediaries who 'sell information, services and documents' (p. 27) can facilitate entry with false passports, jobs and transportation. For those who work in the sex industry, research shows that the majority know they will be selling sex for money; some are deceived and taken advantage of via debt bondage and are made vulnerable and open to abuse. However, mainstream discourse differentiates between the general mass of undocumented workers and those who sell sex – defining those who arrive to sell sex as 'trafficked'. The trafficking discourse makes 'victims' of those caught under its rubric.

Victims become passive receptacles and mute sufferers who must be saved, and helpers become saviours, a colonialist operation warned against in discussions of western feminism's treatment of third world women and now common in discussions of migrant women who sell sex. (p. 39)

Agustin very clearly counters this unidirectional approach that denies women agency and defines them as caught up in forces beyond their control, as victims who need to be saved, by arguing that trafficking is a 'woefully inadequate way to conceptualise them' (pp. 47–8).

Chapter 3, 'A World of Services', highlights the range of services where migrant women are employed: housework; caring for the elderly and sick; marriage; providing sexual services as sex and fantasy workers. Contrary to the mainstream discourse that perpetuates the ideology of sex workers as 'damaged, drugged, and incapable of handling emotional relationships' (p. 63) through fragments of women's narratives, we get a sense of how the earning power, flexible working hours and multiple roles involved in selling sex are 'attractive to and empower many' (p. 63). And, in contrast to the systems that control prostitution (abolition, prohibition, regulation), the issue of labour rights and prostitution as service work that anyone of any age can offer or seek are discussed in relation to levels of identification with the latter approach. A very important point is made here – migrant workers' claims to self-organization and autonomy in the sex industry are undercut by their marginal and often undocumented status. The interests of migrants 'concentrating on accumulating as much money as they can as quickly as possible may conflict with the interests of Europeans who want to legitimise the industry' (p. 73). However, the economic power gained by working as a maid or prostitute in the receiving country may help to create a level of autonomy in social life impossible in the country of origin.

In order to understand how mainstream discourses emerged (and were countered in her fieldwork) Agustin looks towards the past and social history. In Chapters 4 ('The Rise of the Social – And of Prostitution') and 6 ('From Charity to Solidarity – In the Field with Helpers'), we get to the heart of the matter. The focus in these chapters is the construction of the category 'prostitute' and the rise of 'helping' professions aimed at eradicating prostitution. Bound up with the lived cultures of social class and the development and organization of 'work' for women – middle-class women were involved in saving poor and working-class women from a life of 'sin' and at the same time constructing roles and employment/work based upon helping and serving to support the bourgeois ideology of 'work' and acceptable 'femininity'.

For Agustin:

... the paradox is that the victim they constructed, who needed saving from her fate, already enjoyed a great deal of what middle class women desired: a looser concept of marriage, more access to public spaces; the right to enjoy common pleasures, and more varied and flexible jobs. (p. 127)

Drawing upon a range of historical scholarship, Agustin delineates the rise of the discourse surrounding the development of the category and fixed identity of the prostitute; and at the same time, the rise of helping projects:

... that isolated women, giving them a totally negative identity, and yet failed to achieve what reformers had set out to: the end of commercial sex, the eradication of poverty, the attempt to make women domestic, a regime of chastity rather than promiscuity, the prevention of women's entrance into increasingly 'unfeminine' job spheres. (pp. 127–8)

Agustin claims that the image of the prostitute as vile and disgusting was replaced by the image of the prostitute as a victim – a working-class woman – who needed rescuing.

Chapter 5 presents as a methodology chapter ('Methodology – A Delicate Silence') and speaks of the lack, the absence of knowledge and understanding of sex work in the migration literature in Spain. It is at this point that the book focuses upon Agustin's fieldwork in Spain. Spain, she writes, has a dearth of research and analysis on prostitution and this is in stark contrast to the media representation she describes as 'scandalised brouhaha' (p. 144). In this chapter, we get a sense of how the author came to the subject, the usefulness of fieldwork and 'studying up'; the usefulness of feminist standpoint theory and the author's 'shifting' position in the field as participant observer.

The methodology chapter is sandwiched between the two chapters I refer to earlier and indeed, it sits oddly here. For this reader, while I can understand the desire to frame Chapter 6 ('From Charity to Solidarity – In the Field with Helpers') with information about the methodology, I would prefer to be situated in the methodological frame at the outset, for it is in the methodology chapter, after being immersed in writing about largely European discourses, ideology and social history that 'belongs to a postcolonial framework' (p. 7), that we learn that the fieldwork is based totally in Spain. This felt incongruous and I was unprepared. I wanted more information about discourses and social history in Spain.

The final chapter ('Partial Truths') offers a glimmer of a way forward for those of us involved in what are clearly regimes of care and control marked by the construction of 'social problems' albeit for some through reflexive practice and critical analysis. For Agustin, moving forward means that helpers of many kinds should 'shed their certainty of knowing how everyone else should live, they might be able to dispense with neo-colonialism, admit agency can be expressed in a variety of ways, acknowledge their own desires, and accept that Europe's dynamic, changing, risky diversity is here to stay' (p. 104).

This is an extremely useful and well-written text and a strong intervention in and around debates in UK/Europe and beyond on two key fronts. First, as a counter voice to the current slippage from 'migrant sex work' to 'trafficking discourse' so apparent in the UK; this slippage clearly serves to undercut the possibilities of clear and reflexive analysis of the wider issues of migration. Second is the positioning of sex workers in discourses as 'Other' and 'Othered' and the vital need for women-centred research that provides the space for women's voices – and more than this, includes the stereotypical subjects of research as co-researchers (something I have argued and practised for 17 years now [see O'Neill, 2001, 2008]). While I agree with the importance of generating knowledge that challenges dominant regimes and takes a critical look at services and 'helping' agencies, I have long wanted to hear women's voices on the services.

The book also made me reflect on the many excellent projects I have had the privilege to work with in the UK and so I ask the author, is it always the case that helping projects 'benefit themselves rather than their less lucky sisters'? And, where there is power is there not also resistance? What are the ways and means in which helping projects manage, challenge and resist hegemonic discourses and the dynamics and regimes of care/control? Another way forward would be to further develop the research and take a critical comparative look at a range of helping organizations across Europe, including the UK.

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