

Agustín, Laura. (2005) Review of *The Politics of Prostitution*, J. Outshoorn, ed. *Labour/Le Travail*, 55, 313-315.

Outshoorn, Joyce, ed., *The Politics of Prostitution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004).

The subject of *The Politics of Prostitution* is not really prostitution politics. Instead, the research collected here seeks to answer the questions ‘Do women’s policy agencies matter?’ and ‘Is there such a thing as state feminism?’ The Research Network on Gender Politics and the State (RNGS) has been studying these questions since 1995 in ‘Western political democracies’; prostitution is only one of five issues which members have used to measure the impact of women’s movements for equality. By the term ‘women’s movements’, the researchers mean a range of organisations and groups, both grassroots and formal, which may or may not self-identify as feminist. By ‘women’s policy agencies’, they refer to government institutions which exist to advance women’s status in society. These definitions are key to appreciating the book.

Researchers in 12 countries (six in Europe plus Israel, Australia, Canada and the US) each chose three prostitution-related debates to be analysed according to the network’s method for measuring the impact of women’s movements since the early 1970s. To qualify for inclusion, the debates had to end in an ‘output’—a report, legislation or judicial decision. Although all chapters follow the same outline, they are not all equally strong. Some of the authors, like Barbara Sullivan of Australia, are long-time analysts of prostitution issues, while others are relatively new to them or unfamiliar with them in other contexts than their home-states. In the latter case, this sometimes means that they underestimated the importance of certain social actors while overestimating others. The chapter on Spain is an example, overly centred on Madrid and reads like a compendium of the opinions of current local actors in the field without a deeper knowledge of the context. The Dutch and Italian chapters, written by specialists in their own countries, are far more nuanced. Apart from these differences and the imposition of a rigorous writing format, all authors did not handle the material exactly the same way, either quantitatively or qualitatively.

Because of the repeated, fixed order of points and paragraphs and the masses of dates and agency names, the book cannot be a pleasurable read, but it may serve as a reference work for comparing periods and debates across national boundaries. The imposed methodology also marginalises numerous points mentioned in passing that one would like to know more about: feminism came late to Austria; a small grassroots prostitutes’ group was more important than the ‘women’s movement’ in Italy; there was no policy debate on prostitution *per se* in the US; racial issues were important and the activist voices of individual prostitutes influenced ‘femocrats’ in the Netherlands; the AIDS issue was influential in France and Austria. Much is unexplained, and we cannot draw the conclusion that racial issues were not important outside Holland or that AIDS was not outside France and Austria, since these appear as individual authors’ comments made outside the projects’ specific research questions. It is a shame that Germany was not a participant, since this country’s debates and solutions to sex-industry issues are among the most interesting in Europe.

The editor warns that the processing of the data risks ‘eliminating important cultural aspects’ of individual country politics. But nation-states provide the frame, rather than

cultures, and there is no engagement with possible cultural meanings. It is fascinating to compare the efforts of different national parliamentarians to define which commercial-sex activities should be permissible, which words should be used for which acts, and which kind of paid sex, provided by whom to whom, offends. Neighbouring countries in Europe, after all, have reached contrasting solutions to these questions during the same general period, so that, for example, indoor prostitution is currently forbidden in Italy and France while it is allowed in Spain. But, given the framework for the research, such material is neither explored by individual authors nor by the editor, since this did not form part of the research project. Yet for those interested in the subject itself—prostitution—such questions cannot help but be more compelling than the technical research question, and these readers cannot help wishing for an account of these differences. So, although outside the remit of the project, the lack of engagement may be felt as a frustration here.

The methodological framework requires the use of very general (and ultimately hegemonic) terms. By asking whether state feminism or women's policy agencies matter, by definition the research concentrates on formal, governmental actors and entities and downplays other elements and influences. The issue that repeatedly demonstrates this concerns the role of individual activists or subaltern groups, particularly vocal sex workers. For example, the UK chapter makes the common outsider error of imagining the English Collective of Prostitutes to be an important player in British prostitution politics and neglects other groups that advocated from the sex workers' perspective (PROS, SCOT-PEP, POW), also underestimating the weight behind the Europap-UK/UKNSWP alliance, which has been vocal on behalf of 60-70 different agencies in the past five years). The Canadian chapter mentions the participation of CORP in one early debate but fails to mention other groups that played a role in other debates (SWAV, Maggie's, RYPL). Herein lies the pitfall of this kind of research, for no matter how many definitions are agreed upon at the beginning, individual researchers and their informants will inevitably have differing opinions as to the importance of the contributions of one or another social actor. Other kinds of errors mar some of the chapters.

The researchers were required to judge if and how the debates they analyse became 'gendered' as a requirement for deciding the significance of women's movements. These sections are interesting, but the constructs 'woman' and 'women's movement' inevitably mute or erase the diversity of opinions among women themselves. Thus a debate may be classified as 'gendered', but it is arguable that conflicts *within* women's movements were sometimes more important than this gendering. Since these conflicts—about women's agency and the meaning of prostitution—have been particularly nettlesome in these debates, this merger is odd. Moreover, while activist sex workers' voices are sometimes noted, the book overlooks the fact they have rarely been *consulted* about policy issues by those attempting to legislate on their behalf and thus have often been pitted against women's movements that treat them as distant objects in debates. By focussing on the role of women's policy agencies and the extent to which *their* views were heard, the book elides the fundamental issue of representation—that many speaking in these debates presume to *speak on behalf of* women who do not become protagonists themselves.

The concluding chapter quantifies the evidence provided in the chapters and concludes that the hypothesis is proved: women's policy agencies have had a significant impact on

prostitution debates and thus the case is made that governments can effectively promote women's status. Those interested in the quantification of this kind of material may judge for themselves from the charts provided. Given the polemical quality of so many of the debates discussed, with individual women and groups arguing for different solutions, the project conclusion troublingly evades the question of whether gender is indeed the most important aspect of these debates or not.

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