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Sex Work and Sex Trafficking through Critical Eyes

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Nimmons Consulting, London, July 2018

Introduction

Prostitution, sex trafficking and child sexual exploitation are important contemporary crime challenges, exacerbated by globalisation, migration and economic disparity. They have been enabled and amplified by recent technological advance, and yet are rooted in the earliest histories of human civilisation. The post-Marxian theorists of the Frankfurt school heavily influenced intellectual thought throughout the 20th century. Their critical theory is lauded a cornerstone of emancipatory social reconstruction, challenging the hegemony and normative values of the patriarchal, Judeo-Christian west. Critical theory provides useful lenses through which to view and dissect criminological challenges (van Swaaningen, 1997, pp. 74-107), be that through traditional Marxian theories of religion, economics and class to contemporary feminism, post-colonialism, gender and identity politics. In examining the utility of

Page 1 of 16

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critical theory, the illegal sex industry is discussed thematically using five categories. The first category considers the role of sex workers, with agency, autonomy and informed choice (Grant, 2014, pp. 13-25). The second considers dependence factors such as drug and alcohol addiction, pimps and economic coercion, poverty and the grotesqueness of 'sex for aid' (Landale and O'Dowd, 2018). The third considers trafficking and sexual enslavement (Sanghera, 2016), the import/export business of female exploitation. The fourth considers sexual tourism and the virginity trade (Haworth, 2014). The fifth considers the role of critical theory in constructing the threat, exploring its potential complicity in overturning moral, religious, family and other foundational social norms. The role of the 'rescue industry' is examined and the paradoxes of emancipation explored from different viewpoints.

The Frankfurt School was an interdisciplinary group of Judeo-German intellectuals founded in Frankfurt in the 1920s. Among its principal members were Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse. The group's foundations were Marxist. As the inter-war period saw economic depression and strife across western economies it did not (as Marx predicted and they expected) manifest a global workers' revolution. By contrast, and to their chagrin, it provided



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succour to European Fascism. The Frankfurt school reappraised Marxist economic theory, believing that conscious and unconscious sedation by dominant ideologies, narratives and culture had suppressed revolutionary potential (Felluga, 2015). In their new critical approach, they examined ideology, culture and art seeking to awaken revolutionary consciousness by challenging cultural and sociological norms (Adorno, 2001, pp. 98-106). They extended Marxist thought and sought to unify it with the psychological theories of Freud (Marcuse, 2005, pp. 106-128). Leading figures in the school (particularly Marcuse and Adorno) were lionised by the left-wing student movements of the 1960s as the grandfathers of intellectual radicalism (Briggs, 1979).

In thematically assessing the illegal sex industry it is useful to begin by considering agency, choice, control, social acceptance and legitimisation of some aspects of sex work. A prostitute in charge of working conditions, hours, remuneration, location, sexual services and a right to refuse might be cast as entrepreneur and willing participant in the contemporary pleasure industry. They are however in the UK excluded from regularised or regulated employment, part of the shadow economy, dealing in cash and anonymity. Risks to prostitutes include rape (sometimes gang



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rape), physical assault, robbery and even murder. Their rights and access to criminal justice may be subordinated as they are treated as social detritus, an immoral and undeserving underclass. Applying a critical approach gives rise to several questions, for example: is commercialisation and commodification of the self the ultimate in capitalistic perversity? Are prostitutes willing participants in their own dehumanisation and degradation? Are they traitors or martyrs to class and gender politics? Are they reduced to crime statistics, disease vectors (Lindquist and Piper, 2007) and marionettes of moral panic (Cricher, 2003, pp. 33-46)? Have they been failed by social construction that medicates avarice and self-loathing with fast money?

Schisms within the feminist movement highlight the dichotomy (Suchland, 2015, pp. 29-52). The boundaries of agency and sexual emancipation are contested. Whether by liberal feminist or paternalist society, the rescue of the prostitute from vice and moral corruption may appear selfless and philanthropic. Yet emancipatory theory must itself be evaluated critically. What is emancipation? Who is being emancipated and from what (Fromm, 1994, pp. 23-38)? How is our understanding of repression



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constructed? The intrinsic relentless of critical questioning enriches discourse, challenges traditional understanding and gives rise to new intellectual theory.

The second category of the thematic assessment considers the point of lesser agency (Jeffreys, 2012), namely prostitution as a means of funding drug addiction, the role of pimps and other parasitical actors that live off the income of prostitutes. In this category there is a distinct loss of agency, sex work may still be consensual, but the nature and quality of consent may be highly degraded by drug addiction or factors such as extreme poverty or need (Raphael, 2012). The symbiotic or exploitative relationship between pimp (perhaps also boyfriend) and prostitute illustrates key issues of gender roles, and the dualism of protection and predation. The marketability of drug addicted street prostitutes may be very low, with sex sold at extremely low prices. Desperation may well amplify degradation with low pricing reinforcing the prostitute's sense of low self-worth. Any promise of Marxist egalitarianism is dead in this conception. The pimp exercises control over the mode of production (the prostitute's body), which is consumed by customers seeking to drive prices lower and customise services to their (perhaps risky and deviant) desires. The stratification of sex work becomes apparent, with the entrepreneurial



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executive prostitute perhaps viewing the street worker as a victim or sub-proletarian. In this sense, critical theory raises points such as: the links between criminalisation of drugs and ensnarement of female addicts in prostitution; the stratification of sex work; and the economics of low and high-end sex markets.

Shocking examples of charity workers trading 'aid for sex' (Dearden, 2018) raise profound ethical and moral questions. Desperation, be it from drug addiction or profound dispossession, provides opportunity for exploitation. Post-colonialism as a critical theory provides useful concepts, applicable in international development, disaster relief and conflict studies. As such, the perversion of the errant aid worker could be considered analogous to the exploitative colonial master. The promise of emancipation and freedom for the dispossessed is betrayed by a degenerate few masquerading as liberationists. Expecting humanitarian assistance to be repaid in sexual services is profoundly debasing and raises questions about the supremacist attitudes through which it is countenanced.

The third category considers the role of sex trafficking. Criminal patterns include the deception of young girls into travelling to central European cities, enticed by false promises of legitimate employment in the service sector (Kara, 2017, pp. 5-44). Sex



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trafficking may be less risky for criminals than drug smuggling, and commoditised, girls can be repeatedly consumed, monetised and re-sold. They are trafficked (as selected examples) from Eastern Europe and South Asia often by organised criminal gangs, themselves having migrated in the post-cold-war period, particularly from Albania, Romania (Mai, 2010, pp. 10-17) and other former soviet bloc countries. Grooming and trafficking of troubled young girls, be they run-aways or in the state care system has been widely publicised in the UK through criminal prosecutions of gangs in Rotherham (Jay, 2014) and Rochdale.

Sex trafficking and modern slavery signal a complete loss of agency on the part of the girls. They are portrayed working in appalling conditions, being forced to have sex with dozens of clients per day with little or no access to healthcare and loss of basic human dignity. The media narrates lives controlled by debt, physical and psychological threats to girls and their families abroad. Critically assessing the media raises questions about the source and veracity of these narratives and helps disentangle issues such as migrants willingly selling sex (Augustin, 2008, pp. 10-52), from true enslavement of sexual trafficking. Moral panics and the castigation of certain social groups (such as Asian men) may arise through lazy stereotyping and



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critical theory offers countermeasures to help unmask hyperbolic and sensationalist story telling.

The fourth category examines sex tourism (Jeffreys, 2013) and the virginity trade. Sex tourism, legal prostitution and liberal attitudes to sex work in Germany (SPIEGEL Staff, 2013), the Netherlands and Czech Republic raises questions about social attitudes and perceptions of 'prostitution as harm'. Juxtaposing legal European pleasure seeking with (for example) the sex industries in Thailand, Cambodia or the Philippines surfaces interesting tensions (Samarasinghe, 2009, pp. 89-162). In South Asia, with differing legal models, very young girls are exploited, and their pathway into prostitution likely driven by poor life chances (Chin and Finckenauer, 2012, pp. 209-211). The dream of acquiring a foreign husband may be an additional draw into the bars of Bangkok and Pattaya. With some parallels to the errant aid worker, the western sex tourist appears powerful, wealthy and urbane. Fantasies of luxurious western living and the economic power of the post-colonial traveller cede kingship to the buyer. Money arguably replaces manhood. The role of policing and other state institutions can be drawn into question, particularly where corrupt police are complicit



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in facilitation of prostitution, through protection of westerners, vice dens or even as the girl's clients.

Parental complicity (or ambivalence) in their daughters' participation in the sex trades in South Asia raises further questions. Westerners domiciled in Thailand and Cambodia have been known to take extremely young female 'partners', often with the knowledge or tacit approval of the girl's parents. Promises of financial support, schooling, future marriage, or simply temporary relief from selling sex elsewhere may be incentives. Examining the construction of normative social values, differing cultures, the western utopian fantasy and the economics of survival, can, through critical lenses, provide fresh insight.

Perhaps the ultimate betrayal is parental complicity in virginity trading. With fears of sexually transmitted disease including HIV, some customers will pay premium rates for the virginity of young girls. These girls are subsequently sold on to brothels, where they are commercially devalued with each sexual transaction. This chilling trend raises questions about conceptualisations of human value and purity, particularly in honour cultures, where girls are condemned to prostitution, ill-health and likely early death. In the Colombian barrios (Bargent, 2013), gangs are also



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offering the virginity of kidnapped girls as they adapt and diversify their formerly drug centric 'business models.'

The fifth and last theme to be considered is the role of critical theory itself in the construction of prostitution, trafficking and child sexual exploitation threats. Critical theory and its derivatives are not passive intellectual theories. Rather, as post-Marxian radical ideologies they motivate revolutionary action and demand and drive social upheaval. In understanding the contemporary challenge of illegal sex work, questions are raised as to the complicity of critical theory in propagating Marxist counter-religious, counter-traditional concepts. It could be argued that declining religious adherence, radical sexual liberation, hedonism, the new left (Marcuse, 1972, pp. 1-57) and new wave libertines have constructed societies in which prostitution is validated as a counter-cultural good.

An untiring critique of culture, gender, identity, class, race, power and resource distribution may simply validate the warped moral relativism of the predatory sex tourist. If all is relative, then what is there to deny the satiation of sexual desire through the commoditisation and commercialisation of the other? Indeed, manifesting regime change through subversion or invasion carries a high



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responsibility. Critical theory as agent provocateur is adept at creating disharmony and dissatisfaction with established norms. It has been criticised for gagging free speech, shutting down intellectual debate running counter to its post-Marxian ideals. It is important therefore to question the degrees to which critical theory is coherent and constructive, deleterious, intellectually totalitarian and even cultish (Walsh, 2017, pp. 1-8).

Conclusion

In conclusion, critical theory provides useful concepts and tools to widen analytical thinking, assisting in the dissection and delamination of contemporary crime challenges. By briefly examining the illegal sex trade, the utility of critical approaches to gender studies, feminism, media studies, post-colonialism, security and criminology were introduced. These transcended traditional Marxist class and economic theories, building on the work promulgated by the Frankfurt School from the 1920s through the late 1960s. The importance of the Frankfurt School is recognisable through its impact on western intellectualism and the New Left. Naturally, critical theory has its detractors. The propensity of critical theory devotees to invoke claims of supremacism, racism and chauvinism against centrist or 'new



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right' thinkers has led to allegations that it subverts free speech and free thought. The relentless intellectual restlessness of critical theory is perhaps its greatest attribute. In challenging received wisdom and sociological norms, it can usefully uncover biases, tropes and other unhelpful preconceptions. Whether it truly promotes intellectual coherence is debatable. Its constant challenging of identity and even linguistic definitions may widen its analytical processes to the point of collapsing utility. As a tool of emancipation, its pragmatism must also be questioned, particularly given the scale and immediacy of challenge in safe-guarding women and young girls from global sexual predation.



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