Review: Sin in the Suburbs: Nevada's Changing Brothel Industry

Reviewed Work(s): The State of Sex: Tourism, Sex and Sin in the New American Heartland by Barbara G. Brents, Crystal A. Jackson and Kathryn Hausbeck

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BOOK REVIEWS

Sin in the Suburbs: Nevada's Changing Brothel Industry

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, NY: Routledge, 2009, 320 pages. Paperback, $28.76.

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The State of Sex is the most comprehensive analysis of the Nevada brothel industry ever written and a must-have for scholars of sex work. Barbara G. Brents, Crystal A. Jackson, and Kathryn Hausbeck have written a solid work of mainstream sociology that is engagingly written, impeccably researched, and implausibly comprehensive. Empirically, the book is a mixed-methods masterwork, encompassing participant observation in brothels and at public hearings, interviews with brothel owners and workers, a detailed history of the rise of Nevada's legal brothels, the politics of their administration, and recent transformations of their business model. The book is disappointingly devoid of theorizing, but the depth of its data makes *The State of Sex* a solid text for scholars of sex tourism, Nevada's unique sexual politics, the quotidian ironies of licensing prostitutes; and for all other interested readers, this is a good read.

The authors' detailed history lays bare the winding formation of Nevada's system of local control, whereby all but the two most populous counties (containing Las Vegas and Reno) have the option to permit or prohibit brothels. The authors attribute this pragmatic frontier morality to Nevada's long economic dependence on tourism. As an oasis of legalized prostitution in the American desert of criminalization, it also represents the world's only system of enforced *rural* prostitution. The small hamlets that host brothels often relegate them to their outskirts, where they bear less resemblance to Las Vegas's architectural confections than to the truck stops or dusty compounds of manufactured homes that they are.

The authors break new ground when they discuss the recent shift toward lavish suburban brothels. Entrepreneurs have fashioned fantasy worlds in these newer facilities that cater to more upscale clientele, combining sexual services with sports bars and spa treatments. The authors' interpretation of these changes is not convincing, citing a working-class masculinity that "is slowly giving way to a masculinity that relies on consumption to form identity" (p. 227). This analysis only superficially engages with contemporary scholarship on masculinity, however, so the evidence is as inconclusive as it is provocative. In performing their masculinity, are men actually consuming more, or are they consuming *differently?* Are the brothels actually becoming more mainstream, or are they merely responding to a changing consumer base, especially the explosive growth in Las Vegas's suburbs?

Impeccably detailed is their depiction of the actual work of brothel women in a way that recalls Robin Leidner's (1993) *Fast Food, Fast Talk.* In eponymous chapters we learn "The Business of Selling Sex," "Paths to Brothel Work," and "Brothel Labor: Making Fantasies at Work." *The State of Sex* adds to our understanding of the brothels' impressive record of sexual health first described by Alexa Albert (2001), whose *Brothel* explained how the legalization system managed such low rates of sexually transmitted diseases and no documented cases of HIV transmission. The brothel system also contributes to worker safety as well—a significant selling point for the industry for its workers, offering women who often work alone a place to work with others that is also free from the threat of police raids or violent clients.

The authors' contribution to theorizing sex work is their distinction of three ways by which sex workers deploy their labor: body practices, caring practices, and holistic practices. Brents et al. do a good job of grounding each of these ideal-typical practices in the political economics of the industry. If the content of these categories is familiar to avid readers of sex work research, the categories may surprise newcomers to the field with the ways in which these different meanings sustain women doing similar work.

What comes through in all its gritty detail is the uniqueness of Nevada's political culture: its fierce Western independence and proud provincialism that stands suspicious of outsiders, despite chronic dependence on federally funded projects to keep the state economy afloat. The authors document how the shift toward corporate ownership by outsiders (or "squares") actually guarantees that locals are hired for management positions to ensure good community relations. Local managers reproduce the comfortable sexual norms that are racist, homophobic, and traditionally gendered. The authors imply that we are all implicated in these social forces as much as the brothels when they

argue that "identifying the sex industry as the origin of gender and sexual inequality relieves the general population of any accountability for being part of the problem" (p. 228).

Theoretically, the book offers only hazy invocations of abstract concepts, with its analytical contributions stashed in the empirical chapter 6, rather than deployed in the introduction to organize the empirical contributions. Far from a *laissez-faire* sexual Disneyland, Nevada's system is obsessed with deliberately ambiguous tactics of surveillance, containment, and the enforcement of a curtailed sex worker citizenship that is sharply set apart from the community. *The State of Sex* manages to describe this fascinating Foucaultian system without *any* reference to Foucault or his many feminist critics and heirs. As fictional Old West brothel Madam and feminist activist Ida Richelieu would say, "Oh! The humanity!" (Spanbauer, 1991).

The authors fail in their attempt to frame the singularity of the case of Nevada in terms of broader social trends in their claim that "in the new American heartland, the social relations and institutions that drive the sex industry in Nevada are increasingly vital to the rest of the nation" (p. 223). Anyone familiar with *The McDonaldization of Society* (Ritzer, 1993) or *The Huffington Post* (see www.huffingtonpost.com) will be familiar with the laundry list of social forces Brents et al. cite in chapter 2: global capital, neoliberal politics, temporary labor contracts, the rise of service work, and transformations in contemporary gender relations. While these forces are undeniable, the relationship between the Nevada case and the rest of America is anchored merely by the insistence that Nevada is America's heartland—a claim belied by the authors' own history of the state as a tourist escape. A more historically nuanced discussion of markets and morality is provided by Viviana Zelizer (2007), who argued that we have always used economic relations to manage intimacy. Her work suggests, contra Brents et al. (pp. 228–229), that prostitution is less telling of the market for intimacy than the pocket change we spend everyday.

The data in *The State of Sex,* while rich and groundbreaking, are likewise too narrow to provide analytical traction to explain how abstract "demographic, social and economic changes have affected what happens inside Nevada's brothels" (p. 224). When Brents et al. conclude that Nevada's regime "may not easily transfer" to other jurisdictions (p. 233), stronger language seems warranted. The uniqueness of Nevada is clear and explains its differences from other legalized prostitution, as in the Netherlands, or sites of sex worker activism, such as San Francisco (with international ground covered masterfully by Bernstein, 2007). A more convincing tack would have been to frame Nevada not as an extreme example, but as the exception that proves the rule, in the way that an oasis dramatizes what the desert is *not*.

The authors do convincingly accomplish this when they demonstrate that the brothels "expose the specialness of sex as something socially constructed... the authenticity of sex as 'natural' is challenged by the very existence of legal brothels" (p. 230). Brents et al. could have sifted their main findings to make a stronger case that Nevada brothel prostitution is not libertarian, but inherently conservative. Their data show it is organized around making money from outsider clients, using outsider women with curtailed mobility. The environment is explicitly structured to reproduce a traditionally gendered and racist heterosexuality. Such an account would make more of their abundant evidence that it is the state itself—not norms or globalization or transformations in masculinity—that allow the industry to flourish. Industrial vice, tamed by conservative legislation, is what distinguishes Nevada from the illiberal American hunger for prostitution scandals and tragic hooker tales. The authors make stronger claims like these in their illuminating contribution to Ron Weitzer's (2009) excellent revised edition of *Sex for Sale*.

Nonetheless, *The State of Sex* is a welcome empirical respite from the pitched battles waged over the meanings of prostitution among feminists, researchers, ideologues, and quasi-scientists (explored by Agustin, 2007 and named, blamed, or shamed by Weitzer, 2009). The authors go to great lengths to contextualize their findings that there is no evidence for coercion or exploitation "beyond what one might see in many workplaces" (p. 227). With this book, Brents et al. have burnished their credentials as empiricist feminist sociologists of the first order. Their conclusions, succinctly stated and impeccably detailed, join a solid preponderance of evidence that, with prostitution, "it is rarely the work, in and of itself, that is good or bad for workers, but rather the social contexts, conditions of labor, and individual resources and control that matter" (p. 179). If this places them squarely within the mainstream of sociological research on a hot topic, it will leave theorists of the queer, feminist, and critical camps exclaiming that it is only a dry heat. But, deserts must first be surveyed. Here is a comprehensive and systematic study of a singular sexual ecology.

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The Cultivation of Sexual Violence inside Prison Walls

The Myth of Prison Rape: Sexual Culture in American Prisons. By Mark S. Fleisher and Jessie L. Krienert. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009, 218 pages. Cloth, $75.00.

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Looking for dry prevalence rates of prison rape? You will not find it in *The Myth of Prison Rape.* Instead, this unique book offers a solid glimpse into inmate sexual culture. "Myth" in this case does not mean that rape is nonexistent; rather, the myth of prison rape is decades' worth of symbolic prison tales of sexual violence, some true and others false, retold and shared by inmates across the nation.

Fleisher and Krienert combine their criminal justice and research backgrounds to explore the meaning of rape and sexuality inside American prisons from the inmate's perspective. With the help of former inmates, they carefully assembled a "theoretically grounded interview instrument" to collect cultural information about prison sexuality. They then gathered a systematic sample of 564 inmates from 30 prisons (23 male and 7 female) across the nation and completed in-depth interviews regarding male and female inmates' perceptions of sexuality and rape. The amount of data is impressive, and the book is filled with rich and insightful excerpts from the interviews.

Recent interpretations of prison sexuality and rape only begin to touch the surface of what Fleisher and Krienert observe and call the "myth of prison rape" in which dialogue among inmates over sexual violence creates a sense of uneasiness, leading them to overestimate the prevalence of prison rape. For this and other reasons, estimating rape rates inside prisons is difficult. Fleisher and Krienert instead study sexual culture, providing a different angle from which to understand sexuality and rape inside prisons.

The majority of the text discusses a variety of aspects related to prison sexuality, all from the perspective of the inmates, including undergoing "prisonization," different sexual roles and sexual cultures, what it means to be a victim or rapist, how inmates protect themselves, and prison safety in general. For a reader with no background in prison cultural studies, reading this information can be a challenge at times simply because the prison logic is so different from the logic of free society. Outside prison, rape is defined as nonconsensual, forced sex. Inside prison, however, the authors illustrate that sex—let alone rape—has different meanings and implications. What free society defines as "rape" is often called "sex" in the sexual culture shared by inmates. The authors explain that inmates' reasoning in determining if an act is rape depends on context. For example, in men's prisons, if the "victim" was in debt, the "rapist" may demand sex as repayment. Prison sexual culture does not view such an instance as rape; rather, the "victim" did not handle the debt properly and, thus, "got what he deserved." Most cases of what free society would call rape are a result of negative interactions between the "victim" and "rapist," leading to negative outcomes (i.e., rape) for which prison sexual culture has no sympathy. Fleisher and Krienert conclude that such negative outcomes are, nevertheless, rare—a finding also supported by previous research.

The Myth of Prison Rape is largely successful because the discussion of the dynamics of prison sexual culture is guaranteed to keep the reader interested. However, at times, this can also be a weakness of the work, as a full description of the culture would require much more space than the authors can devote. For example, chapter 5 is an ambitious attempt to condense into a short summary this already-confusing prison sexual culture. There are a few places in the chapter where the authors could have better explained and analyzed inmate sexual roles or narratives to alleviate any confusion about the differences between prison culture and free society.

Another weakness is that there is very little analysis of women inmates and sexual culture within women's prisons. While they mention how little research examines gender differences in prison sexuality, the authors discuss male inmate sexual culture much more often than female culture. A chapter highlighting gender differences or how the rape myth might differ between men's and women's prisons would have been a great addition.

The Myth of Prison Rape is a major contribution to the existing literature on prison sexuality and, more specifically, to the sexual culture surrounding rape inside prisons. It contains very rich data, and is more than useful for those who are interested in studying subcultural norms or how sexual culture can shift entirely once an inmate enters prison. It is a fairly easy read and, for the most part, the authors do a great job explaining the material.

This book is appropriate for faculty and students interested in prison sexual culture, prison administrators, and staff. Mass media journalists reporting on sexuality and rape inside prisons should first refer to this study, as many stereotypes of prison rape start in the media. Finally, although they may not have access to this book, it could benefit inmates and those sentenced to spend time in prison, as the book may serve as a useful guide to navigating a complex culture.
