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Review: The Global Political Economy of Sex

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Anna M. Agathangelou, *The Global Political Economy of Sex: Desire, Violence, and Insecurity in Mediterranean Nation States*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, 226 pages.

Review by Silvia Federici, Hofstra University

As a growing body of literature has documented, one of the most important effects of the process of economic and political globalization has been a massive increase in transnational migratory movements which, for the first time, register a high presence of women leaving their countries independently instead of following their husbands or other family members, as had generally been the practice in earlier times. It is now calculated that, since the 1980s, millions of women have migrated from Asia, Africa, Latin America, or the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe, directed towards more affluent regions where their main forms of employment have been limited to domestic work or work in the sex and entertainment industries.

This phenomenon has been the object of many studies, but, as Anna Agathangelou points out, it is not often recognized that what is at stake is an international restructuring of social reproduction and reproductive labor. To study this restructuring -- the political, economic, and cultural factors that shape and motivate it, the new power relations resulting from it, all considered with particular reference to the globalized economies of Greece, Cyprus and Turkey-- is the main aim of her work.

At the same time, the book is a critique of the liberal, "masculine" framework typical of International Relations scholarship and International Political Economy which she faults for describing the present forms of female migration and the forms of employment women find in the countries of destination as the result of market forces and individual choices. As she points out, this "rational economic man model" conceals the structural constraints and the political-economic interests by which the decisions of female migrants are shaped, and makes invisible the exploitation of their labor. In contrast, her analysis of the global political economy of sex seeks to establish that female migration is the intentional consequence of precise international economic policies and to identify those who benefit from it.

However, the theoretical perspective Agathangelou brings to her task --a mixture of Marxism, feminism and post-colonial theory-- is also problematic, as she fails to address the tensions existing between these different frameworks, and uses them in a way often inconsistent with their logical requirements.

Typical of this inconsistency is her analysis of the social forces that motivate female migration and the treatment of female migrants in what she defines as the periphery of the European Union. Repeatedly, she stresses that the quest for cheap labor is the driving force of globalization and the logic of capital accumulation. She also analyses -- in what is one of the best parts of her

work-- the all-important role of the state as the mediator of the relations between capital and migrant workers. Against the liberal view of the state as a neutral agent, she demonstrates how, through immigration policies and the imposition of special labor contracts, the state contributes to cut the cost of immigrant labor, and ensures that female immigrants are hostages of their employers, kept in a position of servitude and maximum vulnerability. She further points out a seeming contradiction generated by globalization. Dependence on foreign labor heightens the state's concern for national security, leading to its definition of immigrant workers as a national threat, a policy resulting in their further marginalization and their inability to demand protection against abuse.

In sum, Agathangelou describes a situation in which, in the pursuit of profit and capital accumulation, state and employers collude to create a situation of systemic violence against immigrant women, functioning to cut the cost of their labor and enforce their subordination, thus falsifying the myth that slavery and coercion are things of the past.

At the same time, Agathangelou also claims that the main factor motivating the import of female immigrants for labor is the desire of the peripheral states and ruling classes of Greece, Turkey and Cyprus to integrate themselves in the global economy, and gain recognition and equal status with the dominant countries of the European Union, or, as she puts it, to "whiten themselves." What analytical possibilities are lost, from a Marxist viewpoint, in the shift from "class interest" to "desire" is a question Agathangelou does not ask. She criticizes Deleuze and Guattari for positing desire as an autonomous force and insists that it is historically constructed. But her pervasive use of the term -- the sex industry too is unaccountably defined by her as the "desire industry"-- certainly introduces a different discourse in which the Marxist categories cease to operate.

Agathangelou also fails to provide some evidence that her racialization of the relations between the ruling classes of Greece, Cyprus and Turkey and the ruling classes of the dominant EU countries is appropriate. In fact, her position seems to be that every power relation can be racialized. Thus, not only are the ruling classes of Greece, Turkey and Cyprus always referred to as "white not quite," but so are the Eastern European sex workers operating in these countries. This move, however, has the effect of leveling racial hierarchies and undermines her otherwise effective critique of how racism contributes to the exploitation of domestic workers and sex workers. She shows, in fact, that not only are racial biases and stereotypes a constant element of the public and private discussion about immigrant women, but a division of reproductive labor along racial lines has taken shape in Greece, Turkey and Cyprus whereby women of color, for example from Sri Lanka or the Philippines, are deemed fit only to do domestic work, whereas the "white not quite" women from Eastern Europe are preferred as sexual partners.

Theoretical inconsistencies are not the only problem with *The Global Economy of Sex*. The book is often unnecessarily repetitive making the reading at times difficult to follow. Some of the key concepts used, as already mentioned, are not accounted for--an outstanding example being the notion of a "peripheral" state which is made to include Greece, Turkey and Cyprus as well as

every other "Third World country." Feminist readers in particular would wish that Agathangelou had addressed some of the debates that have been dividing them on the question of sex trafficking, and the potentially negative effects for immigrant rights of the new anti-trafficking legislation introduced by the EU with the Palermo Protocol of 2000-2001.

However, this is an important book that should be recommended for graduate courses in gender studies, political economy and international relations. In addition to providing detailed information about female migration and the reorganization of reproductive labor in countries that have been understudied, it is an effort to break with the schemes of academic scholarship and provide an analysis that is at the same time a demand and a proposal for social change. Moreover, the book refuses to treat the women it discusses as victims, demonstrating how, through their struggles, they are already constituting a transnational movement capable of organizing forms of mutual support and subverting the divisions erected among workers through national borders and nationalistic ideologies. Its analysis is also supported by a large number of interviews with immigrant women, employers and public officials. Their combined effect clearly demonstrates the brutalization of social relations produced by the neo-liberal ideology, which proclaims that every person with money to exchange has the right to the unlimited consumption of other people. It also demonstrates that slavery is structurally inscribed in the process of globalization and capital accumulation. And it raises an issue that is crucial for the future of the feminist movement(s): that of the class divisions among women, and women's exploitation of other women's labor.