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Book Review | Legalizing Prostitution: From Illicit Vice to Lawful Business

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Ronald Weitzer. *Legalizing Prostitution: From Illicit Vice to Lawful Business*. NYU Press, 2012; 284 pp.; ISBN: 9780814794647.

Dr. Ronald Weitzer is considered an expert on the sex industry, having studied prostitution for over a decade. In his latest book, *Legalizing Prostitution: From Illicit Vice to Lawful Business*, Weitzer provides a comprehensive examination of the myriad dimensions of sex work by drawing on both past research and his own ethnographic field work. Not only does he shatter prostitution myths by using empirical data, but also offers an alternative paradigm for understanding sex work that is theoretically grounded. In addition, he casts a critical eye on prostitution policies in the United States and proposes a “best practices” approach to legalized prostitution, one that encourages harm reduction through standards and regulation.

The book is logically organized into three parts. In Part I, Weitzer introduces the topic of sex work by outlining various aspects of the sex industry and discussing research findings on prostitution. In Chapter 1, he provides a definition of sex work as “the exchange of sexual services for material compensation as well as the selling of erotic performances or products,” and notes that the sex industry includes “workers, managers, owners, marketers, agencies, clubs, and trade associations involved in sexual commerce, both legal and illegal varieties” (p. 3). Although the sex industry is lucrative in Western countries, engaging in sex work continues to be stigmatized, and workers are marginalized. Prostitution remains taboo among the public and controversial among scholars, as opposing paradigms compete for dominance. The author identifies these paradigms as empowerment and oppression, while offering a third alternative to understanding prostitution.

Under the empowerment paradigm, prostitution is viewed as one type of service work that not only provides an income but also may serve to empower sex workers, due to having more control over one’s body and working conditions. On the other hand, supporters of the oppression paradigm contend that sex work “perpetuates inequality both symbolically and instrumentally” through the objectification and commodification of women’s bodies (p. 10). Furthermore, anti-prostitution activists maintain that sex work should be eliminated because “exploitation, subjugation, and violence are intrinsic to and ineradicable from sex work—transcending historical time period, national context, and type of sexual commerce” (p. 11).

Weitzer argues that both paradigms fail to acknowledge the nuances of sex work, as well as the research findings that contradict their claims (e.g. counter-evidence that prostitutes enter the profession as adults and have low rates of childhood sexual abuse/victimization). For that reason, the author offers an alternative model for understanding prostitution. The *polymorphous paradigm* is “sensitive to complexities and to the structural conditions shaping sex work along a continuum of

agency and subordination” (p. 16). The author’s proposed paradigm is a modified version of Symanski’s (1981) typology of prostitution: the exploitation of sex workers and the impact of the sex industry on the community varies among the different types of sex work. Along the continuum, street prostitution is characterized by high exploitation and an adverse impact on the community, due to the accompanying social problems which include drug use and crime. Weitzer asserts that the prostitution myths perpetuated by anti-prostitution activists, politicians, and the media highlight this type of sex work. Chapter 2 is devoted to debunking these myths using data gathered from around the world on the differences between street and indoor prostitution.

In Part II of the book, Weitzer presents the prostitution policies in the United States, noting that similar to other crimes, the trend has become more repressive and punitive. In public opinion polls, the majority of Americans do not support the legalization of prostitution and in jurisdictions where ballot initiatives have been introduced to decriminalize sex work, all have failed to pass. While acknowledging that public opinion matters, Weitzer also highlights his concerns with blanket criminalization. For that reason, he proposes a two-track policy based on a British model where the vast resources spent on closing indoor sex work operations (as long as they are consensual) should be diverted to reducing street prostitution. However, rather than adopt a strictly punitive approach, the focus should be on protecting sex workers from violent victimization and providing them with services and the support necessary to leave prostitution. In the final chapter of Part II, the author examines legal prostitution systems in Nevada and other countries, highlighting some of the challenges each jurisdiction faced after legalizing prostitution.

The last part of the book is devoted to case studies of three major cities in northern Europe with red-light districts (RLD): Antwerp, Belgium; Frankfurt, Germany; and Amsterdam, Netherlands. Weitzer defined an RLD as “an area where sexually oriented businesses are clustered and publicly visible and does not include areas where prostitution is confined to street-level transactions” (p. 106). In this section, Weitzer presents the findings from his extensive field work combined with data from other sources, including newspaper articles, surveys, and client postings on Internet discussion boards. He observed transactions in all locations and interviewed key players in the sex industry. This data is supplemented with photos of the RLD in each city, as well as rich descriptions of the surrounding geographical area and sexual landscape.

Weitzer concludes the book by proposing standards for legalizing prostitution based on the idea that “consensual adult prostitution be officially recognized as work and that participants be accorded the rights and protections available to those involved in other occupations” (p. 207). These standards involve issues concerning five areas: visibility, eligibility, health, safety, and rights. The suggestions offered were gleaned from the “best practices” of the legal prostitution systems, and focus on protecting both sex workers and the surrounding community from the impact of the industry.

In summary, Weitzer provides an in-depth examination of legalized prostitution systems, while also proposing a new paradigm for understanding sex work. Students in the areas of both criminal justice and sociology would benefit from reading this book, because it highlights problems with how we conceptualize sex work and how that impacts criminal justice policies. The book may not be without controversy, however, since Weitzer is critical of anti-prostitution activists who push their agenda by offering sensationalized images of prostitution and highlighting the worst cases. In spite of this, he makes a strong case that the liberalization of prostitution is desirable and possible at the local level in the United States.

References

Symanski, R. (1981). *The immoral landscape*. Toronto, Canada: Buttersworth.