

Fantasies of White Sexual Slavery: How Our Nation's History of Sexual Oppression Is Still With Us

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For anyone willing to look right in the face of America's sexual repression, sexist assumptions, and racist fears, *Policing Sexuality: The Mann Act and The Making of the FBI* by Jessica R. Piiley, is at once a magnifying glass and flashlight. It is an indispensable history of all the American anxieties, hang ups, and priggish obsessions in one neat, little package.

Piiley is a Women's History Professor at Texas State University, and she writes with the predictable detachment of most academics. Her linguistic restraint is likely the result of Olympian self-discipline, given the sheer insanity of what she summarizes and scrutinizes in *Policing Sexuality*.

In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, prostitution was not only legal in America, but widely available in any major city, and even most small cities. Piiley writes that, at that point in American history, "women's citizenship was defined through her sexual contract with her husband (the marriage contract), and U.S. policy towards women generally emphasized women's reproductive service to the nation."

Prostitution, as historian Thaddues Russell often explains, was actually the first model of independent, even feminist, citizenship and life in the United States. Many prostitutes lived according to their own income and accord, wore makeup, and eventually became business owners.

Because it was subversive to the subservience of women to men, and because of its obvious violation of strict social and sexual mores, prostitution became the target of a religious and progressive reformer campaign for regulation, and later, criminalization. The alignment of religious conservatives and feminist liberals on issues of sexual policing is one of the most fascinating stories in American history and contemporary politics. It is one, however, that most people refuse to acknowledge. Piiley's piles of evidence make it impossible to ignore.

Suffragists and "social hygienists", whether motivated by Christianity or paternalist "protection" of young women, used a crowbar to enter into mainstream discourse, and advocate for the prosecution of prostitution. Their crowbar was what Piiley calls, "the American myth of white slavery."

Even though prostitution by coercion, assault, or threat of violence – sex slavery – accounted for less than ten percent of sex worker cases in America during the early twentieth century, the idea of "white slavery" spread like a contagion across the body politic. Millions of people came to believe that young, innocent, virginal white women were victims of abduction and assault, and

forced to prostitute themselves for the enrichment of their immigrant pimps. Because black and non-white immigrant women had no inherent value or innate dignity – essentially, they weren't human – they could not become part of the "white slavery" myth, and were, therefore, unworthy of protection. In response to an actual case of rape against a young, black woman, the U.S. attorney of Arkansas said that in his state it would be impossible to secure a conviction in a case "where any colored people are connected either as subject of victim."

Raping black women was pretty much legal, and common, but white slavery was a scourge in need of destruction. One can't help but wonder how different American history would have turned out if politicians and lawmakers spent a fraction of the time fighting actual slavery as they did combating nearly non-existent white slavery, but rationality and race rarely coalesce in the American story. The Mann Act of 1910 made it illegal to transport women across state lines for prostitution, debauchery, and in the especially dangerous language of the law, "any other immoral purposes."

Even if cases of coercion and force in regards to prostitution were uncommon, aggressively mobilizing law enforcement resources to prevent and punish them was a good idea. It turns out, however, that the Bureau of Investigation (The FBI in its infancy) used the vague and threatening phrasing of the Mann Act to vigorously and viciously persecute adultery, seduction cases, and anything with the slight hint of miscegenation. "Policing domesticity" is a useful phrase that Pliley employs in her analysis of The Mann Act, making it clear and incontrovertible, that the federal government and local law enforcement agencies, along with an army of volunteers, collaborated to enforce traditional morality against women – to keep them in their place, the home, and in the meantime, to keep the races romantically segregated, and to keep the sanctity of marriage synonymous with positive citizenship.

Promiscuity, even among single women, quickly became a substitution for prostitution. Legislators and police officers believed that the promiscuous woman, because she was more likely to contract a venereal disease, threatened the health of married men who might step outside their marriages for sexual adventure. The men, naturally, almost never faced arrest or prosecution. Meanwhile, white men sexually assaulting black women was not a crime, at least in the response it elicited from law enforcement, but consensual sex between black men and white women, was a prosecutable offense.

Such an ambitious enterprise of moral regulation required significant personnel and funding, and when Congress continued to increase the budget for the fledging Bureau of Investigation, it gave birth to the FBI and the surveillance state. The Immigration Bureau and the Bureau of Investigation moved into nineteen cities, and enlisted a "white slavery squad" – men of moral repute who voluntarily went undercover into brothels, vice districts, and other places of prostitution, to monitor, track, and create a record of sex workers. It seems that the worst assumptions modern critics of State power can make about law enforcement and surveillance don't go nearly far enough. The rise of the FBI and State sanctioned spying – in its methodology, its practice, and its reason for existence – is inseparable from misogyny, racism, sexual

repression, and bizarre, Christian notions of moral purity.

Follow the genesis of the FBI and the surveillance state, through the Red Scare, McCarthyism, COINTELPRO, and the political war against dissent in the 1960s, the assassination of Fred Hampton, and the imprisonment of Assata Shakur, and the warnings of Edward Snowden become even more urgent, important, and frightening. From J. Edgar Hoover to the data mining of the NSA, short of wearing eyeglasses upside down and plastering tin foil over the windows, there is no such thing as paranoia in the face of the American State.

Policing Sexuality is irreplaceable in any library of American history, but also in the effort to gain an understanding of an increasingly regressive form of domestic politics. Immigrants don't just constitute a threat to the health and safety of America right now. They were a danger to the virginal bliss and innocence of women and American families in the early twentieth century. Unarmed black men are not just now a menace worthy of police execution. They were ready to rape, kill, and pimp white women a long time ago. Women's sexuality is not up for negotiation and discipline just because they want their health insurance policy to cover contraception, they've always been subversive sluts.

Tolerance of the State policing the consensual sexual activities of adults, just because the exchange of money is involved, is not only ironic in a nation always priding itself on freedom, but deeply cruel considering that, as Pliley demonstrates in her conclusion, "Laws intended to police sex trafficking rarely benefit those who have been trafficked; instead these laws mark women as bodies to be policed."

Sex positive feminist Carol Queen has coined the term "absexual", to describe people who "get off complaining about sex," and find their stimulation through the moral imposition of their mores on the adventurous and open minded, whose source of pleasure fascinates and frightens them. It doesn't require the insight of Sigmund Freud to see how absexuality plays a fundamental role in the shaping America's sexual norms, from the condemnations of puritanical Christians to the concerns of paternalistic feminists. The absexual finds the whiff of what he or she ridicules too alluring to stay away completely, but too scary to actually practice.

Policing Sexuality offers a sad and absurd glimpse into the troubled psyche of a nation that never developed a healthy, sophisticated, and adult sense of sexuality. The punishment it inflicted on prostitutes, promiscuous women, and interracial couples a century ago is a great shame and real sin. The pain it produces in the lives of sex workers right now is nothing short of depraved and barbaric.

It is that very depravity and barbarism that conceived and nurtures American law enforcement and the modern surveillance state.