

Sex Slaves and the Surveillance State

Thaddeus Russell | Apr. 22, 2014 10:00 am

Her name, like that of nearly all the victims, is unknown. Not older than a teenager, she has large, downturned eyes, long and wavy hair, and pale skin. She wears a demure white dress, suggesting that the life she lived before she found herself in this dungeon was one of innocence. She stares through the bars of her cage and, because she cannot save herself, prays for rescue. Behind her, a man wearing a bowler hat and a lascivious grin gazes upon his captive prey through the smoke of his cigar. He has paid to rape her and she is powerless to stop him. She is a "white slave."

This girl is a drawing. She existed only in an image that was part of a flood of claims made in the early 20th century, about legions of white American girls and women being held against their will and forced into prostitution. Thousands of newspaper articles, books, sermons, speeches, plays, and films depicted a vast underground economy of kidnappers and pimps holding godlike power over young female sex slaves. Historians now generally agree that those depictions were mostly or entirely fabrications. There is scant verifiable evidence of American women being kidnapped and physically forced into prostitution, or that such a girl in the picture ever existed.

This was no mere harmless mythmaking. The claims made by the movement against "white slavery" helped create, expand, and strengthen the police powers of an array of government agencies. Since the onset of the panic, those agencies have imprisoned and sterilized hundreds of thousands of women who worked as prostitutes, taken their children from them, forced them onto the streets and into dependent relationships with male criminals, and made their jobs among the most dangerous in the world.

Those same government agencies also prosecuted black, Jewish, Latino, and Asian men for simply having intimate relations with white women; tightened restrictions on immigration; established precedents for some of the worst government violations of privacy and civil liberties in American history; and formed the basis of the modern surveillance state.

The contemporary movement against "human trafficking," also described as "modern-day slavery," is strikingly similar to the crusade against white slavery a century ago, both in rhetoric

and in implications for individual freedom and state power.

In 1907, the federal government launched its first concerted response to the white-slavery panic when the United States Immigration Commission-known as the Dillingham Commission after its chairman, Sen. William P. Dillingham of Vermont-launched a 12-city investigation into the "importation and harboring of women for immoral purposes." The commission turned up numerous foreign-born prostitutes voluntarily plying their trade, and they encountered some women whom investigators claimed were "practically forced" into prostitution by violence or threats of violence, but they found no one like the girl in the drawing.

Investigators also admitted that "to guard against the sensational beliefs that are becoming prevalent, it is best to repeat that the agents of this commission have not learned that all or even the majority of the alien women and girls practicing prostitution in the United States...were forced or deceived into the life." Nonetheless, the government responded to these findings with an immense crackdown on the freedoms of trade, movement, and sexuality both for American citizens and for those wishing to live in the United States.

Driven by the assumption that no mentally healthy woman would choose to sell sex except through overwhelming coercion, anti-white-slavery activists conflated imaginary sex slavery with all forms of prostitution and immoral sexuality. Though they never discovered a woman being brought against her will into the country to sell sex, immigration officials were instructed to stem this alleged tide by refusing entry not just to any woman they suspected of being a prostitute, but also to any woman who had borne children or had sexual relations outside of marriage.

Between 1907 and 1911 close to 80,000 women suspected of being prostitutes or of being sexually immoral were barred from the United States. The Immigration Bureau also commissioned agents to work undercover as spies in saloons, caf  s, and railway stations where prostitutes were believed to work, to pose as census-takers in red-light districts, and to entrap prostitutes by soliciting them on the street.

Typically, immigrant women busted for prostitution were deported. According to the Texas State University historian Jessica R. Pliley, author of the forthcoming book *Policing Sexuality*, for the Immigration Bureau "the problem of white slavery was really a problem with foreign prostitution."

In 1909 the Immigration Bureau dispatched its lead white-slavery investigator, a man named

Marcus Braun, to Europe to ascertain the causes of the influx of foreign prostitutes into America. Braun was astonished to find that in London, Paris, Berlin, Moscow, and Brussels, prostitutes were considered by authorities and the cultures at large to be ordinary wage laborers. He was even more astonished by the prostitutes themselves, who told him that they viewed the U.S. primarily as a lucrative market, since American morality constrained the supply of competitors, thus raising prices for their work. Braun concluded from his research that-contrary to the then-dominant white-slavery narrative-there was no international organization of kidnappers and pimps operating to "exploit innocent and virtuous womanhood."

Nonetheless, in 1910 Congress responded to the continuing hysteria by passing the United States White-Slave Traffic Act, better known as the Mann Act (after its author, the Illinois congressman James Robert Mann), which made it a crime to transport women across state lines "for the purpose of prostitution or debauchery, or for any other immoral purpose." Mann, like the principal supporters of the legislation, was a stalwart progressive Republican who championed regulation of the railroads, women's suffrage, and the Pure Food and Drugs Act. Many Democratic southern segregationists, galvanized by stories of dark-skinned men trading and procuring white women, joined with progressives in supporting the law.

In short order, 45 states passed white-slavery laws, which were used (along with laws against disorderly houses) to close down most of the country's red light districts, shuttering brothels in which prostitutes normally enjoyed the protection of madams, and placing sex workers on a circuit between workhouses, reformatories, jails, and the streets.

"Given these conditions," writes Ruth Rosen in *The Lost Sisterhood* (1983), the seminal history of American sex work, "it is not surprising that pimps began dominating the practice of prostitution." With its legal banishment, sex work was transferred from female ownership to male power. Though they certainly were sometimes exploited in brothels, "madams and prostitutes had wielded considerable power in their relations with customers," Rosen writes. "Now prostitutes became the easy targets of both pimps and organized crime. In both cases, the physical violence faced by prostitutes rapidly increased."

Among the government agencies empowered by the white-slavery hysteria was the Bureau of Investigation (BOI), which was created in 1908 in part to investigate the importation and interstate transportation of prostitutes. With the expanded mandate of the Mann Act, the Bureau grew rapidly, from some 60 agents to more than 350, opening up a White Slave Division and operating in every major city in the country within just five years.

During this period, white-slavery cases constituted close to a third of the Bureau's work. By the time it was renamed the Federal Bureau of Investigation in 1935, the agency had investigated tens of thousands of Americans for alleged violation of the Mann Act. Pliley has found that a sizable portion of those cases involved not commercial vice but relations between older men and girls, adultery, promiscuous teenage girls, and interracial couples.

"The anti-white slavery movement formed an important strand of Progressive Era activism," Pliley writes, "that sought to purify the bedroom in the same way that activists sought to clean up politics, the marketplace, and labor relations." Specifically, the BOI's investigation of cases of sexual immorality "brought average Americans of all class backgrounds under Bureau surveillance."

The most famous Mann Act case was the prosecution of the black heavyweight boxing champion Jack Johnson, whose brazen relationships with white women drew the wrath of BOI agents and the Illinois attorney general. Johnson was found guilty of transporting a prostitute, with whom he had been having an ongoing affair, across state lines, and he was sentenced to a year in jail with a \$1,000 fine.

Pliley argues that the modern FBI was built upon the work of its White Slave Division, which "transformed the BOI into a truly national agency." Enforcing the Mann Act "justified the bureau's appeals to Congress for more funds and established its authority in the public culture." Most importantly, the white slave investigations "established a more aggressive model for federal law enforcement than previously existed-both seeking to prevent law breaking and investigating ordinary citizens, thereby setting important precedents" for what became the FBI.

When J. Edgar Hoover assumed the directorship of the BOI in 1924, he redoubled the Bureau's efforts to police "interstate immorality" beyond commercial vice. Through the 1920s and 1930s, the Bureau launched tens of thousands of investigations and secured more than 7,000 convictions for cases involving bigamy, adultery, "previously chaste, or very young women or girls," or relations between white women and non-white men. Such cases constituted the largest part of the Bureau's work during this period. As Pliley puts it, "the growth of the twentieth-century American state came in no small part through its policing of women's bodies."

The white-slavery hysteria also spawned one of the ghastliest uses of state power in U.S. history. In several states, a conviction for "white slavery" automatically made a woman eligible for sterilization. Between 1907 and 1950, some 40,000 women were forcibly sterilized, most for

prostitution or sexual immorality.

After World War II both the term "white slavery" and the policing of immoral sexuality became disreputable, as prosecutions for violations of the Mann Act virtually ceased. But a new cause emerged in the early 2000s that bore a striking resemblance to the scare of the early 1900s. Having been mentioned only sporadically through the 1990s, "human trafficking" exploded in news reports and scholarly articles at the beginning of the George W. Bush era.

A Google Scholar search shows only 50 results for the term in 1998 and 71 in 1999, but 161 results in 2000, 293 in 2001, 496 in 2002, 758 in 2003, and 1,100 in 2004. The number continued to grow to roughly 6,000 in each of the last three years. The movement against human trafficking, or "modern-day slavery," is now a global phenomenon that far surpasses the scope of the anti-white slavery cause.

Twenty-seven million people, we are told by the United Nations, scores of NGOs, and the U.S. State Department, are being held in bondage around the globe. Though there is general scholarly consensus that most people who are coerced to migrate and work are agricultural and domestic laborers, the lion's share of attention in the anti-human-trafficking campaign focuses on sex workers.

As with white slavery, there is no reason to believe that the actual number of slaves in the world is anywhere near its claimed number. The origin of that figure has been traced by a number of scholars and journalists, notably Laura Agustan, Elizabeth Bernstein, Maggie McNeill, and Ronald Weitzer, to the work of a single man, Kevin Bales, the founder of the Free the Slaves lobby group, who arrived at the figure through estimates, guesses, and an expansive definition of "slavery."

In another parallel to a century ago, several scholars have identified a confluence of human-trafficking discourse with calls for restrictions on immigration. The new panic has also given rise to new agencies within municipal and state governments whose charge to prosecute "traffickers" has resulted in the prosecution of greater numbers of women voluntarily selling sex for money. In Florida, the state legislature is considering a bill that would allow involuntary psychiatric hospitalization of sex-trafficking "victims."

In 2000, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act created within the State Department an Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, which promotes the figure of 27 million "slaves" on

its website and in its "targeted foreign assistance and public engagement on trafficking in persons." Some of that foreign assistance has gone to programs in Asia in which NGOs and local governments "rehabilitate" arrested sex workers by forcing them into factory work.

The history of America's first sex panic should give us pause before we latch onto a new cause whose benefits are likely to be minimal at best but will almost certainly put more women in jail and more cops in our lives.