

Nordic Prostitution Policy Reform

A comparative study of prostitution policy reform in the Nordic countries

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Susanne Dodillet's "Är sex arbete?" (Is Sex Work?)

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Over the past two weeks, it's been a bit of an impossibility for anyone in Sweden to avoid the discussion surrounding [Susanne Dodillet's](#) recently-defended doctoral dissertation, [Är sex arbete? Svensk och tysk prostitutionspolitik sedan 1970-talet](#) (*Is Sex Work? Swedish and German Prostitution Policy Since the 1970s*). Dr. Dodillet, a post-doctoral researcher in the [FEMCIT](#) project at Södertörn University, has produced something of a rarity: a doctoral dissertation that is the focus of attention both inside and outside the ivory towers of academia. Dodillet compares Swedish and German prostitution policy debates in the latter third of the twentieth century, in an effort to account for why these two countries have chosen such divergent paths to the question of how best to legislate the purchase of sexual services. Whereas

prostitution is legal under German law, Sweden became the first country in the world to criminalize the purchase, but not the sale, of sexual services in 1999. Dodillet argues that the underlying causes for this policy variation can be “traced back to different theories of civil society, differing welfare state ideologies, religious traditions and feminist ideas that have influenced the political strategies” in both settings.

The short form of the argument reads like what one should expect from dissertations in the humanities and social sciences. Yet, unlike the average doctoral dissertation that rarely makes a splash in the outside world, Dodillet's book has already been written about by several major Swedish papers, generating both **praise** and **criticism**. On some level, this is hardly surprising. Over the past few years, prostitution policy has never been far from the Swedish headlines, as figures such as **Isabella Lund** (the pseudonym of a prostitute that came to fame in the Swedish public eye via her well-read blog) and **Petra Östergren** (the author of ***Porr, horor och feminister***) have sought to recast the debate in terms they believe to be more favorable to a critical discussion of Swedish policy. More recently, **Jenny Westerstrand**'s doctoral dissertation, ***Mellan mäns händer*** aims to “critically discuss and evaluate the constructions of women's legal subjectivity in dominant feminist discourses on prostitution and trafficking.”

But what is surprising is the comparative lack of attention focusing on Dodillet's *analytical* contribution to prostitution policy scholarship. Rather, when one begins to sift through the all of the coverage, it's clear that the major media outlets have primarily been interested in Dodillet's dissertation because of the book's final chapter, in which she shifts gear from analysis to *advocacy* and presents a “draft for a prostitution policy that...might be a way to bridge the gap between the current Swedish and German legislation.” One of Swedish Radio's recent interviews with Dodillet is representative, with questions chiefly focusing on whether or not Dodillet thought prostitution was a job like any other, whether she thought women who sell sex do so of their own free will, and whether Dodillet can realistically equate the cleaning profession with prostitution. Even in instances where **reviewers** have pointed to potential methodological shortcomings, such concerns have been tightly inter-woven with criticisms of Dodillet's normative stance and have resulted in “point counter-point” exchanges in the op-ed pages over whether Dodillet properly characterized the number of quotes from female prostitutes in a government report on prostitution.

Dodillet herself has played a significant role in framing her dissertation as a partisan contribution, **noting** that she hopes one byproduct of her work will be a new direction in the Swedish debate over

prostitution policy, one in which opponents to prostitution no longer have the ability to dominate the debate. To that end, she has already achieved a great deal within what is known as the "third task" of Swedish academics: communicating one's findings to the broader public.

Yet, we feel that the heavy focus on Dodillet's proposed policy reform has shifted attention away from assessing the scholarly contribution made by her argument, both in terms of how well her overall chain of evidence substantiates her conclusion, as well as for how we might situate *Är sex arbete?* in the ongoing evolution of Swedish prostitution policy scholarship. While the media and the general public may be interested in the normative stances held by scholars when it comes to controversial instances of policymaking, one of the key contributions that scholars can make to policy debates is providing plausible and clear explanations for why events have unfolded as they did.

One aspect of Dodillet's dissertation that should have generated greater discussion is the degree to which cultural traditions at one point in time can be used as (partial) explanations for policy outcomes at another point in time: namely, her assertion that an 18th century Christian morality, now seemingly obsolete, partially underpins the contemporary adoption of the Swedish law banning the purchase of sexual services. This point is worth exploring as it focuses attention, most broadly, on the explanatory power of culture as a causal mechanism. We fully realize that scholars in the history of ideas may be guided by different criteria when structuring their arguments than political scientists are. However, political scientists with an interest in culture as an independent variable have long grappled with whether a correlation between cultural traditions at one point in time, and policies at a subsequent (often much later) point in time, constitutes causality to the detriment of intervening variables. One of the clearest examples of this is the ongoing debate over **why the United States lacks many features of a social democratic welfare state** and the degree to which the initial political culture of the American colonies played a decisive role in the comparatively slim range of welfare state services made available to Americans. The historical impact of political culture, or civic traditions, is also a central feature of Robert Putnam's contemporary classic **Making Democracy Work**. Indeed, it was surprising that the question of culture as a causal force was not placed squarely on the table at Dodillet's defense. It would have been quite useful for the audience to hear a detailed discussion of how Dodillet views culture as exerting an impact over time. Do policy entrepreneurs consciously attempt to mobilize support on the basis of certain cultural values, or does Dodillet view actors as being largely unaware of the influence that culture has over their arguments, proposals and policies? Stated differently, what relationship exists between cultural traditions, policy entrepreneurs and their targets?

A broader, albeit related, issue was raised at Dodillet's defense, when she was asked about the explanatory value of her dissertation as a whole. Unfortunately, this question was one of a substantially larger bundle of questions posed by Professor **Eva-Maria Svensson**, a member of Dodillet's grading committee. In the discussion that followed, it appeared to get pushed to the side. This is a shame. Indeed, one would have hoped that this topic would have constituted a central thrust of Professor **Brian Palmer**'s opposition. Of course, one has to allow for disciplinary differences when it comes to how theory and methods are deployed and assessed when making scholarly arguments. Yet, for those of us with an interest in prostitution policy, but who lack a professional background in the history or ideas, this would have been a highly instructive discussion. Just as the explanatory value of culture should have been problematized, a broader discussion about Dodillet's overall choices, at every step of the dissertation research and writing process, should have been laid bare. What are the criteria for making a sound scientific contribution within the history of ideas discipline? What constitutes the essential roadmap for assembling a persuasive dissertation in Dodillet's field, and how well did she traverse all of the necessary terrain, theoretically, methodologically and analytically? Ultimately, such a discussion would allow the public to have a clear sense of the overall scholarly contribution of the dissertation. Indeed, there are many possible candidates for the contribution made by Dodillet's argument. Perhaps it is to offer an explanatory account that clears up the specific puzzles of Swedish and German prostitution policy formation. Perhaps it is to offer a generalizable model for understanding prostitution policy outcomes across national settings. Perhaps it is to offer a contextually rich level of historical detail that has not been achieved in previous scholarship with similar aims. Yet, just as Dodillet has partisan ambitions, it is equally apparent that she has explanatory ambitions. Hearing more about how she views the nature of her scholarly contribution — both for prostitution policy and for the history of ideas — would go a great distance towards putting this comparatively under-discussed aspect of her dissertation in context.

Finally, there is the question of how to situate Dodillet's dissertation in terms of existing scholarship on Swedish prostitution policy. As Dodillet noted at the start of her defense, the room was filled with not only friends, family and an interested general public, but also with a number of prostitution policy scholars who had traveled from throughout Sweden and beyond to witness the proceedings. Given the historic nature of the Swedish legislation, the question of how to understand the evolution of contemporary Swedish prostitution policy is a central one as we conduct our respective projects. How

does Dodillet view her book as advancing the overall research agenda? One might imagine that a potential contribution can be sketched out by considering her work as a progression from Östergren's *Porr, horor och feminister*. Specifically, whereas Östergren offers a detailed overview of the Swedish case, Dodillet advances our understanding by taking the analysis several steps further, introducing both the comparative aspect and an explicit history of ideas approach. But, are there other ways in which her book leaves prostitution policy scholars knowing more now than they did before? And equally as important, what future prospects does her book create for prostitution policy scholars? If Dodillet has told us the tales of Sweden and Germany, what's the next step?

At the end of the day, it may have been inevitable that the Swedish discussion of *Är sex arbete?* would center on partisan stances. But Dodillet's book shouldn't simply be evaluated as a 602 page polemic. It should be evaluated on the basis of the author's aspirations to shed analytical light on policy choices that generate great interest, and great disagreement.

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